

(Re)membering diaspora: Uneven geographies of Indian dual citizenship

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Abstract

Although the concept of diaspora is sometimes regarded as oppositional to the interests of existing political regimes, we argue that it can become a site where the negotiation of new terms of membership embraces the transnational and de-territorialized networks of overseas populations. Drawing on work on transnational governance, we explore the uneven geographies that accompany India's recent discussions of its dual citizenship provisions. Constructions of diaspora membership are revealed by mapping the discourses contained within the Dual Citizenship legislation of 2003, the 2003 *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* (Overseas India Day) campaign, and the 2001 report of the Diaspora Committee onto the case of South Africa. The results suggest that the construction of diaspora membership focuses on professional success, ecumenical Hinduism, and multicultural incorporation. We also trace how diaspora membership betrays a continuing anxiety over the terms of Indianness. The results remind us that diasporic times and spaces mediate transnational governance.

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Diasporic movement marks not a postmodern turn from history, but a nomadic turn in which the very parameters of specific historic moments are embodied...and scattered and regrouped into new points of becoming (Brazier & Mannur, 2003: 3)

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The Indian Diaspora spans the globe and stretches across all the oceans and continents. It is so widespread that the sun never sets on the Indian Diaspora (HLC Report, 2001: v)

Introduction

The increase in the volume and intensity of movement across borders stretches the territorial basis of national political community (Castles & Davidson, 2000). This disrupts an idealised isomorphism of membership between state and nation that has served as a key institution of governance (Brenner, 2004; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; Itzigsohn, 2000; Jessop, 2002; Levitt & de la DeHesa, 2003; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Smith, 1998). For Dodds (2001: 477), deterritorialisation and cross-border mobility “illustrates...the real limits of democratic governance...there remains the question of how can we organise political life without always falling back on territorial conceptions of community (and democracy) which may be ill equipped to deal with migration, hybrid cultures, and diaspora”. Utilising a case-study of Indians in South Africa, our research explores how the activities of India as a ‘sending’ state reconfigure the notion of diaspora in ways that reflect and become part of the changing discourse of national identity.

A growing body of research theorises how states seek to incorporate their overseas populations (Brenner, 2004; Cohen, 1997; Itzigsohn, 2000; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Within this work, dual citizenship policies are regarded with increased significance for ‘sending’ states keen to have more influence and control over transnational ties and connections (Laguerre, 1999; Levitt & de la DeHesa, 2003; Kymlicka, 1995; Østergaard-Nielson, 2003a, 2003b; Skrbis, 1999). Overseas populations contribute decisively to the economic vitality of origin states (Castles & Miller, 1993; Nyiri, 2001; Walton-Roberts, 2004). For example, India’s overseas populations contribute in important ways to the Indian economy and, in turn, to the global ambitions of the state (Lall, 2001; Lessinger, 1992). India is now the world’s top destination for remittances, with flows into the country touching US\$ 17.4 billion in 2003, up from some US\$ 2 billion a year in the late 1980s (IMF, 2005). Overseas populations also exert political influence of host countries and, in some instances, have played important offshore roles in triggering regime change in origin countries (Castles & Davidson, 2000). In many cases, as Portes (1999: 467) notes: “sending governments do not want their immigrants to return, but rather to achieve a secure status in the wealthy nations to which they have moved and from which they can make sustained economic and political contributions in the name of patriotism and home town loyalty”.

Whilst this literature emphasizes the political and economic connections between states and overseas populations, we argue that such strategies turn on the re-negotiation of belonging through cultural membership in a diaspora. To do this, we draw on recent work on transnational governance that explores how overseas populations “become” (re) imagined (Amin, 2002; Bailey, 2001; Hall, 2003; Kymlicka, 1995; Ong, 1999). Understandings of membership based on essentialised and static notions of ethnicity have been enhanced through sensitivity to the role of religion and belief systems (Anthias, 1998; Samers, 2003). We trace historically and geographically circulating constructions of membership through an analysis of how India as a ‘sending’ state is imagining its overseas population in South Africa.

Whilst India’s overseas population has a complex history, it is often broken down into two main ‘waves’ of emigration: the first occurred during British rule when Indian indentured labourers were exported to colonies in Africa and the Caribbean (Clarke, Peach, & Vertovec,

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