

Of Permits and Peoples

The idea of belonging for me can be traced back to a single moment in time and space. Two generations ago, in a railway station, my family stood clutching a bundle of meagre belongings, six children, and nothing else. The land they had lived on, could dip their toes in and call their own for centuries, was no longer theirs and in fact not much was. They had left it behind in a dazed blur of fire and fear, fleeing a genocide perpetrated by those who were once their neighbors. This was a massacre driven by religious bloodlust – and by cartography: India had been partitioned, identity had been weaponized, and a toxic strain of religious fundamentalism had forced a people, my people, my own family, from their lands and their lives, turning a village homeland into an abattoir. In this strange new country, a squalling infant of a nation, they put down roots and lived in relative peace. We have since been in the rarefied position of not needing to question where we belonged, whether the land we came from would claim us as offspring. And yet, with my generation, questions have begun to arise. Is it our nation, the land of our birth, that gives us our identity? Is who I am defined by my passport?

I am privileged enough to have not needed to seek a visa for escape. I have never been a refugee, or an asylum-seeker. Unlike my grandparents, I have traveled only because the horizon calls, not because the world around me was burning and the earth beneath my feet was slipping away fast, like a Mirzapur *dhurrie* pulled out from underneath. The stickers in my passport or the stiff square residency cards in my wallet – to be carried under threat of punishment! – have only ever been sought out to study, or to see new things. The visa process is a familiar one to me, but in this often-farcical bureaucratic mess of a domain, familiarity breeds contempt. The endless forms and painful little rituals are a series of petty humiliations: the demands include long bank statements, to *prove* that you, the foreigner, are not coming to sponge off the generous, pampering welfare state; residency papers and return tickets to *prove* that you will

go back to your own country and not put down roots in the first world; character references, background checks to *prove* that you are of good moral standing and not a sketchy pillaging defrauding brown-skinned bamboozler.

Foreigner, prove! Outsider-proof! Alien-proofing! Those of us who come from the third world, the developing world, the southern hemisphere - call it what you will - have a lot of proving to do. The first world, the OECD, the West - a lot of proofing. One cannot altogether blame them, I suppose. In any case, the world being the way it is, it is unlikely that immigration requirements for citizens of countries like mine will be relaxed. Our future remains, for the time being, one of stickers and stamps, gate-queuing and heel-cooling, proving and proofing.

So let us sidestep the distant and improbable scenario of a relaxation in rich-world visa rules, and instead examine a ponderable and possible ethical dilemma. If I had the chance to replace my current passport with one that granted me visa-free entry into most countries, would I do it?

Again, it was a moment in time, a world away, that was responsible for bringing this question about in my mind. Getting visas has always been a fact of life. Sitting in consulates with their curling carpets, getting fingers printed and faces photographed, all that was perfectly standard, and the bureaucracy of it all never intruded on my world – until, of course, it did. When I was younger, I lived in Britain for a good long time. Once, arriving back in London with my family from our annual visit to our home country, the immigration officials decided our visas, residency permits attached to my father’s job there, needed extra examination. I felt like Tintin, told by an official in some fictional police state that “Your papers are not in order!” We were placed in a kind of holding pen, and the animalistic, agricultural implications of the word *pen*

make me feel like it's the right word to use. A *cordón sanitaire* roped us off from the visa-free, the crowd moving like streams of clear water through separate – separated – immigration desks.

I felt a kind of righteous outrage. This sort of thing happened only to *other* people, the unfortunate, the careless, the crooked. Fine upstanding correct moral model members of society were we. My parents worked hard and paid their taxes, we were here to contribute. We weren't beggars. We weren't dying to leave the sordid grasps of our home country and cling to the welfare-laden green-leafed haven of this damp island in the West. Sitting on rigid molded ground-bolted chairs, examining the laces of my shoes and the curious sheen of the plastic Heathrow floor, I burned and wished for nothing more than for my passport, a sign for all the world of my apparent desperation, furtiveness, criminality, to change color, to become something that it was not. For me to become something I was not, for my poverty-stricken homeland to melt away like a placid, resigned glacier and for the ability to attach myself to some entity that was respectable and trustworthy to the eyes of the world. Why would this land, the Europe I had grown up in, with its gunmetal skies and bike paths, and playing fields and pints with friends, lash out at me? At "I, I, I, if you please", as a similarly indignant W.H. Auden wrote once, on being searched by a policeman – a similarly outrageous and unfamiliar interaction with Government. Words like *verblijfstitel* and *permesso di soggiorno* and *Tier 2 visa* had always been familiar words, and they had never frightened me. Had I been wrong to assume that they were as benign as the bike paths and bakers and such? They'd got the wrong man, surely, the wrong people. The wrong *type* of people.

This point here, this last phrase, "the wrong *type* of people", is the crux of this essay, I think. I had assumed that my parents' ...education? Social standing, as working professionals? Call it what you will, but I had assumed that it would shield us from the sharper edges of the business

of moving between countries. The gap between the words *immigrant* and *expatriate* was immense, and obvious, a chasm that I didn't bother thinking about. Those who seethed with resentment against government immigration policy were altogether a different people. Cosmopolitanism was the norm, airport holding pens another world. This explains my sense of indignity, my fury at a system that had always worked before, and perhaps why this idea of an *upgrade* of citizenship, in a sense, came about. Then again, this only adds to my ethical dilemma. Obtaining a better passport is a design of the privileged, accessible to some and beyond a dream for most.

The upper ranks of today's Passport Index are dominated by the richest Asian nations (Singapore, Japan, South Korea) and the member states of the European Union. My own country languishes somewhere in the bottom third. Now, to examine what would change if I suddenly was offered a good passport, and chose to accept this offer. For one, it would be an aesthetic downgrade. The countries I visit are desperate to mark my lawful and orderly arrival and departure and so cover each inch of the page in stamps of different colors, sizes, and shapes. Not to mention, of course, the rectangular shimmering visa stickers that convince the uniformed border-protection people to let me in, appropriately vetted and scrutinized. The source may be a frustrating one, but sure, they're pretty, and are a nice connector of time and place. These would be no more, since better passports need fewer visas and usually do without being stamped. So that's one thing.

More importantly, though, a better passport would mean that the frustrations and indignities and resentments that have shaped the front half of this essay like a slow-moving river would disappear. My abiding by the laws would not change and yet the *presumption* of my abiding would. This world called the West was a place I had always felt like I was coming home to.

This change would cement that, and perhaps this world would in turn feel like it was welcoming one of its own. Plus, the barriers to many of my hopes and aspirations would mostly disappear. I would be able to apply for an internship without the fear that I would be automatically rerouted to the junk inbox after ticking that all-important box: “Visa sponsorship required”. I could visit a friend studying elsewhere without subjecting myself to the casual subjugation and biting wind of the embassy visa-line. Most of all, I would not be asked, each and every time, in the dulcet tones of the border official, what I was doing in the West and when I would go back. The open skies (and Open Skies) beckon.

The dilemma, however, is this. A passport is nothing more than a few dozen pages of small stiff waxen paper and yet by god does my tiny tattered pamphlet weigh heavy on the mind and heart. It feels like a connect to a country that gave me, if not a backdrop to my childhood, at least the cultural cues I imbibed growing up, the texture of my value system, a language, a reference point for the way I thought and felt. A moral compass I more often rejected rather than used for guidance – but at least there *something* to compare myself to, somewhere to place myself. The West, for all the influences it had had on my way of comporting myself, my way of seeing the world, could not truly have me as one of its own. Nestled in my wallet still lay that plastic declaration of foreign-ness, outsider-osity, alienosis, like some vague fatal disease. No wonder so many of the prominent businesspeople and writers who were born in my country usually end up moving to New York or London and becoming American or British. My citizenship gives me some sort of link to the place I was born and the ideas and values that originated from that same soil, as well as some sense of pride: I have no need to become something I am not. I am from *that* country, and that is who I am.

The names of those who were denied citizenship weigh heavy on the idea of switching passports like one changes one's opinion, or one's socks. Bhagat Singh Thind, for example, an Indian-born Sikh whose attempt at becoming a naturalized American was repeatedly stymied because of his race. The Supreme Court, including those liberal stalwarts Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and Louis Brandeis, ruled unanimously that racial terms as defined in "common understanding, by unscientific men" excluded people like Thind who were neither Caucasian nor African-American. On the other end of the moral spectrum and yet uncomfortably close in parallel sits Shamima Begum, burka-clad and cold-eyed. Born in Britain to Bangladeshi parents, she left a comfortable life in West London at the age of 15 to marry a member of the so-called Islamic State in Syria. Her two companions – with her dubbed the "Bethnal Green Girls", a terrorist trio sounding like an Enid Blyton adventure series – were killed. Begum herself, after resurfacing in a Syrian refugee camp, had her British citizenship revoked, leading to a raucous debate in Britain. The government cited national-security considerations for its decision, but multiple legal scholars argued that depriving a person of their citizenship violates international laws on statelessness. With her case and many others, the debate on citizenship has grown louder by the day: is it a contract-bound bestowing of privileges that demand the fulfilment of certain duties in return? Or is it an inalienable right that is permanent, personal, and universal? With the ghosts of these people and the strange conflict of practical reality and romantic ideals that they have raised being always present in the sphere of nationality and citizenship, the idea of changing passports sometimes feels like a violation of a sacred sense of *belonging*.

It is certainly true that the rites of the citizenship-acquiring ceremony have a sort of sacrosanct air about them all over the world. They usually involve a pledge of loyalty, an oath-taking, a solemn process in a town hall. Such ceremony highlights that citizenship really is a type of

belonging, a visceral intangible aspect of natural law that goes beyond passports and visa-papers and uniform-clad border officers. In the relentlessly real real-world, however, thousands of wealthy people with weak passports buy new citizenship every year, either through outright purchase (as many smaller, often island countries offer) or through investing large sums of money in business there (a popular option in larger countries like the United States and Canada). It is a business worth billions of dollars. Supporters argue that it shores up cosmopolitanism and makes the movement of people easier, freeing them from the chains of the citizenship they have been born into (these people being mostly limited to those who are outrageously wealthy, of course). Detractors accuse the industry of “commercializing and trifling with rights and privileges that patriots regard as sacred,” *The Economist* noted last year. The taking of a new passport and the giving up of an old, then, could be seen merely as a businesslike transaction, the purchase and sale of a product, like a sweater or a bicycle, or as a hypercapitalist trampling of the very foundations of human society: belonging, nation, ties to the soil.

But there is but a small distance between this sort of talk and the ideas that have ruined countless lives. The link between citizenship, a concept drawn from the law, and belonging, a rather less tangible idea found in the annals of the psyche, is a strange one. It is almost reflexive to find one, and yet it must be deployed and shaped to be truly clear. It is here that danger lies, in this symbolism, this wording that recalls old aggressive nationalist tropes. Authoritarian regimes have always had curious obsessions with symbols and choreography – “Bellboys babbling orders, portraits of caudillos, prearranged cheers or insults, walls covered with names, unanimous ceremonies,” as Jorge Luis Borges once wrote of dictatorships. When I think of my citizenship as anything more than a legal document that allows me to board a plane, I get the nagging feeling that I’m somehow perpetuating that silly nationalism, clinging to the

significance of arbitrary borders and claiming ownership over a political process that had nothing to do with me, tying lines on a map into some crucial facet of my own identity. Being born into my country wasn't something I achieved, so I don't know if it's something to be proud of – or, at least, something that should make me cling onto this passport that I did not earn and that holds me back at every opportunity. There is a distinction between patriotism and nationalism, and it was probably George Orwell who characterized it best: “Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power.” But what both have in common is an irrational attachment to the idea of nationhood and belonging.

Irrational, most certainly. The benefits of getting a better passport are tangible, immense, and rationally offer a far superior outcome than keeping my current, weak citizenship. But as humans surely we are not purely rational actors. Otherwise we would all be algorithms, not living beings who think and feel. Thus, I cannot look upon the dark cover of my passport without seeing something more than a national seal. I also see my homeland, a place I know so little and yet one that I can never feel detached from. An ordinary document in this way becomes something grander – an idea, an ideal. Grander but also, of course, immensely more complicated.

Last summer, I read a moving article by a woman called Rima Datta about giving up her Indian passport to receive German citizenship. She recounted the irritants of carrying a poor-world passport, much like I have in this essay – the difficulties of travel, the embarrassments of inevitable extra examination, and so on. After beginning with such a negative view of this passport and the extra problems it brings, one would think that Ms Datta went skipping with joy to the *einbürgerung* (naturalization) ceremony that would act as a key to a glorious world

of barrier-free easy transit, where one's hunger to see new places did not have to be stymied by the expense and difficulty of begging said new place to let one in. But the author talks not of carefree celebration but of tears and nerves. Her closing lines explain the facet of this dilemma that is not always immediately clear but, I think, would make itself known rather quickly: "I, too, had become a first-world citizen! Why then, instead of rejoicing, did I feel so sad?"

It would take a cold – almost cynical, I would argue – eye to view the changing of one's nationality as a mere signature on a form and a switch of a legal document that itself has no feelings. An updating of one's name in a government database, or a change of immigration lane at airports. As human beings we feel – or maybe we *need* to feel – that there is something more to such mundane things, that they stand for something bigger. Whatever my passport, I am a human being above all else, surely? And it is precisely *that* quality that makes me feel that my citizenship is something more than a pamphlet made of stiff paper examined by the stern eyes of countless nameless bureaucrats. It's some strange idea that is more than the forms and the border officials and the proofing and the proving. It is the heat and sky and dust of my own land and reminds me that yes, despite everything, it is *my* own land and that while I am grateful for the West and the time I spend here, I will always have something I can go back to, something that I cannot be questioned about. Fortunately, the arms of the first world have been mostly welcoming. My own country's arms don't bother reaching out to hug me – I am greeted there only by an uninterested, momentary upward-flicking of the eyes. I don't need to be welcomed there enthusiastically. It's my place, after all.