

“Playing Cards – Identity Cards and the Politics of Information”

Taha Mehmood,
Sarai CSDS

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“Who are you, with whom I have to deal”, remarked Jeremy Bentham while reflecting on questions of individual identity. Of course, we also know that many years later, he gave the implausible suggestion that, only the extreme measure of tattooing the populations would solve the moral and political question, “who are you?”

This paper focuses on questions around identification practices - practices as they are lived, experienced, inhabited, imagined and contested - in the realm of everyday and will try to go back and forth in time and space in order to draw connections and comparisons with 'what was' to 'what is'.

A Village Surveyed: Pooth Khurd

The wall adjoining the door of the house looks over marked. Amidst a collage of images, hangs a modest name plate- black letters set against white, Dr. Virender Dabas, 10/C Pooth Khurd.

Beneath the name plate are deposits of earlier markings, a cluttered haphazard arrangement of signs and symbols- few incantations to Gods, a child's hand imprint – possibly for good luck, bleak faded numerals and lines that a painter accompanying a survey party for a voter ID card or the census left years ago. Seen from an angle these alphanumeric digits provide a vibrant background to the montage of superimposed mascots except for one. And it says MNIC 1-9-3-9, in bold confident strokes, painted in saffron - 'gerua' to be precise- Vibrant color and mixed with lime, for its attribute of adhesiveness. The denotation sticks to the invalid wall - etched for posterity. Inside the wall, lies the home of Dr. Virender Dabas, where three generations

of the Dabas family stay – wife, parents, two brothers and their families, and his own two sons with their spouses and children.

The Master Key

On the 22nd July 2004, the office of the Registrar General of India begin the MNIC project. Here MNIC stands for Multiple- purpose Identity Card. The RGI's initiative was based on the recommendations forwarded by the Group of Ministers to the Government of India on reforming the National Security Systems.

Para 5.110 of the report reads, 'Illegal migration has caused serious problems. There should be compulsory registration of citizens and non-citizens living in India... All citizens should be given a MNIC card and non citizens should be issued a identity card of a different color and design.'

The exercise envisaged allocating a National Identification Number [NIN] to each person, prepare a National Register of Indian Citizens [NRIC], a National Register of Residency [NRR] for non citizens and providing MNIC card to citizens and Multiple-purpose Residency Card to non citizens.

To legitimize this task the Citizenship Act 1955 was amended, and a specific section on registration and issuance of the card was included. The database created and maintained by the Ministry of Home Affairs would be available to officials at State, District, Sub-District, Village and Sub town area at any point of time.

The data will be used for identification while availing of schemes with respect to health and family welfare, education, old age pension, public distribution system, disability and SC /ST related services. The proposal envisages compulsory quoting of the National Identification Number or NIN while transacting with banks, insurance organizations, registration or transfer of property, or while, getting admission to schools, colleges, hostels, booking tickets for bus, railway,

and airplanes, seeking employment and while marrying. [1]

In a nutshell the MNIC card was envisaged as the most comprehensive identity document surpassing all other previous documents used for identification purposes issued by the Government of India. The MNIC card or as Shuddha said yesterday, the 'master key' that would that would open all blockages for speedy transactions.

National ID cards are widely in use in many countries around the world including most European countries, and closer to home in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. (check with Shuddha)

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Coming back to Pooth Kurd, the MNIC number on Dr. Virender's house- 1-9-3-9 is almost an echo of retribution from a not so distant past. In 1939, as the clouds of war were looming over Europe, claims of various identification practices were being deeply contested in England and Austria, William Morris, the chairman and possibly the sole employee of British Monomarks Ltd, attempted to interest government officials in a grand scheme: “that the state should issue to each individual an unduplicated mark of identity, to be considered as his or her 'NATIONAL NUMBER' and used an appendage to the name, for all purposes- state or private”

This card was to join a whole range of documents from birth certificates, school and university documents, driving licenses, passports, national insurance policies, bank accounts and finally the gravestone and death certificates [2]. His idea though revolutionary, was not accepted. But similar thoughts were finding implementation elsewhere in Europe. The Third Reich, according to Edwin Black, was hiring Dehomag, the German subsidiary of IBM to identify and track entire populations of 'Racial Jews' in Austria and the rest of the greater Reich by assigning a unique five digit number to each Jew [3].

At the Dabas household, in Pooth Khurd, things were markedly different. Virender's son, Surjeet, a physical training instructor at the government school was roped in with the *anganwadi* teachers, the *patwari* or the *local revenue officer* and the school principal to assist and conduct house-to-house surveys. The survey form required Surjeet to elicit information on sixteen counts from the villagers.

Pooth Khurd was chosen with thirteen other places for the pilot project of the Multiple purpose National Identity Card scheme. The exercise covers a total population of thirty lakhs. The card is purported to be the first identity document affixing the citizenship of the individual.

This brings me to another card, the Ration Card which was and still is considered an identity document popular by the State. The Ration cards, introduced by the Agricultural Prices Commission as a response to severe crop failures and subsequent food shortages, in the sixties, became an identity document in later decades, much like the Social Security Number of the US. The Social Security card was never meant to be used for identification purposes. However in 1961, the Civil Service Commission began using the number to identify all federal employees. In 1962, the IRS started requiring the number to appear on all completed tax returns[5], now the need for a valid ID has become so pressing that, the motor vehicle departments in many states of the USA are issuing non-drivers licenses as identity documents. [6]

Initially the issue and cancellation of ration cards was deemed to be a continuous process being undertaken by the state governments and the union territories but it was not to be so. In May 2000, while replying to a question in the Parliament, a minister of state in the ministry of consumer affairs and public distribution, said that, “The State Governments/ UT Administrations have been directed to issue instructions to concerned authorities not to insist on the production of ration cards for identity purposes and for identification purposes, the photo identity card issued by the Election Commission be used.” [7]

About two years later, the ration card, which was believed to be the primary document for procuring a voter ID card, undergoes a procedural reversal in some states, the voter

ID card becomes one of the primary documents in establishing the authenticity of an identity claim. In April 2003, while replying to a query in the Lok Sabha, on the issue of fake identity cards in Bengal, Mr. Subash Maharia, the Minister of State in the ministry of food and public distribution said that, "... the Government of West Bengal has formulated strict procedures like the production of Voter identity cards for cross checking the genuineness before the ration cards are issued." [8]

On an empirical level although the Government of India claims to have data on the number of ration cards issued but it is ambivalent about the quantity of bogus cards that add up to the grand total. There is no knowledge of whether there is an increase or decrease in the circulation of fake ration cards. [9]. Even the claim of ration cards covering large percentages of populations is deeply contested. In 1999, for example, in Dharavi, Mumbai, Asia's largest slum with a population of half a million persons, only 151 families were issued BPL ration cards. [10]

More ever, on the one hand, initiatives to process, verify and monitor, both the applications for and the existing ration cards, door to door surveys are preferred- a practice that does not take into account large mobile- constantly shifting populations, making the practice vulnerable for unstable information to creep in, on the other hand claim of durability of information, which is solicited and given voluntarily by an individual, that information staying solely with a particular ministry or a concerned department is inclined to various contestations.

In 1939, for example in England, the use of National Registration Information is a case in point. It illustrates the phenomenon now know as 'Data Creep'. The 1939 Registration Act provided for three administrative applications [National service, security and food rationing], but eleven years later no less than thirty nine government agencies made use of the data. [12]

In less than four decades since its inception, the trustworthiness of the identity document has shifted from a paper based booklet, that is, the ration card, to a laminated photo ID card.

The notion of trust seems to follow the footprints left by technological progress. Now the entitlements accorded to the voter identity card are being debated as work on the pilot project of MNIC draws to a close. It is not surprising that the debates around MNIC revolve more towards its technological aspects like the ability to converge large amounts of information, of durability, of security rather on issues concerning identity or identification practices.

It is in the technological journals like Electronics Today and Data Quest, that MNIC finds a mention. An article in Data Quest, entitled 'The Synergy Challenge', reads, “The world is going in just the direction where walls are collapsing, allowing all to mingle freely. Similarly, all Indian government departments will, one day, share data and process knowledge freely, across terrain, beyond all barriers of language and infrastructure”.

With the estimated cost of sixty rupees a card and that's straight six thousand crore rupees for the card itself. Accessory services like maintaining, verifying and upgrading data would pile on to the bill. Prompting new players like the behemoth TCS, The Sark Systems of Delhi, Indian Society of E-Governance or IT for Change to become stakeholders in the smart card pie. Elsewhere in the mainstream press, the discursive space around identity and identification practices is built around the illegal migrant/unauthorized alien/ unverified tenant/ unauthenticated servant and the tropes of fear and uncertainty around terrorism are evoked to introduce new practices for greater state scrutiny and control. [13]

In 1926, B. Traven, a German speaking radical, in his story of adventure of high seas entitled *The Death Ship*, wrote, “It seems to me the Sailor's card and not the sun, is the center of the universe. I am positive that the great war was fought not for democracy and justice, but for no other reason than that a cop or an immigration officer, may have the right to ask you, and be well paid for asking you to show him your Sailor's card, or what have you. Before the war nobody asked you for a passport”. [14] This moment was crucial as it dramatically changed terms of international travel. I want to focus on a similar moment that people in Pooth Khurd, are living. I would like to investigate this moment through some questions. What is the nature of this moment? Is

this moment transformative? Will it ride over/ on or override previous identification practices? How do those who inhabit this place are reading this moment? What sorts of imaginations are evoked as Dr. Virender Dabas and his village waits for the MNIC card or the Green Card or Hara card as it is referred to locally, to arrive?

Pooth Khurd, which is locally believed to mean, a high ground, lies towards the northwest of Delhi. According to oral history it is believed that around four hundred years ago, a man called Kala, came here with his grandmother from a nearby village called Kanjawala, and laid the foundation of, what is now known as, the Dabas clan. The land, bequeathed to him and his brother as legacy was equally divided. After him his two sons Kheta and Rama further divided the land. Pooth Khurd was Kheta's share.

From what started as a communal adobe of six families called thoda in Kheta's panna or piece of land has grown on to become a thriving village of twelve thousand people with multi caste, multi regional and multi religious personhoods.

Over the past decade because of increasing urbanization the farm land of the villagers were taken over to develop residential colonies. Now circles of men playing cards dot the village. Erstwhile farmers with quite a bit of compensation money and no lands to till. The perceptible changes in Pooth Khurd are a replay of the transfer of land use and livelihood practices in Sukhrail, a nearby village, in Gurgaon, a satellite township of Delhi.

Malls, multiplexes, private townships, condominiums, eighty feet roads, modern steel and glass multi-storied office complex stand today at what a decades ago stood the sleepy village of Sukhrail. Most of the land is now taken over by private condominiums and townships. These residential entities are covered under the Haryana Apartment Ownership Act, 1986. Chapter IV, sub section 21, under the heading - Other Duties of the Board of Directors of the by- laws of a Resident Welfare Association framed as per the Act says-

“In addition to duties imposed by these bye laws or by resolution of the association, the

Board shall be responsible for the Care, Upkeep and Surveillance of the condominium and the common areas and facilities and the restricted common areas and facilities. [15] In a routine internal circular notifying the residents titled- Security and Other Related Matters the Security Committee of the residential complex notes under section a section, titled- Security Fencing- that the security fencing improvements, that is, the increased heights of boundary walls on the south and north sides, installation of razor wire fencing on the front [west] side is nearing completion.[16]

As the language of the aforementioned documents make it apparently clear the erstwhile Sukhrail and a host of near by villages are now being policed separately and privately as a host of real estate developers, property dealers and realtors claim possession and exercise control over its access. The rapid urbanization of Gurgaon, has generated hundreds of work opportunities in the service sector. Rrural, semi-urban and urban people from neighboring states, mostly UP, Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa seek employment here as maids, drivers, receptionists, electricians, gardeners, attendants, and cooks. But the most visible of them all are the uniformed security guards. Security service firm is a mushrooming business in Delhi and adjoining townships giving employments to hundreds to young men. Given the nature of the job, trust plays an important role in seeking and eventually obtaining employment. The relative ease of manufacture of bogus ration cards, or other identity documents makes the task of hiring and verifying valid individuals extremely difficult for the security service agencies.

How does one ensure that the guard posted in front of the bungalow will not be a party to any unlawful activity? And if he is, how can he be not allowed to disappear in a mammoth mass of the mega, or like Solly would argue as the 'incremental' city? How can trust be established in the face of an unstable identity document?

Talking of the stability of identity and identiicaton documents, I'd like to mention a famous Hollywood film, the 'Assasin'. The main protagonist Jullian Moore, essaying the role of an electronic data thief, utters this, at a critical point in the movie, "look, I don't have a social security number. I don't have a driving license. I can barely

remember my real name. I am a ghost. I am a nobody. I will just disappear”.[17]

Retired [Colonel] Ramesh Verma, the owner and Managing Director of Colonel's Security Agency seems to know exactly how to prevent a guard from disappearing , of becoming the ghost of his person becoming a nobody and disappearing in the crowd. His technique of employing guards is simple. He follows what is a well-documented procedure of hiring people in terrorist organizations- which is hiring through modules or cells. The first guard he hired had served under his command for twenty years. He knew him well and trusted him. As the business grew he asked the guard to get two people whom he trusts most from his extended family and made him personally responsible for them and so on. After fifteen years and fifteen hundred guards later the idea seems to be working.

Rakesh Mishra, a guard working with another security service agency on the other hand had to deposit his class ten board certificate to keep the job. The agency hires only tenth class pass males from Darbhanga region of Jharkhand. For the period of the employment with the agency, their tenth class board certificates are taken away and kept in a bank locker to be returned only when Rakesh would leave the organization after having cleared all the dues.

Practices involving kinship, regional affiliation and temporary seizure of educational certificates makes for the void created by an unstable identity document. These practices emerge from the experience of dealing with unstable documents, although they may not lay any claim for a rational approach, a universal methodology but they certainly illustrate how non-state players deal with the wobbly issue of identity in their own idiosyncratic albeit workable ways, contributing to a constantly circulating archive of experiences within the city.

But what happens when archives, the virtual and material but passive depositories of identities of people becomes alive, like the index card which accidentally falls in the lap of Senor Jose, the protagonist of Jose Saramago's novel, *All the Names*. It is a riveting account of the adventures of an archivist working in the Registry of Births and Deaths.

Rajiv Sethi, a manager, in charge of the personal loans department, of a Multinational Bank received this sms from an unknown sender one day as he was about to call a client to persuade him to take a personal loan- BHARAT COMPUTERS the Database people offers Latest/Updated DELHI, NCR, Databases on Individuals, Business and professionals. These CD's can be bought by paying a hundred rupees, from agents standing near the staircases in congested electronic markets of Nehru Place and Punjabi Bagh and shouting Database Cd's. The database CD's sketch a fascinating graph of circulation of digital archives of identities in various forms and practices. How the technology that help create, organize and control digital archives, also participates in the dissemination, deformation, reassembly and circulation of virtual catalogs of identities.

The Multiple purpose National Identity Card is perhaps the most ambitious attempt at creating a digital archive of one billion people. At the pilot stage though it is not without its share of problems. According to a news report in The Telegraph, Calcutta Edition, on August 23, 2005, the MNIC survey failed to verify some 90 percent of the population in Murshidabad district of West Bengal.[19]

An earlier story filed on August 18, 2005, reports about the contentious issue of non coverage of some four hundred Bengali and Persian speaking Iranis, during the survey, who came to India and settled here about seventy years ago.[20]

Even as the census commission grapples with citizenship issues in Murshidabad and elsewhere, Dr. Virender Dabas' father who has never been outside Delhi, hastens to explain what it would mean to have a MNIC card.

According to him, the MNIC card will help make foreign travel easier and would protect and establish their identities in case of any trouble. A view, which was seconded, by his son and many others. Initially I couldn't understand the link between foreign travel and the citizenship document. It was while admiring a MNIC embossed jute bag, with the benefits printed on both sides, presented to the villagers at the Panchayat Bhavan by the survey party, that I stumbled upon the possible connection.

MNIC or the Multiple Purpose National Identity Card translated into Hindi reads as /Bahu Uddeshye Rashtriya Pehchan Patra /but what I suspect is being read as /Bahu Deshye Rashtriye Peechan Patra /or Multiple Nation National Identity Card.

Not much difference in pronunciation of the two words – bahuuddeshya –multi purpose and deshya – nation. The MNIC card, seems to evoke different sets of meaning for the scholars, bureaucrats and the statisticians at the office of the Registrar General of India from the inhabitants of Pooth Khurd.

The yearnings, the urges, the conjectures and the aspirations of a technological wonder, of a nation wide digital archive, of a possible merging and purging of data, of permanently settling the troublesome issue of citizenship, of closing boundaries, of stabilizing personhoods, and of affixing a identity to a particular person is being read as, perhaps as it is or perhaps as a moment of dreams and desires of mobility, of movements, of drifts, of shifts, of opening up and venturing out, of perhaps acquiring multiple citizenships, of sliding through and passing by, of posing as and faking it.

I would like to end with a quote from Beatrice Fraenkel, commenting on the History of Signature said that, 'identity is at the same time that which distinguishes an individual from others and that which assimilates him to others'.^[21] Which brings us close to Bentham's query' Who are you?'

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