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Why I Hate Passports and Visas

A Personal Story of Globalization and Fairness

SOHAIL INAYATULLAH

“Soda,” she said. “Is anyone called ‘Soda’ here?” she said a bit louder. I looked around at the handful of us in the immigration room in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. No one looked like they could be called “Soda” but myself. In any case I knew she was yelling out my name, as I was used to its numerous pronunciations. Finally, I stood up and said, “Do you mean Sohail Inayatullah?” She smiled and nodded.

We walked over to her office. I expected the examiner to be an intimidating, tall, white, Texan male whose nose could ferret out illegal aliens; instead, she was a heavily tanned local Hawaiian/Japanese woman. As the interview began, I swore to tell the truth, all the time pondering on the nature of truth and identity. But that my hands were raised and not concealed—a weapon, perhaps—she believed me and I believed myself as well. I just hoped she would not ask me if I believed in the overthrow of the American government. Fortunately, the citizenship questions she asked were about the three branches of government, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution. I answered them correctly, even giving her the Latin term for the law of the land, *Lex Legis*.

I had studied the hundred questions passed out by the Kalihi-Palama immigration center over and over. In those many-times photocopied pages there were questions like “What is the color of the flag? Who said ‘give me liberty or give me death’? Who helped the settlers when they came to the new land?” I had wanted her to ask the question, “What were the benefits for gaining citizenship?” In the crib notes, the answer was the very honest “to get a Federal job, to bring my relatives over to the US,” but I was looking forward to saying, “To vote.”

By voting I could finally participate in representative government. I could make the difference between democracy and despotism, between freedom and tyranny; I could save the United States from another four years of . . .

Born in Pakistan, I had never had the chance to vote largely because we were always out of the country, and when I had lived there, I was too young to vote. In any case, there was usually a dictatorship running the show. I remember once in

Hawai'i on election day a man walked by me, smiling, and told me how good it felt to vote. The power of participation in his face overflowed. I should have said nothing, but I told him that I did not vote. He walked away dejected, perhaps feeling that the republic had lost its legitimacy now that one of its citizens had not voted. I should have told him that I was not a citizen. But I guessed that he would know anyway by my color or look.

It was this look that the examiner asked me about next. She asked me what type of skin complexion I had. "Brown," I had written on the citizenship form.

"No. The only categories we have are fair, medium, and dark."

"Well, I am not dark and I am not fair."

She wanted to argue that I was dark. My being medium made her color problematic, since she was not fair and she was clearly not as dark as me. We both fought for the middle spot, with her finally relenting.

Next we could not find the category for my profession. Immigration had not heard of political scientists, planners, or policy analysts. I did not try to have her look up "futurist," the profession I am most often identified as having. She asked me if she should look under "biology" or "physics." I thought of the new approaches of quantum politics and biopolitics but asked her to try "social scientist." She found it, and after a few signatures (which had to be legible instead of scribbles, which I normally used to represent myself) the exam was over. I walked out to the corridor among the other Asians and Europeans.

This exam had been easier than the earlier one for permanent residency. Then my attorney had argued that I was a world expert in forecasting for court bureaucracies. The US Immigration and Naturalization Service believed him, forgetting to ask why anyone would want to forecast in state judiciaries. Earlier a doctor had cleared me of all types of venereal diseases, and I promised that I would not get any political diseases (communism or homosexuality).

But at least at the green-card hearing there was no questioning of my name. I did not mind the "Soda" incident, but before I signed the final paper the examiner asked me if I wanted to change my name. I took it personally. For years my name had been a source of trouble. I still remember the time in Manila when the immigration officer surveyed my passport and my body and finally asked me if I was any relation to the Ayatollah (Khomeini). I nervously laughed and said he was my uncle. The officer smiled and then suggested appropriate bathhouses for me to enjoy during my stay in the Philippines.

I made the same joke to the INS examiner and then commented that I was glad that my first name was Sohail, from the Arabic Al-Suhail, the southern night star, and not Saddam. She did not laugh. She asked me one more time if I wanted to change my name. "Sodaullah did not sound right," I thought. "How about Saddam Ayatollah," I said. She cringed in her seat. I tried to save the day by softly telling her that Inayatullah meant "the beneficence of God."

In the questionnaire prior to being granted an interview, one is allowed to omit agreeing to military service if one believes in a Supreme Being who deems such actions inappropriate. But this cannot be a political, sociological, philosophical, or personal moral code. That is, it must be one of the recognized religions. God as guru, as a tree, or as the eternal Zen nothingness of *mu* would not qualify. God must be objective *but* based on belief. Like voting.

I wonder if my Pakistani-born Muslim cousin, Aslam, knew of this when he became a US citizen. After Queens College, he joined the navy. Unfortunately, his first assignment was in the Middle East shooting at other Muslims. Was he American or Muslim first? His career in the navy did not last long.

In any case, the examiner was not impressed with my humor.

True, citizenship means changing one's identity and becoming Americanized. But I did not want to be called Sam like my friend Saleem. I merely wanted to make it easier to travel, to enjoy the fruits of *Pax Americana* (after all, I had been diligently paying American taxes for many years). A Pakistani passport invited all sorts of intrusions. In the summer of 1990, when I traveled to Yugoslavia, where I was to lecture at a conference on "Third World Visions of the Future," the immigration officer, suspecting I desired to use Yugoslavia to enter Italy and join Europe 1992 (as the emerging European Union was then called), questioned me extensively as to my intentions. Finally he was convinced I had a job somewhere and let me in. In Hawai'i, when I worked for the justice system in the 1980s, I was frequently tested by customs officers to see if I really did work for the Hawai'i courts or if I was actually using the judiciary as a front for an international heroin-smuggling operation. Indeed, once the FBI stalked me, thinking I was part of an operation selling passports/drugs to and from Indonesians. They later apologized.

Even entering Pakistan I was once pulled to the side, as the officer did not believe I was Pakistani. He believed that I was an Afghani or Soviet spy. "Where and how did you get the Pakistan passport?" I did not say I forged it so that I could enter Pakistan's dynamic and high-paying job market.

Years later, when I desired to travel to Yugoslavia to visit my pregnant wife while we waited for a job in Australia, the Serbian authorities denied me a visa. They argued I was a quasi-intellectual using marriage as a ruse so as to write negative portrayals of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. That we had traveled through Macedonia in the previous year made my getting a visa nearly impossible. I tried to tell the officer that the Macedonian guards had served me delicious chocolate cake at the border (why cannot he be that kind?) and that we were merely tourists on our way to Athens, but he suspected otherwise. Fortunately, my wife, Ivana, phoned from Yugoslavia and managed to take a few minutes of the officer's valuable time (earlier they claimed they were too busy—obviously

from the deluge of tourists desiring visas to visit the Balkans) and convince him that I was no Pakistani or Bosnian or American spy.

But India for Pakistanis is far worse than Yugoslavia or America. Constant threats, suspicion, and visits by the secret police are common. I well remember the chilling words spoken by a Central Intelligence man: "We know you are here, Dr. Inayatullah, and we would like to speak to you." It is this coercive power that makes traveling difficult. It is this utter sense of powerlessness that makes me afraid every time I land. I fear I might be arrested for being different. I have no legal rights, and the power of the visa officer is arbitrary. And then there is that computer at every entry point in the world. What are they looking up? Is there a master file for every infraction we have committed against God, the nation-state, or the global interstate system?

That is my crime and guilt. I do not believe in the nation-state. When applying for a Pakistan identity card many years ago (I know who I am; why do they need to know?) I had to proclaim that Muhammad was the last prophet of civilization and that a sect of Islam, the Ahmedis, excommunicated from the faith by then prime minister Zulfikar Bhutto, was no longer Muslim. Believing in the plurality of tradition, I was in doubt of the legitimacy of excommunication as a religious practice, but to travel in Pakistan I needed the card. I signed. Somehow, my agreement gave legitimacy to the state. The social contract was sealed, the boundaries of Islam clarified, the polity strengthened, and again I could travel.

States control movement. They control my movement. Perhaps for my own good. Perhaps so the poor will not inundate richer economically developed areas. Perhaps because all foreigners are in fact potential terrorists, borders must be watched carefully, just as in medieval times when entrance into the city was regulated by passes. But in those days, the area outside the city was free. Today, we have no free areas. In exchange for our loss of freedom, however, we are promised protection (unlike the medieval era, when bands of men attacked the weak). But our protection is short-lived, for when another state threatens our collective security, then fight we must. In exchange for the right of citizenship is the duty of war. When placed within statist categories, boundaries and ownership of territory must be clarified, meaning we must all live in war, patriotism, self-aggrandizement, and expansion.

To avoid the draft, the war plans of any nation, we want our young son, Saim Dusan (born in Australia, our current home), to have as many passports as possible. The Americans have given him one, but only after he raised his right hand and swore allegiance to the Constitution. Pakistan and Yugoslavia as well have offered citizenship. The Yugoslavian passport will take a while, as their Parliament cannot decide what the passport cover will look like, as the number of states that will join or leave remains uncertain. But Australia has refused. More than

refusing him a passport, the Australians placed numerous conditions on his possible return to the country after we were to leave on a family vacation to Pakistan. Without a reentry visa, he would be deported on arrival. After numerous forms, including many that required him to state his occupation (“baby,” I never tired of writing), he was required to have a health examination. When I told the health department that he was born here and regularly went to Australia’s finest doctors and nurses, their faces remained unyielding. In the exam, the doctor (an immigrant from India) checked to see if he had a heart. I told him that he smiles at everyone. He then asked if we could remove his diaper. The doctor desired to check to see if he had two testicles. Fortunately Saim did, and even more fortuitously, he managed to “pooh,” thus leaving a gift to the Australian immigration system. But they preferred the eighty-eight dollars I had to give them so they could ensure that he could breathe and excrete. When our daughter, Mariyam Lena, was born in Australia, we went through the same process. This time, the immigration doctor—from Hong Kong—just checked her heartbeat; she assumed everything else was fine. Mariyam, in turn, left no gift.

But Australia is famous for its colonial immigration system. After having waited six months for my academic visa, I was granted a mining visa. I said that while certainly deconstruction was part of the job, mining might be difficult, but I would do my best. Only after numerous pleas from the university did they manage to switch my visa category. But few wars are fought in Australia, and thus we are saddened that Saim will not get an Australian passport.

Our problem is that we exist in many spaces; our son is a mixture of Punjabi, Serbian, Russian, and Slovenian. My wife only recently discovered she was a Serb, always believing she was a Yugoslav. She was equally stunned to find out that she was now the Other, that obtaining visas to OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) nations is nearly impossible, and that when gained, she must go through the line for those from the former colonies: Africa and Asia.

I hope my son’s journeys outside national boundaries will be less difficult than my trespassing of boundaries. Growing up both in Peshawar, Pakistan, and Bloomington, Indiana, was confusing. Before we left for the United States, when I thought about that country I mostly imagined snow. I had heard it was cold. Cold, indeed. We were not allowed to stay in the classroom during the break. We had to go out and walk around. It was at MaCalla Primary School that I learned the national anthem and “America the Beautiful.” I never liked having to stand up and sing, even though the words were lovely.

After many years of traveling with my parents—my father is one of the lucky ones of the modern era, as he traveled with a UN “Laissez Passe” passport—we returned to Pakistan, where once again I had to swear allegiance and sing a national anthem I did not believe in. We stood in perfect lines, oblivious that our

school was an old British private school called St. Mary's. These memories became more concrete when at a Pakistan Day ceremony in Hawai'i we all had to stand up and sing. I dreaded that my organizer friend Lubna would ask all the Pakistanis to stand up and walk to the stage. I do not know if I would have had made it there. Luckily, only the official Pakistanis who were already at the front of the room sang. I could slink back and think about my identity.

Another Pakistani friend, Asma, knows this and always introduces me with, "This is Sohail; he is Pakistani, I think, sort of. . . ." I would prefer she skipped the "sort of" introduction and either stayed away from the nation identification theme or said that I am Pakistani. I think it is because she is really saying, "He looks like us, but he is not really one of us. But he is not one of you either." However, she does not then give me official cultureless status either; rather, I am left to stand in the middle of some large landscape of cultures, colors, and nations when a middle may no longer exist.

The Pakistan Day ceremony made me realize that I disliked all anthems and that it was fear of reprisal that kept me in line. At baseball games and other expressions of patriotic strength the temptation to stay seated is strong, but the fear of being attacked by bona fide Americans is even stronger. Recently, I have justified my standing by saying that I am being culturally sensitive. Wouldn't I want all of them to stand at the flag of the planet Earth whenever that day comes about?

At the final US citizen swearing-in ceremony, we were each given flags as we entered the courthouse. The US Immigration attorney warned all of us potential voters that we had to recite an oath of allegiance. She would be watching our lips and listening to our voices. If we did not renounce all fidelity and allegiance to any "foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty," our application would be denied. Along with the others, I said the holy words.

Afterward, the judge gave us a citizenship speech in which he focused on the right to religion and the right of free speech. He commented that we could believe in any god, even no god. Atheism and the Zen *mu*, or nothingness, were allowed. We could also say anything we wanted. He then told us to welcome the new citizens around us, thus sealing the social contract and cementing civil society.

I looked around at the room full of immigrants and was touched by the many colors. But the diversity was quickly replaced by uniformity as we all turned toward the flag and recited the mantra that would make freedom so. And even though we had all earlier said that we were ready to bear arms, few in the room looked prepared—many were elderly men and women—and others were here because of processes created by global economic currency structures, for in the United States we could triple our economic level. A rupee is not a dollar.

After the pledge, the bailiff called out our names to get our "naturalization" forms. She mispronounced mine, and there was laughter as the new citizens knew

that their names would be mispronounced next. Along with my naturalization certificate, I was given a letter from the president and a book on citizenship. George H. W. Bush does care about immigrants. I quickly went to the passport office and applied for a passport.

My friend Tom of the US State Department, with whom I went to high school in Malaysia, was initially disturbed by my desire to gain citizenship so that I could travel more easily to India and Europe as well as to other places where a Pakistani passport is tantamount to an indictment. He lectured me on my civic duty (but I work with numerous volunteer agencies, I responded—I do contribute), on voting (but does Congress represent our interests?), and democratic government (don't all legislators get reelected anyway?). But what left him most perturbed, I believe, was my violation of the nation-state. My values were not patriotism but ease of travel. I was not ready to submit to the melting pot. I had no intention of ceasing to write pieces critical of US (or any national) policy, domestic and international. It is not that I am robbed of meaning, decency, and faith; it is just that I no longer believe in the modern world system, I would argue with Tom. Finally, he gave up and we went back to discussing the problems Malaysia faces in forging a unified identity with its many ethnic, religious, and temporal divisions (postmodern, modern, and traditional).

But still I violate sovereignty. Capital can violate it; labor cannot. And if labor travels, it must submit itself to the new rules of employment. To live in the United States and criticize its values even as one enjoys them is a bit too much. Much too much. But Tom wants to do the same. He is sensitive to other cultures, bright, and wants to be an ambassador, preferably to Pakistan or Malaysia. But he wants to remain in his Washington position of privilege even while he enjoys the cultures of the Third World. He violates identity, but the interstate system allows these *official* excursions.

But I should not fault Tom. We want humans to have allegiances. We do not want humans to become like capital, going to the highest bidder. After I told my Indian friend Manomita Rao that I was applying for citizenship (my euphemism is that I am switching passports), she “jokingly” said I was a traitor. She and I have applied for a green card, the right to work but to retain identity, while I have gone a bit too far by changing official identity as well.

Getting to changing my citizenship has been a long-term process. The fear is that there will be a loss of Third World identification—an identification with the oppressed. But all intellectuals like to believe that they are merging their minds with the poor and the marginalized even as they lead privileged lives. Moreover, we forget that nationality and citizenship are practices, not eternal, a priori structures, however concrete they seem.

But it is not just my Indian friend who felt I had gone too far. I called the Pakistan embassy to find out visa requirements for US citizens. I told him that

I was switching passports and asked if dual citizenship was possible. He paused. “Why are you so afraid of a Pakistani passport?” he asked. I, feeling guilty, could only respond that I had lived in Hawai‘i most of my life and thus could no longer be counted on as an official Pakistani.

Fortunately, Pakistan now allows dual citizenship, and thus when I fly in and out of Pakistan, I can show either passport. In a recent departure, I asked which passport I should show when leaving Pakistan. The Pakistani immigration official smiled and said, “It does not matter; either one is fine.” Coming from a colonial outpost where nationalism is revered but where Pakistan’s place in the world division of labor is quite clear, he understood. His message was, “whatever is most convenient to you—passports are commodities.” While this airport official was quite relaxed, government officials in the Ministry of Interior remain in Raj days. It took us five days of sitting in offices to gain a four-day visa extension for my wife and our children. After endless questions and long waits in line, she received the visa. It took so long because bureaucrats with salaries low and egos large have little power but to make others wait. With bribery more and more problematic in the ministry, the only joy is to make others wait (and, of course, to offer tea while they wait).

But while having dual nationality in Pakistan is no longer seen as loss of self, in an earlier conversation with an American friend, who is a South Asianist, I did not tell her that I was changing citizenship for fear that she would interpret my actions as selling out. Rather, I said that I was switching passports for technical reasons. Escaping the nation is easier written than done. Visas to Mars, anyone?

But I do understand the charges of treason. In a Pan Am hijacking in Karachi many years back, an Indian who was on his way back home had just switched to American citizenship. After the plane was hijacked, he told the hijackers that as he was now a US citizen, he should not be harmed. While this might have been appropriate in the United States or in an embassy where sovereignty extends through borders, in front of hijackers, outside the city walls of sovereignty, it was a mistake. They shot him.

I hope my movements and attempts to move in and out of sovereign spaces of identity do not lead to the same fate. And if they do, I am not sure who will claim me. Will you?

