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The Portability of Indianness: Some Propositions

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We live in the age of portability. When the Government of India (GoI) offered Mobile Number Portability (commonly abbreviated as MNP) and the eventual abolition of national 'roaming charges' it was only one more instance of what might be called the portability-ethos of our everyday lives. Our everyday lives can go with us anywhere we go in India. Indeed, I am proposing here that we *perform* Indianness in the *form* of a certain portability.

I take portability to mean two interrelated features. One, it is the *property* of an object (people or things), as signifying its *capability* to move. Two, it implies a *system* that facilitates this movement and which, as John Urry puts it in his study of mobilities, provide ' "spaces of anticipation" that the journey can be made' (2007: 12-13). When we speak, therefore, of mobile numbers or health insurance portability we automatically gesture at the process of movement (of our records from one service provider to another, our payments shift from one account to another, and even the icons and interface on our phone screen change) and the systems that anticipate and enable this movement.

Portability with these two intertwined meanings, I propose, is now a condition of identity, a constituent of our belief-systems and our lifeworld, and is therefore a material condition that informs our actions and ways of thinking. It structures our way of thinking about ourselves and the nation wherein, for instance, we do not think of 'transfer' in the same way as before given the fact that the systems allow us the portability of many things and processes. We can now actually anticipate our mobility, and the mobility of processes, as a result. We perform identities in the very process of mobility, even as we assume that there is a core identity that is transmissible, like Latour's *immutable mobile*, across systems of transmission.

But, while we assume we have a consistent identity in terms of physiognomy or DNA, we often forget that these identities are not-self identical and need to be embedded and validated by particular systems. Earlier there have been markers of identity that were pan-nation, the driving licence, the passport and the not-too-long-ago PAN card being three such significant ones. Others, such as vehicle registration, ration cards and telephone numbers were 'localized' in the sense they had to be issued by a local authority and were valid within that state/region. The Road Transport Authority of your state of residence validates your driving licence and by extension your identity, your local telephone authority that issues a number, a host telephone exchange and validates, therefore, your residential address. Gas connections, cable TV connections, loans, phone connections tethered you to a place through systems of validation and offices. We imagined ourselves into locality through these very concrete architectures of identity-formation and identity-validation. The age of such a localized identity-formation is now

past, at least for some classes of people as portability becomes a whole new way of engaging with identity and the national-cultural formation of their lives.

While cultural and social theorists speak in terms of cosmopolitanism, postnationalism and transnationalism, we rarely stop to think of the intranational, or national-cosmopolitan (an oxymoronic formulation if there ever was one), or vernacular cosmopolitan, identities that are facilitated through such a portability ethos. The vernacular cosmopolitan, as Pnina Werbner (2006) among others describes it, is the combination of local specificity with universal concerns. Vernacular cosmopolitanism, the condition of being rooted in/to a place while carrying the potential to be, or be moving, elsewhere, is the effect of portability. Indianness is now a vernacular cosmopolitanism for the elites in the country.[1]

Increasingly since the 1990s, however, many of these processes and objects have become portable. Four prominent ones constitute the evidence for my argument regarding portability-as-Indianness here. In the recent past, the Insurance Regulatory Authority (IRDA) of the GoI has announced portability of health insurance from one insurance provider to another, anywhere in the country. Bank loans, in similar fashion, can be moved from one bank to another. Gas connections, we are now informed, will also be portable soon. With the AADHAR initiative the GoI has argued a case for 'one person, one card' in one nation. We can now imagine an India and Indianness where several things that have marked our identities – the paper trail all Indians carry – need not change. We can imagine an Indianness founded on not rootedness but *in* portability, where location, dislocation and relocation actually mean carrying the same apparatuses of everyday life – from bank accounts to gas connections to phones – wherever we go.

National identity now, I propose, first, is portable across the country in the form of an insertion into a virtual 'flow architecture' (Knorr Cetina in Urry 158) that allows the continuous relocation of the apparatuses of identity and everyday life. Flow architecture is the 'system' component of portability I outlined above. It is what enables the capability of movement to be realized. Sentient machines and systems that are unobtrusive and yet very real – insurance records, government offices, bank databases, as well as membership databases of large stores – constitute the flow architecture that are not always fixed environments but exist in virtual states activated through the arrival of the ID card or data byte at their terminal. India itself is this collection of flow architectural 'spaces' whereby my bank loan, health insurance, gas connection, mobile number and AADHAR locate and situate me in any geographical-cultural part of the country, only tenuously linked to the point of origin – spaces that anticipate my imminent or optional movement. India as a marker of my identity is constituted through the *traversal* through this flow architecture. In other words I am proposing that my sense of Indianness comes into being through the condition of actual or potential *mobility* and portability through the flow architecture of multiple databases. My sense of, and performance of, Indianness is contingent upon my passage through the country in virtual as well as real terms when any of these documents and identity-markers is accepted by the sentient environment of a machine-reader or database.

Second, geographical distinctions, except in terms of choice of residence or commute, make for only a part of our lives in the age of portability. While these identity markers do ensure our *access* to material and concrete infrastructures like roads or schools (as WJ Mitchell has argued in *Me++*), portable identity markers, I propose, transcend the actual local-regional in favour of the *potential*-national. That is, while local geography and chorography do matter for the here and the now, portable identity markers such as mobile numbers or health insurance always anticipate one's eventual mobility. To phrase it differently, all identity markers now carry within them the possibility of mobility without obstacles. To move geographical locations is to now carry borders within us in the form of these markers.

Third, if we requisition here Benedict Anderson's influential argument (1991) about 'imagined communities', we now have whole new ways of imagining our Indianness. We plug into – literally in many cases, when we swipe cards in sentient machines – a *national* flow architecture in the form of service providers. Portability, I suggest, is a way of thinking about national belonging because these cards, bar codes and papers represent a simultaneously material and virtual form of belonging to an entity represented in the form of the flow architecture. Interlinked branches of services providers constitute a new geography of the country for me when/if I relocate.[2]While not always consciously aware of being documented or monitored through such markers or bar codes, we can see (on screen, in a print out, in a password) and therefore *feel*, a sense of belonging. I can move and remain Indian because I am locked into a national database accessible from any part of the country: the card or bar code I carry is a national one despite its point of origins. My card with my identity on it *moves* through the enormous database, and gives me a sense of belonging.

Fourth, mobility as a condition of national identity or belonging automatically relegates the sedentary or those with lesser mobility to the condition of local identities alone. It is not too much of a speculative leap to visualize a scenario where a person's credit-history and therefore credit- worthiness – loans, credit card spending – will become important across the country in this the age of consumer citizenship, facilitated by the linking of databases and new forms of consumer- and spending-citizenships now arising. Thus, enhanced mobility of the kind facilitated by these markers reinforces class divides, this time around mobility.

Fifth, we need to think of the materiality of these identity markers as 'fugitive' (I am invoking here John Urry's formulations on mobility, 2007: 158), invisible and becoming realized only when they run into an obstacle. Their significance and potential to formulate your identity in any part of the country, their kinetic potential, are all innocuous and invisible.

Sixth, new forms of thinking about community emerge. From the time when 'community' implied a territoriality to the present where the portable mobile or bank account suggests a vernacular cosmopolitan, we have come a long way. We remain tethered, as I proposed, to the local in terms of infrastructure or weather, but we now carry with and within us the link to a larger geographical and geopolitical entity of the

nation as never before. Vernacular cosmopolitanism is the consequence of the dynamics of the local and the national within these processes of portability, and is mostly the condition of the elite (Werbner 2006).

Seventh, the conscious or unconscious *recognition* and cognizance of portability as a marker of identity is now to be treated as a material condition. Just as belief, religious faith or myths are material and therefore influential in the sense they constitute the cultural- and lifeworlds I occupy, portability is the new cultural world for certain sections of the society.

Portability, therefore, is a condition of vernacular cosmopolitanism that, even as it situates us within a locality through service providers, terminals and structures, and offers us the potential of mobility anywhere in the country. At once local and universal (within the nation's borders, but with roaming phone and data cards at relatively low pricing, even this is changing rapidly), the vernacular cosmopolitanism that makes us *feel a sense of* and enables *an enactment of* Indianness is enabled by the structures of portability. Indianness is now portable across the country.

Notes

[1] Such an elite mobility and portability of identity is of course in sharp contrast with the forced migration and/or displacement of tribes, communities, farmers and refugees. If for some modernity in India is characterized by mobility then we need to acknowledge this modernity's limited remit and reach. Further we must also see the limited modernity as engendering various new kinds of 'wastes', in Zygmunt Bauman's terms – most notably of refugees.

[2] Incidentally another form of this portability ethos is visible in the consumer cultural component of cities and lives. All malls resemble each other with their standard 'fittings' and brands – Levi's, KFC, McDonalds, Fab India, among others. Having frequented these outlets in one city, one knows exactly what to expect (food quality, services, storekeeper uniforms, merchandise – in the company's store in another city. Therefore, we do not experience a cultural shock from one mall in X city to another mall in Y city due to the cultural continuum of brands and store architecture. This leads to the creation of soft cities where the uniqueness of a city that makes it recognizable is eroded in favour of homogenization.

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