The present day ‘terrorist’ is a man who thinks. He is a planner. No one knows his name or his past. When and where does he come from? No one knows...

“He could be anyone or no one. He could be the one sitting beside you in a theatre or a local train, or be a bank teller or a cigarette/tobacco vendor. He is intelligent and dangerous...

“He has to be found”.

Fanna

This dialogue from the highly popular Hindi film Fanna (2006) provides a compelling entry point for an inquiry into the ideas of frontiers and borders, nations and nation states:

> In what ways does a modern nation state grapple with issues of visibility and invisibility, identity and anonymity?

> What tropes of political and bureaucratic rhetoric does the state mobilise to assert its claim for initiating processes of visibility?
> How do existing social conditions change in the face of such processes?
> What sort of transformations do these processes of visibility inaugurate, especially those transacted between the state and the individual?
> What strategies are mobilised by individuals as a response to these transformations?

This essay explores these questions specifically with regard to the introduction of the proposed Multi-Purpose National Identity Card (MNIC) in India. The MNIC would be the first of its kind in terms of a citizenship document in the country. For this purpose, a proposal to prepare a national register of citizens, a national register of non-citizens and a national register of residency is being put forth by the state.

In this context, it has become important to observe the developments happening in the Indian context. In April 2003, the Government of India initiated a pilot project for the introduction of the Multi-Purpose National Identity Card (MNIC) in select districts. Depending upon its feasibility, this new document would go for a national rollout.

The pilot project was completed in April 2007. On 26 May 2007, the Registrar General of India, D.K. Sikri, who is also the Registrar General of Citizens Registration, handed over the first MNIC Card to Mishro, a middle-aged female resident of Pooth Khurd village of Narela district in the National Capital Region of Delhi. This document, like national identity cards elsewhere, has the following characteristics:

> Bearer’s fingerprint biometrics
> Photograph
> Digital memory
> Standard identity signifiers such as name, age, address, etc.

The MNIC is a ‘smart card’. Smart cards are embedded with Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) chips. RFID is a system of data carriers and base stations. A data carrier can be any label, tag or transponder. It consists of an RFID die, an antenna and packaging. The carrier can then be formatted into any plastic ticket. The base station acts as a reader that contains an antenna, a RF receiver or transceiver, and a microcontroller or a computer. The station can be set up as a desktop, wall mount, or as a portal.2

RFID usually means a passive RFID. The transponder contains no battery; it is powered by an RF signal. The reader transmits the RF to the transponder. The transponder cannot be activated unless it is near the reader. Depending upon the frequency band, the reader can communicate with the transponder within a range of 20-1000 centimeters.3

The card’s memory is a SCOSTA-based chip4 with storage capacity of 16 kilobytes. In an active RFID, the transponder is powered by battery or fuel cells. The reader and transponders are basically radios that can detect each other within a distance of a kilometre.5

The MNIC will be fitted with a passive RFID. In this sense the card would be a departure from earlier kinds of ‘identity documents’. The transformation from manual and mechanical inscriptions of identity signifiers to that of the digital would shift the idea of a document to
a plane straddling the border of heterogeneity and homogeneity. All data at its root would be composed of Boolean binaries, homogeneous in a way, yet distinct from each other by the operation of a number. Individual personhood would be signified as an objective mark – an inscription that could be stored, transmitted, linked, accessed, manipulated, shared and retrieved through the precise science of a software programme.

In his influential work *Trust in Numbers*, historian of science Theodore M. Porter asserts: “[…] when ‘philosophers’ speak of (the) objectivity of science, they generally mean its ability to know things as they really are” (1996, p. 3). Likewise, an ‘objective’ individual identity of a person – as he/she really is – may be a function of “a body, a memory, and rights and responsibility” (Lyon, 2001, p. 294), together with locatability, social categorisation, symbols of eligibility/non eligibility, etc. (Marx, 2001, p. 312). In this respect the number as an encryption mechanism becomes most useful, as it first further deconstructs individuals made up of many various partial identities, and then reconstitutes these into a singular and totally transparent being. The excessive scopophilia of the state, to borrow an oft-used word from film studies, which avidly commits to the ideal of complete transparency, results in a desire for the complete enumeration of its subjects, now amounting to over a billion.

At this juncture it would be useful to return to the dialogue in this essay’s epigraph. The lines are from a scene where Agent Tyagi, a surveillance expert, is called in to assist an Anti-Terrorist Unit in tracking down an alleged ‘terrorist’. She explains to a colleague from the Ministry of Defence the different ways in which the Unit could come to learn more about the alleged ‘terrorist’, who they refer to as “mastermind”. Throughout the sequence, anxieties about not knowing the “mastermind’s” name, his location and history are repeatedly voiced. Tyagi keeps reiterating that “no one knows” who he is. Of course, by the term “no one” Tyagi is paradoxically implying the state. Unable to deal with the anonymity of the alleged ‘terrorist’, she conflates it with a generic assumption: “He could be anyone or no one”. The film’s narrative, especially after this particular sequence, revolves almost entirely around determining the identity and personhood of the “mastermind”. As Tyagi insists, “He has to be found”. The pertinent question here would be how this particular presence, who/which is also an absence, who could be “anyone” or “no one”, is actually to be found.

By way of a classical parallel, it can be noted that the epic poem *Ramayana* narrates an instance when Prince Rama’s brother Laxmana is fatally wounded by Indrajeet, the son of Rama’s rival King Ravana. Laxmana could only be saved by sanjivani, a particular medicinal herb. The valiant monkey-god Hanuman is sent to fetch this from the distant Dronagiri mountains. Now, Hanuman had no knowledge of herbs. Unable to select the right one, he uses his divine strength to lift the entire range and transport it to the battlefield.6

Agent Tyagi’s contemporary dilemma is essentially similar to Hanuman’s: that of correct deduction-identification-selection. Against all odds, a ‘terrorist’, who is imagined as a ‘deviant’ personality type as opposed to a ‘normal’ or ‘average’ law-abiding citizen, “has to be found”. Here, the word ‘normal’ derives from the idea of ‘norm’ as advocated by Emile
In Empire of Chance (1990, p. 172), philosopher of science Ian Hacking, reflecting on Durkheim, remarks:

A moral fact is normal for a determined social type when it is observed in the average of the species, it is pathological in antithetical... It is no surprise that media coverage of stories of 'national importance' in India are consistently marked by narratives of the 'disruption of normal life', and followed by the rhetoric of the 'restoration of normalcy'. This is accompanied by the usual sorting out of 'anomalies'. In this regard, Michel Foucault's burgeoning list of excavations concerning the mad, the recidivist, the insane and the sick, might easily incorporate further notable additions in the name of the 'terrorist', the 'suspicious-looking' person, and the 'alien'.

For instance, the Delhi Police, which underpins its public presence through an endearing though unconvincing punchline – FOR YOU, WITH YOU, ALWAYS – launched a media campaign in the wake of an alleged 'terrorist' attack on the Red Fort in December 2000. The police campaign, optimistically titled 'Let's Fight Terror Together', ran simultaneously with a massive tenant verification drive to register all tenants residing in the city. The seeming logic was that since the alleged 'terrorists' were outsiders to Delhi and had lived in the city for months prior to the attack, it was possible that some of them could still be present among the millions who rent. The media campaign on the other hand ran as an advisory, exhorting the citizen to stay alert and be on the lookout for/report potential 'terrorists' to the police who, of course, were 'WITH' and 'FOR' the responsible citizen, 'ALWAYS'.

In a country like India, where information superhighways coexist with potholed alleys of misinformation and uncertainty, any such advisory tends to result in a situation where the auditory starts competing with the visual to calibrate seditious whispers. Much like the treacherous frisson described by novelist Ismail Kadare in The File on H (2006, pp. 26-27): "[...the ear never rests, for people always want to talk and to whisper; what is said and especially what is muttered is always... much more dangerous to the State then what can be seen]."

One year later after the 'terrorist' attack on the Red Fort, in a classic case of tinnitus in December 2001 the Delhi police arrested a Delhi University professor of Arabic, on charges of waging war against the state. It was claimed that he had a hand in the conspiracy to attack the Indian Parliament on 13 December 2001. On this eventful day, five alleged 'militants' drove a car into the Parliament compound and started firing indiscriminately. What exactly happened is still not very clear, but the parliament’s CCTV and TV cameras recorded an exchange of fire between the police forces/security personnel and these men. All the supposed 'militants' were killed in the shootout, following which six people were arrested.

It was alleged that these 'militants' attacked the Indian Parliament as a response to the state's not granting 'freedom' to the state of Kashmir. The professor was awarded a death sentence by a High Court; in 2003, after two years on death row, he was acquitted by the Supreme Court of India and absolved of all charges. The sole 'evidence' (which was later
proved faulty) for his arrest consisted of transcripts of a 136-second long-distance telephone conversation he had with his 18-year-old half-brother in Kashmir. The 13 December attack was termed by the government and media as ‘an attack on the heart of Indian democracy’. So far, out of the six main accused, two have been acquitted for ‘lack of evidence’; one is on death row, but there is a sustained campaign for a ‘fair trial’. Materially, what we have are five dead bodies, and a surreal ‘event’ that continues to confound the rational mind. Following close on the heels of 9/11, the 13 December attack facilitated the passing of draconian anti-terror laws such as the Prevention Of Terrorism Act (POTA), since repealed.

Returning to the confined logic of the ‘Let’s Fight Terror Together’ campaign, a ‘terrorist’ could be any person acting ‘suspiciously’ – specifically if he is wearing clothes unsuited for the season of the year; or if he is conspicuously trying to blend in, via clothes and behaviour, with the surroundings. In other words, as proclaimed by Agent Tyagi, he could be “anyone or no one”. This rhetoric of ambiguity tends to produce a situation where on one level the idea of normality becomes a performance, of that which is imagined as ‘normal’; and on the other, creates a perceptual filter of what sociologist Gary Marx terms “categorical suspicion”.

As Hacking declares, “[…] few of us fancy being pathological, so ‘most of us’ try to make ourselves normal, which in turn affects what is normal” (1990, p. 2). How can one differentiate ‘normal’ from ‘suspicious’ behaviour? What are ‘normal’ clothes? What does one mean when one is talking about ‘blending in’ with the surroundings? What contingent notions of ‘normality’ does this give rise to?

The case of a national identity card stretches the idea of ‘suspicion’ further. By this logic, in order to affirm or confirm one’s trust in the state, one needs to not only be aware of one’s personhood, or possess a document that can indubitably vouch for one’s claim to oneself, but one ‘should’ have a document containing a fingerprint – what Giorgio Agamben calls “the most private and incommunicable aspect of subjectivity… the body’s biological life” – that can be not only enumerated, but recalled and verified in an instant. The state will only recognise any person as him/herself if the memory of his/her personhood as contained in his/her token is an exact match with a copy of his/her memory of personhood as indexed by the state archive of names. The link between the name, the person and his/her memory of personhood would of course be constituted by a number. With the MNIC card, a 15-digit National Identity Number (NIN) would be allotted to each citizen.

The NIN would become mandatory for a range of transactions. Travelling, school admission, registration of property, obtaining a driving licence, opening a bank account: for all such transactions the card-carrying citizen would have to fill a form and quote his NIN. According to an official estimate, the Government of India currently has more than 100,000 different forms pertaining to various departments. Because of increasing pressure by different private lobby groups, the Government has given its nod to mid- and large-sized software companies to actively participate in and share the burden of processing this ‘national’ information.
Incorporating these parameters, the MNIC card may precariously waver towards, as some scholars argue, the ‘demeaning’ of the identity of an individual. The identity in this sense is composed of political and personal characteristics. As policy analyst Richard Sobel, for instance, states: “[…] NIDS demeans political and personal identity by transforming personhood from an intrinsic quality inhering in individuals into a quantity designated by numbers, represented by physical cards, and recorded in computer databanks”14.

However, any identity document clearly supplies ‘meaning’, sometimes copious, sometimes fragmented, when an individual’s identity is documented. The urge to acquire identity cards underlines some fundamental assumptions in relation to citizenship. One such assumption is the right to legitimately claim state benefits, irrespective of whether or not one can rightfully locate oneself within the category of ‘legible’ people. However, it is not just the issue of crucial ‘benefits’, since the euphoria of citizens with regard to the functioning of the welfare state has long since dissipated. Not to be recognised by the state – or in other words, to be stateless – is an extremely disturbing, even dangerous, condition and not one that many would desire. The perennial queues outside government offices for ration cards, voter ID cards, etc., corroborate our continual need to be ‘acknowledged’ by the state.

The coming together of public and private on the MNIC project entailing the sharing of information marks another first. For the first time, the Indian state will allow its memory to be accessed by non-state players. ‘G to B (Government to Business)”15 has emerged as the newest mantra in the rhetoric of e-governance. The state would, of course, draw a lot of benefit if this works out. Instead of a multitudinous array of identity documents bearing different identification numbers, ranging from Voter ID card to Permanent Account Number (PAN) card, to driving licences and credit cards, it will have to manage only one document with just one identity number that produces the ‘legible’ and legitimate citizen.

In All the Names (1999), Portuguese novelist José Saramago offers a riveting account of the disappointments, delusions and frustrations of Senhor José, a clerk who lives in a single room attached to an agency called the Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths. The
narrative is set in a city which, to borrow Agent Tyagi’s rhetoric, could be anywhere or nowhere. Senhor José describes Senhor José’s activities thus: he works in the Registry during the day, and “by night, he ferrets for facts about the famous, compiling his own archive of births, deaths and marriages. One day he chances upon an index card of an ordinary woman whose details hold as much fascination for him as any celebrity’s... José starts to track the woman down”16. After much trial and tribulation he concludes that the woman had committed suicide, but this inference proves to be an error after he pays a visit to her grave (p. 243):

I walked through the general cemetery to the section for suicides, I went to sleep under an olive tree, and the following morning when I woke up, I was in the middle of a flock of sheep, and then I found that the Shepherd amuses himself by swapping around the numbers on the graves before the tombstones are put in place.

The metaphor is exquisite; but literature follows a different rationale from that of the historical desire of a nation state to accompany an individual from cradle to grave through the agency of an identity document. With the emergence of the digitally enabled national identity card we are moving towards the paradoxical spectre of an opacity that rides on transparency – i.e., as the citizen is becoming more and more transparent to the eyes of the state, the latter is receding behind a plethora of alphanumeric archives and databases. For instance, future Public Distribution System (PDS) shops would have electronic kiosks instead of personnel from the Food and Civil Supplies ministry who were, till now, sourced locally. The operation and maintenance of the PDS shops would be subcontracted to various private vendors. Only those citizens eligible for the category of BPL (Below Poverty Line) would have access to subsidised food. Their claim would, of course, have to be validated through the smart card.

The concept of a fabricated image of a person, together with other alphanumeric signifiers, contained in a digitally rewritable, retrievable memory pressed between two plastic sheets, embossed with a national emblem and laminated with a transparent cover, suggests that the MNIC card will work exactly like a double-sided key that allows both the state and the citizen to enter into each other’s realms.

However, there is a caveat in this meta-narrative, reminiscent of poet-philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s compelling assertion that “the lock doesn’t exist that could resist absolute violence, and all locks are an invitation to thieves” (1994, p. 81).

How will the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion play itself out in the case of the MNIC?

We live in a world surrounded by a plethora of ‘fakes’, but fascinatingly, the effective presence of the counterfeit provides legitimacy to the existence and desire for ‘real’ documents...

A notch gives an outline to a key. It lies on the periphery of a key. A notch forms a firm boundary to a key. The National Identification Number (NIN) would similarly act as a crafted notch or groove to this key known as the MNIC. A unique sequence of numbers will
distinguish between the standardised memories of personhood, which acquire a legal currency by being valid, and other memories which are too personal, too complex and too layered to be grouped into any category of time and space or sorted into any form of document, but nevertheless form the basis of who we are.

The NIN, according to the proponents of the MNIC, will act as a virtual border between state machinery and citizens – a border where any act of transgression would be immediately noticed, where no stealth or subterfuge could be practiced, where all acts of masquerade, mimicry and simulation would be exposed, to reveal the identity that lies hidden behind ‘other’, concealed identities. Quite unlike the real frontier – characterised by razor-wire fencing and checkposts, where the idea of territory is contested by security forces on a day-to-day basis, and where people may have lived and traversed an ever-changing line for years, where the terrain is marked by negotiated crossings, dealings with middlemen, farewells and promises of return, sometimes kept and sometimes broken...

The physical frontier becomes the space where the state confronts its biggest dilemma. How are individuals to be categorised? How to decide who is who? How to ascertain the truth claim of an identity? How to gauge if the lungi17-clad person is from this side or that?

Perhaps the answer is being sought in the MNIC.

In case of Indian borders, the problem is compounded by the fuzzy frontier between the definition of an ‘alien’ and a ‘citizen’. Border posts are places where identity documents assume hyper-significance: where a heightened state of alertness is the ‘norm’. Where ‘anyone’ from ‘anywhere’ can be asked to prove his/her identity, and where the lack of an identity document quickly transforms the assumption of innocence into presumption of guilt.

India shares a border of 2,912 kilometres with Pakistan, a border of 4,053 kilometres with Bangladesh, a border of 1,690 kilometres with Nepal and a border of 3,380 kilometres with China. There are ongoing border disputes with Pakistan, China and Bangladesh. There have been three wars with Pakistan and one with China.

Chapter V – “Border Management” – of a highly influential report on national security titled Reforming the National Security System: Recommendations of the Group of Ministers, unequivocally declares: “In fact, barring Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Delhi and Haryana, all other States in the country have one or more international borders or a coastline and can be regarded as frontline states from the point of view of border management”19. Quantitatively speaking, according to this report, out of a total of 28 states and 7 Union Territories, barring just 5 states the rest of India, for all purposes, administrative and political, is to be regarded and managed as a “border”. This may well transform to a situation where most citizens may thus be seen as potential immigrants (read ‘aliens’) by the state. With an internal collapse of the periphery, the idea of the hinterland merges with notion of the border, and the self-sustaining myth of inside and outside gets engulfed in its wake. Particular ethnic, religious and political identities are overtaken by a singular, affective national identity, a supposedly infallible document.
Further, the Report claims: “Illegal migration has assumed serious proportions. There should be compulsory registration of citizens and non-citizens living in India. This will facilitate preparation of a national register of citizens. All citizens should be given a Multi-Purpose National Identity Card (MPNIC) and non-citizens should be issued identity cards of a different colour and design”. For the illegal immigrant to be marked and verified, the citizen has to be stabilised; and vice versa. For all purposes, unless the not-so-apparent dichotomy between the legal citizen and the illegal immigrant is sorted out, the state is likely to find itself sinking deep in self-demarcated tautological quicksand.

Given the complex internal haemorrhage that the MNIC seems to have initiated between the fringe and core, it is interesting to note how subtle changes in the syntactic structure of this minutely calibrated grandiloquence has helped push the dreams of mobility beyond national boundaries. Trouble with the code, for instance, was evident in its misreading by the people of Pooth Khurd, a village northwest of Delhi earmarked for the pilot project of the MNIC scheme. The erstwhile farmlands of this village have been transformed into urban clusters following the rapid expansion of Delhi and the absorption of the frontline rural/semi-urban areas into the metropolis. Malls, multiplexes and high-rise apartment blocks have appeared. Compensation money for the displaced farmers was seemingly ‘adequate’, but when I visited this village in 2006, the dominant narrative was one of lack of livelihood. Former agriculturalists were finding it difficult to move into newer occupations, and it was equally difficult for them to assimilate new work cultures.

I conducted a series of interviews with a group of men from this village. One of them complained: “We don’t have work, but this does not mean we are poor”. This was obvious from the range of new cars parked along the yet-to-be-paved roads of the village.

When I asked my subjects about the MNIC, their faces lit up. They all remembered the day when the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) came to their village and told them about a “Hara Card (Green Card)”. Quite a few of my subjects described how they would take foreign tours; some also said that their long-cherished dream of settling abroad would finally come true in the near future. This odd but optimistic projection was a recurrent theme in all my
conversations during subsequent visits to Pooth Khurd. I kept wondering what the MNIC had to do with going abroad, but I couldn’t figure it out.

Many visits later, one day while listening to an illiterate farmer talking about places he would visit in England, I chanced upon the possible link. I was admiring the jute bag presented to him by the SDM on account of his role as responsible community elder. The farmer had mobilised over 50 people to share their biometric and other personal information with the officials of the state. The letters “MNIC” were inscribed on either side of the jute bag in English and Hindi. “MNIC” in Hindi translates as “Bahu-Uddeshya Rashtriya Pehechan Patra” or “Multi-Purpose National Identity Card” – but was (mis)read by the people of Pooth Khurd as “Bahu-Deshya Rashtriya Pehechan Patra” or “Multi-Nation National Identity Card”. Phonetically, the only difference between Bahu Deshye and Bahu Uddeshye is an elision of vowels. But semantically, this inverts the very idea of a national identity card with its notions of fixed citizenship and singular national identities.

Much has happened since that particular visit to Pooth Khurd. A whole range of smart cards – biometric passports, smart health cards and smart cards for subsidised foodgrains under the Public Distribution System – have surfaced. There is talk that an Integrated Smart Card will be introduced, which will collapse all these other cards into MNIC. And according to a Planning Commission Report of January 2007, recommendations are being put forth to bring children under the smart card project.

“How to take children into account?” This is the current predicament the Indian government seems to be grappling with. Its report Entitlement Reform for Empowering the Poor: The Integrated Smart Card deals specifically with problems pertaining to distribution of benefits under various governmental schemes. A peculiar quandary has arisen, as the MNIC would only be given to persons who are 15 years or older, thus depriving millions of young children. The report recommends that “the biometric information of all family members needs to be in-built into the smart card.”

On the question of citizenship status, the report suggests, “The creation of a database of residents and assignment of a unique ID to each resident is much easier than the creation of a database of citizens, because of the difficulty of authentication of citizenship and the legal implications that it may have.”

The idea of the MNIC began as an attempt to mark all citizens permanently and accord them with formal national membership – a membership which would surpass other memberships denoted by filial relations, region, religion, language, gender, caste, community, locality, etc., and result in the creation of a homogenous category of legible and legitimate citizens. Significantly though, the project failed to take into account the complex praxis that exists between the idea of an individual identity as imagined by the state, and an identity as lived by those who constitute it and whom it constitutes. To complicate matters further, the Planning Commission Report (January 2007) makes it abundantly clear that the government is tinkering with the idea of collapsing individual identities into group identities. This move would create new membership pools within a larger sea of already existing sets of memberships.
In a country with a documented history of mass internal migration, a national register of residency would facilitate the manifestation of hitherto unimagined demographic nodes - unimagined because these will tend to push valid citizens without a formal residency status towards the brink of illegality, while on the other hand, genuinely ‘illegal’ immigrants would try to mask their existence by acquiring all available tokens of legitimate identification. The creation of newer sets of membership would offer fresh categories for identification. Together with existent categories, the emergent categories will tend towards an amorphous idea of national group membership, where at least some of the members will neither be totally inclusive nor exclusive to the group.

In the absence of distinct forms of identification, the ongoing experimentation is producing a somewhat ‘fuzzy logic’ of national identity. According to mathematician Lotfi Zadeh, fuzzy truth is something which represents membership in vaguely defined “sets”, and not as a result of an event or condition. Fuzzy logic allows for “set membership” to range from ‘Slightly’ to ‘Quite’ to ‘Very’.

A national identity card would create a “universal set” of Indians, but as the Planning Commission Report (January 2007) gestures, this “set” may have a lot of “subsets”. For instance, the state of Kerala has its smart cards for commercial sex workers, the Indian Army is considering a proposal to issue health smart cards for HIV-positive soldiers, and car drivers have their smart driving licences. Subsets around occupation, health and transport are just a few of the many that may come up. The fuzzy logic of the MNIC will make ‘Indianness’ an attribute dependent not just on the document, but also on one’s projected image of being a ‘normal’ Indian. The contestations for claims to national membership through the MNIC card will arise in the domain of truth claims. It will be marked by attempts to look like or furnish proof of evidence of ‘Indianness’, which would make one ‘Slightly’ Indian or ‘Quite’ Indian or ‘Very’ Indian. Depending on this, a person would get a Multi-Purpose National Identity Card (MNIC) or a Multi-Purpose Residency Card (MRR).

The parameters of fuzzy logic become apparent in the relatively obscure case of 400 Iranian immigrants in the small town of Murshidabad in the state of West Bengal. This community settled in Murshidabad 80 years ago, long before the formation of the independent Indian nation state. The MNIC survey team failed to accord a single member of this community Indian citizenship status. So what are they: Persian-speaking Indians or Bengali-speaking Iranians? Are they ‘Slightly’, ‘Quite’, or ‘Very’ Indian?

The 16 categorical questions in the Government Proforma for the MNIC must be answered not with a tick or a cross but by giving information supported by evidence. This evidence is then turned over to a verification team headed by a supervisor. The verification team will ascertain the citizenship status of each individual. In case of unavailability of evidence, the decision of the verification team and the local SDM would be crucial with regard to granting citizenship to a hitherto undocumented individual.

Thus by its very nature the MNIC questionnaire generates slippages within categories. In order to be verified correctly, an individual seeking legitimacy must either produce evidence – or have the good fortune to be in appearance ‘Very’ Indian...
Cases such as the abovementioned Iranian migrants (with their ‘Slightly’ Indian features) elude the bureaucratic pincers that shape an individual into a citizen. In order to claim a legitimate place in/belong to a nation, an individual must conform to categories anchored by questionnaires, certificates, oaths and affirmations. Those who do not fit the established categories are assigned new ones that then produce their own detailed narratives of illegality and suspicion.

Thus, ‘categorical suspicion’ by the state is supported by the desire for ‘categorical affirmation’ on the part of the majority of Indians, who see ‘legible’ identity documents as their only really useful vehicle for socio-economic mobility and negotiations with the state. Meanwhile, far from the declared goal of a scenario of total surveillance and encrypted subjectivity, the ongoing Indian experiment with identity documents instead finds itself paradoxically committed to the fuzzy truth of ambiguous citizenship.

**Author’s Note**

**MNIC Timeline**

> 26 May 1999: Kargil War with Pakistan begins.

> 26 July 1999: Kargil War ends.


> 7 January 2000: Kargil Review Committee (KRC) submits a 228-page report to the Prime Minister. A key recommendation of the report is to take steps “to issue ID Cards to border villagers in certain vulnerable areas on a priority basis, pending its extension to other or all parts of the State”.

> 17 April 2000: On the advice of the KRC, the government forms the Group of Ministers (GoM) through Order No. 141/2/1/2000-TS.

> 22 December 2000: The Red Fort in Delhi attacked by alleged ‘terrorists’.

> January 2001: Delhi Police launches its ‘Tenant Verification Drive’ – the first-ever compilation of data on ‘tenants’ in Delhi.

> 26 February 2001: The GoM submits its report to the Prime Minister. A paragraph in Chapter V of the Report, “Border Management”, reads: “There should be compulsory registration of citizens and non-citizens living in India. This will facilitate preparation of a national register of citizens. All citizens should be given a Multi-Purpose National Identity Card (MPNIC) and non-citizens should be issued identity cards of a different colour and design”.

> 23 April 2003: Pilot project on Multi-Purpose National Identity Card initiated.

**Editors’ Note**

Some ideas in this essay were presented by the author at ‘Sensor-Census-Censor: Investigating Regimes of Information, Registering Changes of State’, an international colloquium on information, society, history and politics, held at Sarai from 30 November – 2 December 2006. The colloquium was organised by the initiative
Towards A Culture Of Open Networks (Sarai-CSDS, Delhi; Waag Society, Amsterdam; t0, Vienna), and supported by the EU-India Economic and Cross-Cultural Programme under its Media, Communication and Culture dimension. These ideas were also presented at the National Identity Cards Systems Research Workshop held on 8 June 2007 at Queen’s University, Kingston, Canada.

Notes
5. Workshop Reader, op. cit., p. 6.
9. Police advertisements. See http://www.delhipolice.nic.in/home/pressrel.htm
12. See Central Mission Mode Projects National Citizen Database (NCD/MNIC)/ UNIQUE ID (UID)
13. Ibid.
16. José Saramago. All the Names (Harver Panther, 1999), jacket copy.
17. A sarong-like lower garment worn by men in India.
19. Ibid., p. 85, para 10.

20. “Entitlement Reform for Empowering the Poor: The Integrated Smart Card”. Chapter 2, Multi-Application Smart Card; 2.5 Application of Unique ID to Government Schemes, pp. 8-9
http://planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/committee/11wrkgindx.htm


22. Ibid., Chapter 1, Multi-Application Smart Card; Introduction Module, Identification Modules, p. 5.
http://planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/committee/11wrkgindx.htm

23. The concept of ‘Fuzzy Logic’ was first put forward by mathematician Lotfi Zadeh in a paper published in 1965 (“Fuzzy Sets”, Information and Control 8:3, pp. 338-53), which provided the theoretical basis for fuzzy computer chips that appeared 20 years later. Unlike traditional or classical logic, which attempts to categorise information into binary patterns such as black/white, true/false, yes/no, or all/nothing, fuzzy logic pays attention to the “excluded middle” and tries to account for the “greys”, the partially true and partially false situations which make up 99.9% of human reasoning in everyday life. It builds upon the assumption that everything consists of degrees on a sliding scale – truth, age, beauty, wealth, colour, race or anything else that is affected by the dynamic nature of human behaviour and perception.

In addition to consumer applications, especially in Japanese electronics, fuzzy logic is being used in the fields of biomedicine, finances, geography, philosophy, ecology, agricultural processes, water treatment, satellite remote sensing, handwriting analysis, nuclear science, weather forecasting and stock market analysis, to name a few.

Zadeh remarks, “The question really isn’t whether I’m American, Russian, Iranian, Azerbaijani, or anything else; I’ve been shaped by all these people and cultures and I feel quite comfortable among all of them”. He adds, “When the only tool you have is a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail…”
(http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/24_folder/24_articles/24_fuzzywhat.html)


See also Devadeep Purohit, “Iran to India, Stateless: Small Community of Immigrants Denied Citizenship Right”, The Telegraph, 18 August 2005.

http://www.censusindia.net/results/eci17.pdf

The initial NRIC will be built from the initial Local Register of Indian Citizens (LRIC), which will be based on a census-type exercise to be conducted throughout the country during a specified period. The baseline exercise would involve a systematic listing of houses and households followed by canvassing of the schedule for preparation of a Population Register. This data would be printed on a pre-formatted verification form and handed over to the verification team through the supervisor. The main responsibility of the verification team will be to ascertain the citizenship status of each individual by following a prescribed procedure. The adult individual will sign the verification form certifying that her/his personal details and the photograph are correct. In case of dependents, it will be the responsibility of the head of the family to sign the verification form. The verification team would give a recommendation regarding the
citizenship status of the individual. The final decision in this regard would be taken by the sub-divisional magistrat.

References


Scaling Walls, Breaking Fences, Crossing Gates