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The Overseas Citizen of India and Emigrant Infrastructure: Tracing the deterritorializations of diaspora strategies

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the conceptual notion of Emigrant Infrastructure to further debates on diaspora strategies, extraterritorial belonging, and citizenship. Diasporic strategies are altering the possibilities for transnational citizenship and redefining belonging through the introduction of emigrant documentary schemes aimed at formalizing relationships with the diasporic subject. Using India as a case study, this article examines the historical development of the Overseas Citizen of India and Overseas Indian Card, state technologies that transformed emigrants from unwanted others into desired diasporic subjects. Outlining historical spatio-temporal junctures of the legal, policy, and bureaucratic engagements between the Government of India and emigrants reveals a deep Emigrant Infrastructure erected through three phases: active, reactive and hyperactive (linked to the colonial, post-colonial, and post-liberal Indian state). Tracing emigrant–government engagements, the article reveals how India actively constructed itself as a homeland with a diaspora. Understanding the formalization of a diasporic subject de-naturalizes the spatial assumptions linking nation, state, territory, citizenship, and people. Emigrant Infrastructure understood through diasporic subjectivity and identification cards reveals the spatiality of diaspora strategies and a changing relationship between the reterritorializing nation and the deterritorializing state.

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Introduction

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Madison Square Gardens October 2014 address in New York City announced the introduction of the Overseas Indian Card, marking a change in the Government of India's (GOI) diaspora strategy. The 20,000 present applauded the new card which merges the Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) and Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) schemes and to make it easier for those married to 'Indians' to get a card. Modi had "set a deadline for the home Ministry to get cabinet approval for the Citizenship Amendment Bill before the winter session of Parliament" (Tikku, 2014). These seemingly swift changes have a deep history¹. During the 2011 diaspora meetings held annually by the GOI, former PM Manmohan Singh announced:

Our Government had introduced the Overseas Citizen of India card and the People (Person's) of Indian Origin card to facilitate visa-free travel to India as well as to provide the rights of residency and participation in business and educational activities in

India. We have recently reviewed the functioning of these schemes, and have decided to merge the OCI and PIO cards into a single facility. We hope to iron out some of the problems that have arisen in the implementation of these schemes (Department-Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs, 2012; The Ministry of Home Affairs, 2012).

As a result, in August 2013 the Rajya Sabha (Indian Parliament's Upper House) passed a Bill reflecting the GOI's intention to create a new state-issued document to further institutionalize emigrant belonging. Although it lapsed in the Lok Sabha in spring 2014, if passed, it would be the third identification document aimed to consolidate diasporic subjectivity since the 1999 PIO card launch and subsequent 2005 introduction of the OCI scheme.

The OIC typifies recent bureaucratic machinations to reformulate belonging. Such diasporic identity cards are bureaucratic documents, technologies of mobility mediating belonging, territory, citizenship, state, and nation. In extending belonging to emigrants, these state technologies are informed by larger diaspora strategies as well as prior state-emigrant engagements. These engagements have left a substantive bureaucratic paper trail by way of policy changes, bureaucratic revisions, reports, official discussions/communications, legal statute amendments, parliamentary

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¹ See, Standing Committee Report Summary, The Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2011 (Department-Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs, 2012).

committees, public meetings, regulation and facilitation of emigration. Gazette notifications, announcements and pronouncements of GOI officials, and amendments to the Citizenship Act (1999, 2005, 2011). Diaspora strategies are informed by a long and deep history of emigrant engagement.

In this article, I propose Emigrant Infrastructure (EI) to analyze the emergence and proliferation of diasporic subjectivity via state mediations of extra-territorial emigrant belonging. EI describes the institutional, policy, juridico – legal practices and engagements between the nation, state,² government, non-state groups and institutions, as well as the imbrications of capital or commercial interests with emerging or extant emigrant populations. Further reflected in this understanding is the changing *pace at* and *intention with*, and *aspirations for*, which the government engages emigrants and their descendants. In the current period of expanding diaspora strategies, EI involves the compression of time and the flattening of space.³ Using the idea of EI, this article historically contextualizes India's recent diaspora strategies to create diasporic identity state technologies. Attentive to historical shifts, my argument yokes the emergence of the OIC and OCI to previous state engagements that created or dissipated meaningful conjunctures between the idea of the nation and emigrants. Although this piece focusses on the nation, state, and the documentary practices to create diasporic subjectivity, EI involves wider mediations of brokers, agents, and others who facilitate, mandate and hinder movement⁴. EI reveals the contextual and changing spatial parameters of the co-production of nation, state, people, territory, and sovereignty. As such, EI unveils the play of de/reterritorializations inherent to diaspora strategies. These strategies create documentary forms of belonging that inflect national belonging into expanded state mobility technologies, which allow for emigrants and their decedents to have official status beyond citizenship and ethnicity irrespective of distance and time, and independent of the passport held.

My research is based on policy and document analysis, archival research, and fieldwork in New York, London and Delhi conducted between 2001 and 2013. Much existing work on Indian migration is divided into three temporal periods: historic indenture, brain drain migration, and recent/temporary migration. This general understanding implicitly pervades explanations of the emergence of state identity migration documents (such as the OCI), creating either descriptive or disruptive narratives. Thinking instead of migration and citizenship in terms of nation-state spatiality, I extend discussions of emigrant subjectivity⁵ to earlier periods by demarcating three main phases of EI – namely, *active*, *reactive*, and *hyperactive* (current). This article is organized by these three phases. If the current phase ensconces a formal diaspora strategy, in the sense of an “incubation of relationships between homeland state and their diasporas” (Ho et al., introduction to this special issue), the earliest iterations of bureaucratic connections with emigrants managed labor supply. The next section explores the initial phase, in which the colonial GOI was *actively* involved in emigrant policies and oversight. Long preceding colonial rulers facilitation of indenture, Indian oceanic trade routes determined emigration. As Washbrook has argued, eventually British Empire's ideologies of citizenship and nation meant that “natality and residence...circumscribed identity and

freedom of movement” (2013, p. 17). The third section, on the *reactive* phase, highlights the GOI's reactions to a sizable existing emigrant population during two international meetings related to non-alignment. This second phase begins just before Indian Independence (1947) and is ensconced until just after the liberalization of the economy. The current phase, reflects an *hyperactive* diaspora strategy. Extending the discussion of EI and diasporic subjectivity, section four explores the emergence of the OCI. This state identity document mediates a new population – identified as diaspora. The re/de-territorializations of space and time in the current period has constructed a new category of people whose existence via an official document *make natural* the links between the nation, territory, and state via citizenship. Being attentive to EI de-naturalizes national belonging,⁶ revealing the complications of territorial boundaries, connections to the soil, and the limits of imagining citizenship *in absentia*.

Diaspora strategy, EI and the territorializations of the diasporic subject

As this Geoforum special issue reveals, the GOI is not alone in its efforts to redefine belonging by embracing those living outside of its territorial borders. New Zealand, Ireland, China, Japan, Malaysia, The Philippines, Haiti, and Mexico have instituted transnational emigration schemes aimed at: increasing emigrant mobility; attracting capital investments; and, facilitating social, cultural and knowledge interactions. Many have argued that these changes are indicative of neoliberalism (Larner, 2007; Gamlen, 2008; Amrute, 2010; Mani and Varadarajan, 2005; Edwards, 2008; Ragazzi, 2009) and rendering diasporic citizens into meaningful political-economic subjects (Larner, 2012). Such a reading foregrounds economic governmentality (see Dickinson, 2012) and eclipses the deep structures of governance and other long standing engagements which mediate the relationships of belonging and citizenship. The ascendance of using neoliberalism as a conceptual frame has been critiqued by Ferguson as a “‘rationality’ in the Foucauldian sense linked to...specific mechanisms of government, and recognizable modes of creating subjects” (Ferguson, 2010: 171; cf. Collier, 2009, 2011, 2012; Ferguson, 2010; Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Ganti, 2014; Gershon, 2011). Diaspora strategies read as neoliberal economic state rationality obscures what Ferguson and Gupta have identified as: “states’ abilities to spatialize their authority” (2002:996). This article proposes EI to understand the production of diasporic subjectivity via the spatialization of the state and the deterritorializing impulses of diaspora strategies. Tracing how emigrant – state technologies have changed over time, EI weaves the potential agency and materiality of emigrant state documents into the changing policy and political abstractions of belonging.

The diasporic subject has emerged as a governmental and analytical category, a particular kind of legal subject. In making the diasporic subject legible, “the state acts to reconfigure the scales at which citizenship is defined and expected to be practised” (Desforges et al., 2005, p. 440). Previous work on mobility technologies has revealed: (1) that the nation-state has “usurped from rival claimants such as churches and private enterprises the monopoly of the legitimate means of movement” (Torpey, 2000, p. 1); (2) the historical origins of documentation with the introduction of colonial regulation of indenture and mobilities (Singha, 2006; Mongia, 1999, 2007); (3) an evolution of documentary forms that produces nationality, authenticity, and personhood through archive (Chen, 2012); and, (4) the inherent capacities of mobility technologies as agentive materialities mediating persons and populations of social

² Gamlen (2008) provides a thorough cross-country examination of the emigrant state and the institutions and practices of diaspora building and integration aimed at extra-territorial groups to create a loyal diaspora. See also, Larner (2007) study of New Zealand's reforms.

³ See Boyle, 2001, p. 432 for discussion of space.

⁴ See articles by Fischer, 2014; Yamashiro, 2014; Leung, 2014; Larner, 2014. See also, Biao, 2011; Lindquist et al., 2012; Ye, 2013.

⁵ Brenda Yeoh emphasizes, “not every transnational subject is a harbinger of cosmopolitan ideals or has successfully disentangled himself or herself from the discursive or material webs spun by the state, capital or powerful others” (Yeoh, 2005, p. 419).

⁶ Critiques of spatial revisions and discussions of de/re territorialization as reflected and refracted by territorial state sovereignty and globalization extend discussion of the idea of territory (Amin and Thrift, 1997; Brenner, 1999; Elden, 2005), reveal networks as a spatial order (Painter, 2010; Jones, 2008), or, aspire to a ‘post-national geography’ (Appadurai, 2003).

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