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# Nationality, Complex Identities and Multiple Belongings

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## Nationality, Complex Identities and Multiple Belongings

Rohini Hensman

As we celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Pravada/Polity*, it is a pleasure to have been associated with it, as a regular contributor, over this period. One reason I did so was because it was extremely satisfying to be linked to a good quality, left-wing but non-dogmatic publication, which was discussing issues vital to the present and future of Sri Lanka and the rest of the world. But I had a more personal reason too: this was an activity that helped to anchor the Sri Lankan part of my identity, which had become somewhat fraught for reasons I will now explain.

I had left Sri Lanka when I was sixteen, completed my education in Britain, and settled in India in 1972. I soon discovered that citizens of Sri Lanka had to renew their Indian visas every year, no matter how long they had been living in India. It was a cumbersome process, which entailed visiting the Foreigners' Regional Registration Office (FRRO), filling in and submitting an application form, then ringing them up to check whether it had come through after a month or more, and coming to get the visa stamped on one's passport when it finally came through. I could manage so long as I was not often travelling abroad, which was the case until 1987-1993, when I moved to Britain again while my husband worked for his doctorate.

Soon after returning to India in 1993, I started working with Women Working Worldwide, and this time my work required frequent travel abroad for research and conferences. By then, the time lag between applying for a visa and getting it had lengthened to several months, and this posed many problems. If I wanted to travel abroad between the date I applied for a new Indian visa and the date it came through, I had to get a 'No Objection to Return' visa from the FRRO. This was not a major problem when I travelled to Sri Lanka, for work as well as family visits. But of course, all other countries required me to apply for and get their visas too before I could enter, and one of the conditions for granting a visa was that the visa in my country of residence should be valid for at least three months after visiting their country. In other words, during those months when my new Indian visa was pending and almost three months before the old visa expired, I couldn't travel abroad except to Sri Lanka, and that was interfering with my work. This was what made me think of getting Indian citizenship, but there was a Catch 22: before applying for it, I had to have not travelled outside India for at least one year! I did try, appealing to various friends of friends to help me, but the best they could do was help me to get a five-year visa.

In the end, I decided I didn't want Indian citizenship after all, since it would entail giving up my Sri Lanka citizenship. Would I have felt less Sri Lankan if I had ceased to be a citizen? Not really. But I felt I was proving a point by being the only citizen of Sri Lanka in my marital nuclear family – that national borders can cut across the closest and most intimate personal relationships. When my first child was born, I inquired if she could be a dual citizen, but was told by both Indian and Sri Lankan authorities that children get their father's nationality. Patriarchy was taken for granted by the officials of both countries. I wonder(ed)

when that national barrier first divided me from by babies: was it when the umbilical cord was cut? Or earlier?

Retaining Sri Lanka citizenship also put a question mark over my own national identity. I remember a conference on women workers where we had to write our names and countries on our name tags. I asked if I could write 'India and Sri Lanka' as my countries and was told 'No, you can only write one country'. I didn't argue, but it was surely an absurd requirement. Even if I didn't have dual nationality, I felt I belonged to both countries and had worked with women workers in both, but apparently this was too complicated for the organisers to get their heads around. Writing for *Pravada* and later *Polity* in Sri Lanka and for the *Economic and Political Weekly* in India gave me a chance to give expression to this complexity. I often wrote about India in the former and about Sri Lanka in the latter, and would refer to both as 'our country' in certain contexts. That certainly didn't mean that I identified with the state in either country, least of all when they lurched sharply to the Right. On the contrary, that identification and sense of belonging made me feel a greater sense of responsibility to combat authoritarianism, racism, religious bigotry, patriarchy and violence in both than I did in other countries, just as being closer to someone makes you feel more responsible for their welfare.

As I found when I examined these issues in greater depth in my essay 'Post-war Sri Lanka: Exploring the Path Not Taken' (2015), the presumption that you can have only one national identity, belong only to one country, is part of a concept of identity and belonging that has never been realistic. To begin with, nation-states are, in historical terms, a relatively recent development, and were preceded by empires within which people moved from one place to another relatively freely, not to mention traders who travelled across the world and sometimes settled down far from their places of origin, intermarrying with local populations, and women from conquered peoples who were forced to be sexually available to the conquerors. In such a scenario, ethnic 'purity' is a myth. No doubt there were endogamous communities, but this custom had to be enforced by patriarchal control over who could have sexual and marital relationships with whom – a situation that persists in many communities even today. The other way of ensuring 'pure' nationalities was – and is – also patriarchal: denying a mother's contribution to a child's nationality. In other words, instead of taking it for granted that we start off with different nationalities and then have to account for how they get mixed, it is more realistic to presume that we start off mixed, and that what has to be examined and accounted for is *the ways that systematic differences have been created and maintained*.

I hardly need to emphasise how important this perspective has become today, when narrow ethno-religious and national identities are being forced upon people to divide them from their neighbours and justify unimaginable violence being inflicted on those within the community who refuse to conform and those outside the community who have been 'othered'. In this context, it is not good enough just to stand up for the rights of the people who are being oppressed to have the same rights as those who are oppressing them; we need to question the very basis of the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. People who share the same language may have very different ideas of how to use, teach and develop it; those who share the same religion may interpret it in diametrically opposed ways; and those who share the same

nationality may kill each other in a struggle for power. None of these groups constitutes a monolithic entity. Conversely, people who don't share a common language, religion or nationality may come together to defend the human rights they believe they share; they may share an identity as workers, farmers, professionals, women, LGBT+ people or people with disabilities; they may love the same music, art, literature (maybe in translation), films, sports or any number of other activities. The life-stories of oppressed and exploited sections of the population from very different parts of the world have much in common, as do the aspirations of those who strive to end such oppression and exploitation.

Once we acknowledge the multi-layered and multi-faceted nature of an individual's identity, it becomes clear that each one of us can belong to a multiplicity of groups in more than one country. Furthermore, there is absolutely no reason for conflict with people simply because they belong to different linguistic, religious or national communities, since one may share with them other dimensions of one's identity, like class, gender, a love of literature, a commitment to discover the truth and struggle for justice, and so on and so forth. Indeed, the default option, given our common humanity, should be friendship with members of other communities.

I am not arguing that the nation-state is on the verge of becoming defunct; this is far from being the case. Rather, I am arguing we should reject the notion that a unique and homogeneous 'nationality' is a marker of our identity. Indeed, with climate change and environmental degradation threatening our planet, the very survival of humankind may depend on more and more people identifying as citizens of the world! This is why I hold onto my ambivalent national identity. My visa problems have to some degree been solved after I was granted an 'Overseas Citizen of India' card, which resembles a residence permit. Other rights are restricted, and it can be withdrawn at the whim of the authorities, but the lack of security is worth it. I am hoping that *Polity* will, among other things, develop the notion of complex identities and multiple belongings as it enters its fourth decade.

## References

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