

Identities in the transnational lifeworld

Individual, community and nation

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Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Light, has gone global—from the White House to 10 Downing Street. While applauding the contribution of the Indian diasporic community in the UK during her Diwali message in 2017, then-British Prime Minister Theresa May simultaneously invoked Hinduism and Lord Ram, appealing to other diasporic communities for harmonious and peaceful co-living in multicultural Britain. I celebrated the same Diwali evening at the Indian Embassy in the Hague, where guests from diverse communities and nations—from the Indian diaspora and Indian-Surinamese-Dutch community to the South Asian and global diplomatic community—enjoyed Indian samosas and sweets and danced to Bollywood tunes. When travelling home by public bus after the event, to my surprise the driver greeted me in Hindi. Enthusiastically he introduced himself as Raghuvir, a synonym used for Lord Ram, and insisted I stood beside him throughout the entire journey.



Happy Diwali. Image courtesy Nitin Badhwar on Flickr. Creative commons license.

It was an engaging conversation. Raghuvir told of his grandfather who migrated from India to Surinam in the 19th century as an indentured labourer. The family continued to follow the Indian tradition and his father gave Indian names to his children, taught them Hindu epics and the Hindi language. Though Raghuvir had never been to India, he loved Indian food, festivals, culture, and Bollywood, and boasted of having a large collection of Hindi CDs. Demonstrating his talent, he sang a line from a popular Hindi song. Then he referred to Surinam, his land of birth, as his *Desh* (nation/Motherland) and community, expressing a deep emotional connection. Decades ago, he had migrated to the Netherlands in search of better opportunities, and had become a Dutch citizen.

With this Diwali narrative I hope to set the context, to reflect on the contemporary transnational lifeworld, and to understand how in this globalised world, identities of individual, community and nation undergo transformations through a range of activities, which involve networks of individuals and communities, transcending national borders.

Transnational lifeworld

The transnational lifeworld is complex. Transnationalism provides the key to understanding how links between places are initiated, evolved and sustained and how changes occur not only in the spheres of family and kinship but also in the realms of citizenship and the nation-state. Transnationalism helps us to understand how political, economic, social and cultural processes and activities extend beyond national borders, and how individuals, communities and states engage with multiple identities within a fluid global context. Transnationalism embraces a plethora of issues: families, migration circuits, identities, social networks, public spaces, public cultures, capital flows, trade, services, policies, citizenship, corporations, inter-governmental agencies, non-governmental and supra-governmental organizations.

Today, large numbers of people have diverse 'habitats of meaning', or they live in social worlds that are stretched between physical places and communities in two or more nation-states. Multiple habitats bring in multiple experiences, constitute multiple cultural repertoires, and construct multiple identities. A number of factors in each habitat influence identity formation: history, belongingness, stereotypes, exclusion, cultural difference, ethnic segregation, access to resources, socio-economic hierarchies, rights and duties, strategies of mobilisation, etc. Multiple contexts create a 'transnational social field', a 'transnational village', and 'translocality', etc., presenting a complex set of conditions that influence the construction and transformation of social identities. These multi-local/transnational identities shape everyday lives of individuals and form the basis of their community and political engagement within and across each of the places.

Debates and issues

In the early 1990s, transnationalism came into focus in migration studies research. Social anthropologists Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Christina Blanc-Szanton argued that trans-migrants were not 'uprooted', but firmly rooted both in their host and home countries, maintaining multiple linkages and bringing together their societies of origin and settlement.¹ For Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo and Patricia Landolt, economic transactions primarily determined the existence, scale and intensity of transnationalism.² Some scholars observed that the parents' country of origin seemed to loosen across generations, thus raising doubts over the longevity of transnationalism. Yet the idea survived and various explanations surfaced.

Studies showed that not only transnational 'ways of being' (activities, practices, networks, etc.) but also 'ways of belonging' (solidarity, reciprocity, etc.) acted as crucial parameters for the establishment and maintenance of the transnational lifeworld. For some other scholars, kinship and group solidarity should not be treated as given conditions for transnationalism, as they could be constructed and even dismantled in transnational space. Researches also addressed how and why transnationalism emerged, was maintained, transformed or dissolved not only by factoring in the impact of global capitalist penetration, but also analysing the economic, cultural and social resources of migrants, nation-state migration regimes and border politics.

The state-transnationalism relationship

Transnationalism has been often been equated with spontaneous cross-border mobility and practices that take place independently of the nation-state. Immigrants, non-state actors like global NGOs, transnational corporations, worldwide media, immigrant entrepreneurs and cross-border personal networks are seen as key agents and drivers of cross-border flows. Thus, state involvement is by and large ignored. A problematic distinction is also made between nation-state initiatives termed as 'international' and civil society-driven activities as 'transnational'; in reality, both overlap and are often closely connected.

The state-transnationalism relationship is complex. While some find states as the final arbiters in the international system, today, nation-states operate under structural constraints proportionate to their status in the world-system. The burgeoning supranational institutions further constrain the state by regulating flows of capital, goods and people across national borders. In the era of economic globalization, supra-national quasi-state entities like the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the United Nations and the European Union restrain and weaken the nation-states.

Yet despite these constraints, states cannot be simply seen as exit and entry points for migrants; the state plays the crucial role of a critical mediator in transnational processes either by being proactive or reactive.

Proactive state transnationalism means that the state may make 'the first move' towards creating new global social or trading networks, thus igniting the latent potential among immigrants for transnational demographic and financial flows; for instance, the role of the People's Republic of China in migration management. The state may also adopt policies to promote and regulate cross-border flows; for example, the recent surge in the demand for dual citizenship and right to vote in Europe, Africa and Asia, propels states to consider adopting policies to help their diasporas at home and abroad. When a state responds to transnational activities that non-state actors or migrants have already initiated, it is reactive state transnationalism.

While recognising state-driven transnationalism or 'transnationalism from above', it is important to bring in 'transnationalism from below', underlining the active role of migrants, grassroots movements and transnational entrepreneurs. Transnationalism from below, it is argued, acts as a 'counter-hegemonic' movement enabling migrants to become autonomous communities, without being completely controlled either by the host or the home state.

Factoring in subaltern sites and people

Thus, nation-states do contribute to the shaping of transnationalism. Today, from Europe to the United States, the rise of right-wing populism and the backlash against immigrants have led to the introduction of assimilation-oriented policies. This has come as a sequel to the increased securitization of migration since 9/11, which had already restricted migration options. Moreover, in Europe, 'transnational nationalism' is propagated by a variety of transnational networks of nationalist parties, movements and individuals focusing on racial, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant agendas. Although dissimilar in ideology and agenda, various right-wing nationalist forces do attempt to form a transnational alliance and a common platform. These political developments give a clear signal that the connection between the nation and transnationalism must be examined seriously.

Further, major discourses on transnationalism primarily focus on the first world metropolises as sole sites of transnationalism, mostly ignoring how the global social and economic forces shape the lives of a large number of subalterns in the global South. The erasure of these subalterns from the dominant discourses does not mean that they are outside the orbit of transnationality. Despite being citizens of a nation-state, they barely enjoy citizens'

rights due to their inaccessibility to basic resources. With the onset of neoliberalism, forces of global capital further push them to the margins, accentuating their precarity. Moreover, when a poor person from Bangladesh or a Rohingya from Myanmar crosses the border, being pushed out either by poverty or religious persecution, they face no less hostility and persecution in the land of arrival. This leaves no option for the subalterns of the South but to put up resistance against such unequal and oppressive globalism. Thus, a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of contemporary transnationalism must factor in subaltern sites and people.

The transnational lifeworld, carrying multiple meanings, constituting multiple identities and involving multiple sites, actors and social relationships, manifests how identities are being shaped in the contemporary world. The multi-faceted structure, character and experience of the transnational lifeworld demonstrate that individuals, communities and states play a critical role in constructing transnational identities and in sustaining this complex lifeworld. This complex interplay was evident when 50,000 Indian-Americans thronged into Houston stadium on a Sunday morning in September 2019 to participate in the "Howdy, Modi!" event to greet the Indian Prime Minister in the presence of President Donald Trump. The 4-million Indian-Americans do not belong to the genre of Raghuvir's ancestors, who remained economically and socially marginalised and had little choice to stay connected to their motherland. On the other hand, the postcolonial highly skilled Indian-American migrants enjoy enormous economic, cultural and political capital both at home and in the host nation. Hence, the Indian state and the diasporic community today work in tandem; as the Indian state has the largest diaspora in the world and is the top recipient of remittances (79 billion dollar in 2018), it obviously stands by the Indian-Americans against Trump's anti-immigrant policies. Trump of course attempts to woo Indian-Americans and exploit the Indian Prime Minister's popularity among the community for his electoral prospects. In this complex emerging context, the transnational lifeworld needs deeper reflection.

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Notes

- 1 Glick Schiller, N., Basch, L. & Blanc-Szanton, C. (eds) 1992. *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered*. The New York Academy of Sciences.
- 2 Portes, A., Guarnizo, L.A. & Landolt, P. 1999. 'The Study of Transnationalism: Pitfalls and Promise of an Emergent Research Field', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22(2):217-237.