Paper trail: A personal journey through diaspora theory

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Abstract: From the time I first heard of it the concept of 'diaspora' had a lot of appeal for me with its familiar feelings of longing and (not) belonging. I could relate to these having had my own belongingness interrogated at various stages of my life. "Are you guys British?" my best friend in primary school once asked me; He couldn't understand how my family and I could possibly be Indian if we spoke English, were Christian and "smelled like butter." In this paper I make use of personal narratives in an autoethnographic mode to discuss the concept of diaspora; the attractiveness of the concept when making sense of belonging and also its shortcomings, by reflecting on my own experiences with belonging growing up in India, my transition to Portuguese citizenship and simultaneously incorporation into the Indian Diaspora on becoming an Overseas Citizen of India Cardholder. By focusing on belonging in relation to communities, nations, and nation-states, in which terms diasporas have been defined, I will attempt to locate the individual within diaspora discourse. I argue that being a member of a diaspora does not and need not imply a feeling of belonging in it, but does provide a flexibility with regard to identification which in this day and age can often be a source of opportunity. I conclude by formulating identification as strategic gameplay that individuals can use to achieve their own ends and through it effect a change in the categories of identification.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Belonging, Autoethnography

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"Home is only a feeling you get in your mind
From the people you love and you travel beside
You may feel like a passenger but now you're the driver
You've got to go traveling, traveling on."
-*Fuel up* by Stornoway
Songwriters: Brian David James Briggs
Fuel Up lyrics © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.

Strangeness and the attraction of diaspora theory

"Are you guys British?"[2] my best friend in primary school once asked me. He couldn't understand how my family and I could possibly be Indian if we spoke English, were Christian and "smelled like butter." It must have felt, to him, like a betrayal of the senses and in stark contrast to what we were learning in school at the time. The textbook history of the Indian freedom struggle was amply clear that the British/Christian/Outsiders were the enemy. My friend's question was probably meant to help him decide whether or not I was one of the 'bad guys', and as a result whether he was guilty by association. This is complicated further by the fact that ours was a convent school[3] and the medium of instruction in our school was English. Perhaps his question stemmed simply from the innocent curiosity of childhood. But whatever his intention, it became amply clear that my 'Indianness' was somehow suspect. This was the first of many incidents that confirmed that I did not fit the ideal type of what it meant to be Indian. In another incident a man on the local train in Bombay told me he thought I was a foreigner because *'aap ne toh Amerika ka culture apnaya hai'* (you have adopted American culture) gesturing at my clothes – a white t-shirt and beige shorts, which co-incidentally is the uniform of the RSS.[4] In another incident an attendant at the library of the University where I was student at the time asked the colleague I was with, "where is your friend from?" in Hindi, expecting me not to understand, and though I explained to him that I was born and raised in Bombay, to this day he still asks that colleague about

[2] Though the word 'British' sticks out in my memory, I cannot be sure in which language this conversation actually occurred because we spoke a mixture of English and Hindi. There is a good chance he used the word 'Angrez' meaning Englishman which comes from the word 'Angrazi' meaning English (the language) but it is often used more broadly to refer to white foreigners.
[3] Convent school is a term used in India to refer broadly to schools run by any Christian religious organisation and are sought after because they are believed to teach a high standard of English.
[4] The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization committed to the formation of a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation) and the chief proponent of the idea that India belongs to the Hindus.

his "foreigner friend". Little did I know then that his words would be prophetic. Perhaps I was always a foreigner and I was an Indian only on paper. But I still needed to reconcile the tension between my being on paper with my being in person.

Being Goan offered some explanation for my strangeness and this was intertwined with being Christian. Most of the other Christians I knew growing up were either Goans, Mangaloreans, or East-Indians with surnames like Fernandes, D'Souza, Rodrigues, and Pinto. And with this came the idea of being somehow Portuguese. This was particularly strong among Goan people. If I was indeed a foreigner, then I ought to belong to somewhere else other than India, and Portugal here seemed the obvious choice. Others were clearly feeling it too, why else would they stick Portuguese flags on their cars and cheer for Portugal at the world cup? Going by the Tebbit (cricket) test[5] this would mean that Goans were not sufficiently integrated into mainstream Indian society, but would it then mean that they were fully integrated into Portuguese society? In this way my being Goan explained my strangeness not only to the other Indians but also to myself but as a consequence magnified the experience of otherness. It was these experiences of not belonging that found resonance with the concept of 'diaspora.' 'Longing and belonging' is a phrase that recurs in migration and diaspora literature and implicit in these feelings is an experience of not belonging. Moreover, these feelings are first and foremost experienced by individuals, and the formation of groups and group identities is arguably an attempt to address these feelings if not resolve them.

The first time I came across the term 'diaspora' was when I was working as a research assistant for a documentary film on the Sidis i.e. people of African descent that live along the western coast of India. None of them have ever been to Africa and bear no memory of their 'homeland.' Their African heritage is made manifest through their physical features and later confirmed through musicological and genetic studies. And though they were interested in their African roots they were more concerned about how to improve their current socio-economic situation. While academics were more interested in discussing whether the term diaspora applied to them or not they saw potential in the attention that this discussion brought them in the form of a platform where their voices could be heard.[6]

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[5] British politician Norman Tebbit famously suggested that to know whether or not immigrants to the UK were integrated one needed to see which country they cheered for, the country of their origin or the country in which they had settled.

[6] This is best exemplified in the report of a conference on African diaspora in Asia at which members of the Sidi community were also present. See Kessel, Ineke van (2006) "Conference Report: Goa Conference

It was this idea that someone could belong to a place far away without ever having been there or knowing much about it held a lot of promise. Of course, this is a step away from the earliest theoretical invocations of the term diaspora, such as the definition by Safran (1991) that, drawing on the Jewish prototype, was used to describe groups that were characterised by 'displacement' from an 'original homeland' and situations of precariousness resulting from this. Gradually the concept began to expand to include those who had moved voluntarily, or those who were displaced without having moved at all – such as queer people who were forced underground by societies that did not accept them – as discussed, for instance, in the work of Brubaker (2005) Tölölyan (2007) and Cohen (2008).

Particularly attractive was Cho's (2007) argument that sees diaspora not as an object of analysis but as a 'condition of subjectivity'. Diaspora, she says,

> brings together communities which are not quite nation, not quite race, not quite religion, not quite homesickness, yet they still have something to do with nation, race, religion, longings for homes which may not exist. There are collectivities and communities which extend across geographical spaces and historical experiences. There are vast numbers of people who exist in one place and yet feel intimately related to another. While this current historical moment is not unique, in that there is a long history of settler colonialism and the displacement of peoples and communities in its aftermath, there is a particularity about the legacies of these displacements and longings in the present. (Cho, 2007: 13)

It was feelings exactly like the ones described by Cho that drove/drive my own 'turn to diaspora,' to use her own words. But apart from the familiar feelings it was also the colonial entanglements that caused these feelings that involved me personally in the diaspora discourse at a point at which the nation-states themselves began to participate.

Reclaiming Portuguese Citizenship

I knew, long before I actually began the paperwork, of the option I had to become a Portuguese citizen on account of my Goan/Portuguese heritage. This option is available

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on the African Diaspora in Asia," *African Affairs*, Vol. 105, No. 420 (Jul., 2006), pp. 461-464 and Shroff, Beheroze (2009) "Indians of African Descent: History and Contemporary Experience", in Mullings, Leith (eds.) *New Social Movements in the African Diaspora: Challenging Global Apartheid*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, pp. 157-170

to anyone who can prove that they have an ancestor who was born in Goa, Daman and Diu prior to 1961 (and Dadra and Nagar Haveli prior to 1954) when India annexed (or liberated, depending on whose side you're on) the Portuguese Estado da Índia and brought these territories under the control of the Indian Union. This is to allow the people from these territories, who were seen as being full citizens of Portugal, to reclaim their right to Portuguese citizenship; a right they were deprived of when said territories became part of India. Moreover, since India does not recognise dual citizenship anyone (re)claiming their Portuguese citizenship has their Indian citizenship automatically revoked, turning many people into foreigners, on paper, in the only country they have ever known. Nevertheless, it was not uncommon for Goans and others to exercise this option because of the benefits it offered especially with regard to facilitating travel abroad. This became all the more attractive after Portugal became part of the EU in 1986 thus opening up the possibility of migration to the UK. The reason it took me a long time to make the application – among other things such as the time, effort and money involved in the process – was that I had spent my whole life trying to find a footing in a place where I was, where all my certificates had value[7], where I was already part of the system – however problematic that system was. And since India does not recognise dual citizenship claiming Portuguese citizenship would involve making myself a foreigner in the only place I had known enough to call home. In other words, I had a home in India (or whatever version of India Bombay was) and yet there was simultaneously a longing for a home elsewhere to smoothen the incongruences of being *me* in the place where I was. It makes you wonder as Brah (1996: 190) does, "When does a location become home? What is the difference between 'feeling at home' and staking claim to a place as one's own? It is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home."

It was a proclamation of home, although not public, that finally cemented my resolve to go ahead with the citizenship claim. But what is curious is that this incident does not occur in either India or Portugal. While living in Germany on an exchange programme I made it a point to visit Portugal. After spending 10 days in Lisbon I returned to the city that I was living in at the time, and as my bus ground to a halt I sighed and whispered under my breath, "Home!" I took notice of it immediately, after spending a lot

[7] This was more significant than I previously realised but being as I was from a middle-class family that did not own any land or have a business of any sort we were always taught that our only opportunity for a better life was through education.

of time considering the word and what it meant it was not a word I used easily. Why did I say it now? What about this place made it home? The response to these questions is a set of many possibilities but the outcome was the realization that an in-between space, like the world I felt I was living in until now, could also feel like home. What surprised me even more was that this place felt more like home to me than even Portugal did. Could this be what Brah (1996) means when she speaks of a 'homing desire'? Brah points out that the 'home' of a diaspora exists only in the imagination since the diaspora and the home are both constantly moving through history and therefore a return to home of diaspora is impossible. And so, instead of a homecoming what diasporas are left with is a homing desire – a feeling that serves as an orientation to an imagined home which is distinct from a feeling of being at home.

The process of applying for Portuguese citizenship involved traveling to Goa and queueing up in front of the Portuguese consulate from as early as 3 am or even the previous night. Everyone applying is familiar with the scene on the steps outside the Consulate General of Portugal in Panjim. The sight of little winding road and the yellow consulate wall with the tiny entrance are symbolic of the hope and anxiety that accompanies the whole process. These feelings of hope and anxiety shift balance one often eclipsing the other. My early sense of hope quickly began to drain and be replaced by anxiety once I began to actively pursue it. Three things that were responsible for it were, the pressing urgency of it that the agents suggest,[8] the bureaucratic hurdles and the state of limbo the applications always seem to exist in.

Standing in that queue outside the consulate I became increasingly aware of the fragility of my Goanness. I had always identified as Goan albeit with varying degrees of comfort depending on the context. Among non-Catholics[9] it was a lot easier but among Goans in Bombay it would be a lot harder to because it was obvious that my family were very bad Goans; we didn't speak *Konkani* at home or keep up traditions or call our grandparents *avô* and *avó* or attend the get-togethers or local *tiatr* performances[10] or visit our village in Goa every summer. In other words, I was never really part of the Goan

[8] There is an entire economy built around these applications that includes and army of agents, lawyers, clerks, and others based in Goa and Lisbon and a few in Bombay as well. They help facilitate these applications for a fee.

[9] I say non-Catholics because back then I did not know many Christians other than Roman Catholics and to me the two were synonymous.

[10] The relationship between Goa and the Goan community in Bombay has been one of close ties and constant engagement despite being separated by Imperial, transnational and federal borders at different points in time and is akin to Rouse's (1991 cited in Clifford 1994: 303) concept of 'border communities' that are maintained through the continuous circulation of people, money , goods and information".

community in Bombay. And here I was now a 'marginal'[11] Goan in Goa among actual Goans.

Once I had gotten over my self-consciousness, I began to notice the diversity of people in the queue with me. There were people of different ages, different socio-economic backgrounds. From talking to people and judging from overheard snippets of conversations seemed that majority of them were from Goa but there were also some from Bombay and a small minority from Gujarat[12] and other parts of the country. As we waited together in the cold and dark, making small talk there was a palpable sense of a shared hope. But with the light of the morning and a growing queue this solidarity was fractured by each one's individual need to safeguard their own place in the queue. Here we were once again a set of people with little holding us together documents that promised a better future.[13] This sense of 'community' that is central to the concept of a diaspora. A lot of the literature has focused on these diaspora communities – their formation, persistence, and their relationships with their homelands. The importance of the collective has been emphasised by a number of scholars of diaspora. Brah (1996: 189-190), for instance says that

> diasporas are not synonymous with casual temporary travel. Nor is diaspora a metaphor for individual exile but, rather, diasporas emerge out of migrations of collectivities, whether or not members of the collectivity travel as individuals, as households or in various other combinations. Diasporas are places of long-term, if not permanent, community formations, even if some households or members move on elsewhere. The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble, and reconfigure.

Tölölyan (2007: 650-651) goes on to point out how the diaspora communities come to supplant the individual,

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[11] Sheffer (2003: 100) uses the terms "core members", "members by choice", "marginal members" and "dormant members" to distinguish between members of diasporas based on their level of integration into host countries. I see this as a recognition also of the varying levels of belongingness felt within the group.

[12] These were from Daman and Diu that were also part of the Estado da Índia until 1961 and from Dadra and Nagar Haveli that were part of the Estado da Índia until 1959.

[13] I am reminded of the Indian indentured labourers or 'girmitiyas' for whom the documents – the agreements or 'girmits' that gave them their name – became a totem of their identity.

> The community endures as a distinct diaspora, not because its members individually remember grandma or the village, but thanks to the collective work of memory and commemoration, the performance of difference, the cultivation of ideologies of identity, and the institutionalization of practices of connection to the homeland.

But I cannot shake the feeling that this notion of community is emphasised to the point that the individuals within them get obscured. Which is odd because I feel that these collectives themselves come into being to serve or safeguard the interests, motivations, hopes and dreams of the individuals within them. In this sense I agree wholeheartedly with Cho's (2007) suggestion for treating diaspora as a condition of subjectivity because it draws attention to the subjects that embody the diasporic experience. This would also allow us to consider two factors that have not been adequately addressed. First, the way in which nation-states have been engaging with diaspora subjectivity to strategically consolidate diaspora communities around nationalist agendas. And second, the place of those at the margins of diaspora communities or those that meet the criteria on paper but do not feel part of these communities.

Becoming a Citizen of the Indian Diaspora

I was forced to confront the role of the nation-states in shaping diaspora discourse when I was applying for my OCI (Overseas Citizen of India) card. Having become a Portuguese citizen, and as a result having had my Indian citizenship withdrawn by default, I needed to get a visa in order to be in India where I was residing. I could then apply for an OCI card which would provide me certain benefits such as a lifelong visa to travel, live, and work in India.

While waiting my turn at the FRRO (Foreigner Regional Registration Offices) I heard the officer at the desk speak to all the people ahead of me in English. But when I presented him with my case he insisted that I speak to him in Hindi because, he explained, "you're an Indian after all!" In response I only smiled in an effort to conceal my surprise and annoyance, and promptly and obediently switched to Hindi. But I could not get over the fact that as long as I was Indian I had to prove my Indianness and no sooner had I become Portuguese that I was being claimed by India. What this taught me is that the ideal type of the nation-state is flexible as and when it suits their agenda. And this is also

why I believe it is crucial to call attention to the use of the language of diaspora by the nation-states.

These diaspora communities are formed out of shared situations of vulnerability and the community then becomes a source of strength and comfort. But the way Nation-states use the concept works to fracture this sense of community by first re-formulating the diasporic communities around the idea of the nation-state and then structuring their engagement with people in the diaspora at the level of individuals. So, taking the case of the Indian diaspora(s), rather than having a number of different communities each with a different set of histories of migration – ranging from indenture, political refuge, voluntary migration, etc. – you now have a general Indian diaspora community each member of which is issued an OCI card.

Identity card games

When thinking about the different identity cards people carry now-a-days – these different documents that have come to define us – I was reminded of a game that was popular in my childhood. It involved a deck of cards, very much like identity cards, with a photograph of sportspersons followed by important personal statistics and a record of their achievements. These were dealt to players so that each player had a set of cards assigned at random. In each round the initiating player would pick a statistic and other players would compare it with the same statistic from one from their own set of cards. The person with the highest score would win the round. Each player could decide which card from their set to play, choosing either to play a strong card, or to sacrifice a weak card if losing was guaranteed, thereby saving the stronger card for another round.
Identification I find is like this card game, we are all dealt a certain hand – our ethnicity, our history, etc. – from which we may choose, given the context, those identities that we want to foreground and those that we want to conceal. These identities each represent a community though the individual may not embody the community identity perfectly. In this sense, the community identity tends to be more ideal-typical. Individuals invoke and align themselves with this community identity as and when it serves their purpose. What is important is that the identity invoked should satisfy the demands of the context. These contexts often arise when there is a perceived departure from the ideal type. So, when my childhood friend asked, “Are you guys British?” it was because of a perceived departure from the ideal type of ‘Indian.’ Here I find it useful to think of these as ‘breaches’ in the way that Garfinkel (1967) described them in his *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. He

demonstrates how social order is reproduced at the micro level using what has come to be known as 'breaching experiments' to upset the order. In these experiments, subjects would find ways to normalise the breach by seeking out an acceptable explanation and thus restoring order. In this case, my identification as Goan would be sufficiently acceptable for explaining my speaking English and being Christian. But in the process, it also alters the definition of what it means to be Indian, at least in this instance.

Moreover, while this selective identification may sound like 'strategic essentialism' it differs from it in that in strategic essentialism the heterogeneity within the collective is sacrificed to achieve the goals of the collective, here it is done in order to achieve individual goals. I see it as that which is required of individuals within the collective in order for the collective to strategically essentialise itself. This is necessary because the discourse itself is constrained within an order that is predefined.

To think of diasporic identities in this way allows us to, both, acknowledge the individual as well as retain the emphasis of the community in the conception of diaspora. It may also help to see the opportunity that comes with being in the diaspora and argue that despite the experiences of loss and longing having these multiple identities affords us more opportunities to navigate the world of today.[14] The ability to invoke a particular history, to profit from the goodwill of a particular community, or simply feign familiarity through a shared origin brings with it a lot of potential. This includes the option to negate or invisiblise certain aspects of these identities or even reject them entirely. For instance, my being an outsider has allowed me to live in India without a caste. And more importantly it has allowed my claim of not having a caste to go unquestioned. This has allowed me a mobility unimaginable to most people in India.

Conclusion

Why is it important to tell this story – to tell *my* story? One of the reasons is probably to tell the world that I exist even if I am a misfit, or maybe it is precisely because I feel like a misfit in all the groups, communities and nations in which I hold a stake that makes me want to tell it. And though the concept of diaspora has been useful in making sense of this difference and also providing comfort and hope, the focus on the community seemed

[14] This is particularly true when these multiple identities also translate to multiple identity cards. An example of this is the tendency that Ong (1999) observes among Hong Kong businessmen to accumulate foreign passports for the sake of convenience and to hedge against the uncertainty of Hong Kong's relationship with China.

to be at odds with my experience. It is for this reason that I wanted to highlight the individual in the diaspora conceptions. I think part of the reason for my experience feeling incongruous with other theorisations of diaspora is that it has been for the most part an interaction with nation-states whose engagement with their diasporas operates in a machinery that deals with individuals. The way in which individuals come into contact with the concept of diaspora today is not as an abstract theoretical or analytical category but as a reality often mediated through modern institutions – primarily nation-states – the basic unit of which is the individual.

Finally, by formulating identification as strategic gameplay I hope to encourage people to play the game, to see the potential in their multiple and divergent identities and to mobilize their agency in either claiming or negating them. Because if, as Garfinkel argues, order is reproduced at the micro level, then by discursive intervention at the micro level it may be possible to effect a change at the macro level, i.e. by playing the game it might be possible to change the rules of the game. In other words, if my papers are the only claim to the different identities that form a part of me I must use these papers to claim my space. Rather than let the papers define me I must, by proclaiming my existence, use these papers to redefine the identifying categories themselves.

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