

Citizenship, Belonging and the Sense of Ambiguity among French Tamils of India

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Abstract

The French nationals of India are the remnants of French colonialism in India. Today, there are Pondicherrians in the union of independent India who are French nationals, exercising French citizenship rights. While ethnically Indian, they are legally French citizens. This essay has attempted to engage with the case of the French nationals of India, through a review of the documentary film, 'Two Flags', and to situate them in the larger contexts of citizenship, nationality and belonging. The essay has been divided into three parts. The first part delves into the community's history; the second part situates them in the context of citizenship and rights; the third engages with their belonging and politics of belonging.

Keywords: French nationals; Pondicherry; India; France; colonialism; citizenship rights; belonging; identity; ambiguity

Introduction

In the month of February, 2015, the Indo French Senior Citizens Association, demonstrated a massive protest in Pondicherry, registering their displeasure regarding the Indian government's move toward denial and revocation of French citizenship status granted to some Tamils in Pondicherry, under the deed of cession that the Indian government signed with the French government in 1962. The past decades have witnessed various movements regarding political rights and quest for inclusion. These movements for political rights, and/or citizenship rights do not always adhere to a majority/minority dichotomy (Kymlica, 1995) and are instrumental in understanding the ideas of belonging and inclusion of a particular community agitating for these rights. Certain communities agitating for certain rights may not seem to be coherent with the larger framework of analysing the idea of belonging, or the conceptual scaffolding of engaging with the concepts of nationality or citizenship. "Articulating rights as claims to recognition has always invoked the ideal of citizenship. What has been happening in the past few decades... has been a recurrent, if not a fundamental, aspect of democratic or democratizing polities." (Isin & Turner, 2002: 2). Such communities and their movements, their ideas of belonging can invoke critical engagement which is essential for scholarly arguments and debates, which can lead to a reimagination of the contours of these categories which are taken affixed. One such community is that of the Tamils in Pondicherry who are, legally, French citizens. This particular community are ethnic Tamils, belonging to India, but are French citizens. The French Tamils in Pondicherry produce a fascinating case for delving into the concepts of nationality, citizenship and belonging, and the fault lines within the frameworks of engaging with these categories. Through a review of the documentary on this community, *Two Flags*, by Pankaj Rishi Kumar,

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and of secondary literature, this research has attempted to study the questions of belonging and identity of the French Tamils through the concepts of citizenship, belonging and identity.

The French nationals of India are the remnants of French colonialism in India, which had a limited presence in India in terms of their territories, and, in comparison to the British presence, but had a strong influence on their subjects. The French presence started in around the seventeenth century and continued till a decade into the second half of the twentieth century. The French colonised territory of Pondicherry was formally ceded to India in 1962. Today, there are Pondicherrians in the union of independent India who are French nationals, exercising French citizenship rights. They form a small minority in Pondicherry. They vote in the French constituency of Nice. They are Hindus, Christians and Muslims of local or mixed family origin, and only a minor proportion among them are adept in French language. However, French is taught in schools attended by French Indian children and adult French classes are well attended, reflecting an interest in maintaining ties and an allegiance to France or in finding jobs with French companies. While ethnically Indian, they are legally French citizens, residing as alien citizens in the territory of their ethnicity. The French nationals of India derive some of their income from pension (some 20 percent are retirees), social security, welfare, and other programs of the French government. They are also entitled to emigrate to France, although few do so and the French Government does not encourage the practice.

Isin and Turner (2002) opine that the major contestations around the categories of belonging, nationality and citizenship in the contemporary times are marked by the broader processes of post modernisation and globalisation and the contesting claims and marginalities emerging thereafter, like indigenous rights and belonging, the issue of refugee citizenship, the sense of belonging of immigrants and diaspora, ethnic quest for territorial self-determination etc. However, the case of the French Tamils in Pondicherry is entrancing on various facets. They do not directly identify with the issues which dominate the present order. They are the remnants of a colonial past in a postcolonial setting. Furthermore, all the components which cement one's belonging and culminate into nationhood and subsequently, citizenship- "common language, common history, common religion, common customs - the most basic, and therefore probably the most taken for granted, is that of common territory" (Miles, 1990: 250) are peculiarly different in the case of French Tamils in India. They present a case of conflict, contestation and ambivalence regarding their ideas of nationality, ethnicity and belonging which depend on ethnic, cultural and territorial identity. Where does their belonging lie? What is their idea of territorial belonging? Does their ethnic identity come in conflict with their nationality? How do the larger ideas of nationality and citizenship in the postcolonial world accommodate such an idea of belonging? Can they be identified as French diaspora in India? If they are the remnants of French colonialism, what does it reveal about the French colonial project in India and the French idea of the postcolonial?

Part I

A Brief History of the French Nationals of India

"If empire building is a haphazard affair, motivated as much by superpower rivalry and jealousy as by the desire to accumulate specific territories, imperial deconstruction - that is, decolonization - can be no less untidy." (Miles, 1992: 142). The current state of Pondicherry, a union territory of India, and the existence of a community within this territory, whose nationality lay with their erstwhile coloniser can be seen as an example of an untidy



decolonisation. It can also be seen as a strategic, calculated geopolitical move for the coloniser's existence in the postcolonial world. To understand the present situation of the French Tamils, their colonial history needs to be delineated.

The French association with Pondicherry can be traced back to the seventeenth century. "On 4 February 1673 Bellanger de l'Espinay, acting as agent for the state-controlled French East Indies company, landed in 'Puducheri' (Tamil: 'new village')" (Miles, 1990: 252). The ambitious project of colonialism in India suffered in the hands of the competing British colonial expansion, however, the French were successful in retaining their colonial presence in India through the control of Pondicherry (handed back to France by Britain in 1816), the towns of Karaikal, Mahe, Yanam in the southern part of India and the control of Chandan Nagar (then Chandernagore), now in West Bengal, in the eastern part of the country. Like the very ideology of colonialism, initial territorial expansion and control was based on economic profitability, precisely trade. Pondicherry was strategic in maintaining trade relations with French colonies of Mascarene Islands (east of Madagascar), Port Louis (in Mauritius) and Reunion Islands. (Ramaswamy, 1987; Wanner, 2017). However, French colonialism seeped into the very cultural and social structures of the colonised subjects, given the distinct idea and operation of French colonialism. Thomas (2015), in this regard, writes,

French concept of colonisation is very different from that of the English or any other European powers...France believed in a colonisation process that made the colony as part of the mother country... In the case of England, the colony was treated as having a separate identity that was inferior in all ways. Thus assimilation or mixing with the native population of any kind was not tolerable. The French followed a policy of assimilating the colonies, as this would give them less burden in enforcing their policies. (693)

This seepage could be witnessed in the cultural and social changes among the colonised Tamil elites of Pondicherry, who were were attuned to the French on cultural, educational, and linguistic markers. Unlike British colonialism, wherein the colonised subjects were imperial citizens, the French colonised subjects were French nationals, and this particular characteristic has culminated in the nationality-belonging ambiguity of the French nationals of India.

The decolonisation of India in 1947 was marked by unrest, with partition of India and the mergers of the erstwhile princely states into the dominion of India. The French retained their control over their territories for a period after 1947 and their transfer of power to India was a different process. In the French territories of Pondicherry and Chandan Nagar, the internal politics was marked by the conflicting groups of pro-mergers and irredentists. An agreement between France and India in 1948 called for a referendum to decide the fate of French India. A referendum was held in Chandan Nagar in 1949 and there was an overwhelming majority in favour of merger. The situation in Pondicherry presented a stronger political rift between the pro-mergers and the irredentists, with neither of the governments' loosening their grip over the territory (Subbiah, 1990). In the early '50s, there were massive political and economic pressures from the Indian government which led to negotiations. Furthermore, the strategic importance of Pondicherry for the French, "lay in its being a port of call for the French navy bound to and from Indochina. With the withdrawal from Indochina an inevitability, the strategic *raison d'être* of a French presence in southern India also disappeared." (Miles, 1990: 255). In 1956, the treaty of cession was signed between India and France, along with an option

for the colonised French nationals to retain their French nationality, notified through a written document, within a period of six months (article 5 of the treaty). Apart from a few highly acculturated elites, (who eventually moved to France), the majority became Indian citizens. According to article 1 of the treaty of cession, 'French Nationals born in the territory of the Establishments and domiciled therein . . . shall become nationals and citizens of the Indian Union.' Moreover, article 4 of the treaty exempted all Pondicherrians, who were under French employment (serving the French army in other territories) from giving up their French citizenship, who therefore, retained their French nationality. The treaty of cession was what marked the untidy decolonisation of French India, as it left sufficient loopholes which has led to the existence of a community which is ethnically Indian but are legally alien citizens in India.

The first loophole was the option of retaining French nationality by the colonised subjects. The second loophole was in article 4 of the treaty of cession which allowed the French citizens who were not in the territory ceded to Indian union but belonged from the territory to retain their French nationality. The colonised subjects, who were employed by France, serving the army, were eventually repatriated to an independent India, who were now overseas citizens of France and foreigners in their own homeland. This article also meant that those citizens who were born outside of the colonised territory during or after the *de jure* transfer of power in 1962 would also be eligible for retaining their French citizenship. These loopholes have led to the ambiguous citizenship rights and national identity of the French of India.

Part II

Nationality, Citizenship and the French Nationals in India

In 2017, a protest was demonstrated by the French nationals of Pondicherry against the Indian government's move to prohibit them from participating in the French presidential elections. It was argued by the protestors that such a step would prohibit them from exercising their citizenship rights and deprive them of their national identity.

It would be incomprehensive to look at nationality and citizenship as standalone political positions of people within a citizenship rights regime. "National citizenship is a legal and social status which combines some form of collectively shared identity with the entitlement to social and economic benefits and the privileges of political membership through the exercise of democratic rights." (Benhabib, 2007: 19). Nationality and rights are essential indicators of identity and belonging of individuals/ groups claiming certain rights, of nation-states granting (or not) those rights and vice-versa (Bellamy, 2008). Therefore, to understand the questions of identity of the French nationals of India, they must be situated in the larger questions and frameworks of citizenship rights and belonging.

While India was a British colony and therefore under the British administration, the French colonised territories remained distinctly French in their administration. Parts of such administrative features are witnessed in independent India, in the union of Pondicherry, after the transfer of power in 1962 (Jain, 1970). The French embassy is bestowed with the responsibility of administering the French nationals in Pondicherry, and also registering those persons who are eligible for and demand French citizenship. The French government's colonial presence in postcolonial India is not just limited to maintaining an embassy which looks over the governance of its legal, yet alien citizens, France also maintains an extensive



education system to ensure that its alien citizens remain French. Furthermore, the French system of administration ensures certain economic benefits to its nationals, in the form of healthcare, social security costs, pensions for senior citizens, along with a network of French multinational companies undertaking investments and employment in the region. Moreover, the French nationals of Pondicherry are also eligible to vote in the French elections, from the constituency of Nice. This form of French postcolonial presence in Pondicherry, coupled with the loopholes in the treaty of cession, has strategically contributed to the increasing number of Pondicherrians seeking French citizenship (Miles, 1990). As mentioned, the treaty of cession leaves an ambiguous avenue regarding Pondicherrians seeking French citizenship, residing in an independent India. The treaty did not provide a clear decision on the fate of the Pondicherrians born to French nationals outside of the colonised territory of Pondicherry, and they were, by default, born as French citizens in an independent India. Some may argue that such a condition has resulted in easy access to the economic benefits provided by the French government to its citizens which has culminated to an increasing number of Pondicherrians claiming French nationality and demanding French citizenship, many with ambiguous birth documents, who are registered by the French embassy as *immatriculates* (Miles, 1990). In what ways does the existence of such a citizenship regime contest the very ideas of nationality and citizenship?

In theory and through historical experiences, nationality and citizenship are two ideas which inform one another, and may not be quite apart from each other. “In theory, citizenship as protected entitlements depend on membership in a nation-state” (Ong, 2005: 697) and this citizenship to a particular nation-state determines one’s nationality. If modern citizenship is broadly looked at from the realm of the political, it is, first, ensured through a membership to a territorial nation-state, ‘marking personhood’, excluding subjects outside of the territory, “and subjects of a territory are recognized as being citizens with specific rights.” (Janoski & Gran, 2002: 13). Given the historical contexts and recent developments of citizenship struggles across the globe, is not necessarily drawn from the idea that all those persons belonging to a particular nation-state will be included in the idea of citizenship (for example, internally displaced groups, refugees) neither does it negate the fact that persons who are territorially excluded can be included into availing citizenship of the said nation-state (for example, overseas citizens). Citizenship involves the capacities of citizens to influence the politics and economics of the nation-state and exist, equally, under a legal system of the nation-state, balancing rights with certain obligations and limits. To delve further into the concept of citizenship and citizenship rights, it is primarily looked through certain theoretical perspectives; liberalism, communitarianism, participatory democracy and the newer additions of postmodern theories and multicultural citizenship (Janoski & Gran, 2002). Of the four, liberalism is the most dominant, especially in the Anglo-Saxon democracies, wherein an emphasis is laid on the rights and identification of the individual, coupled with individual rights and liberties and limited obligations. Theories on communitarianism “focus on consensual order, and civic republicanism. The primary concern of many communitarian theories is the effective and just functioning of society... Obligations to society may often predominate over rights because their goal is to build a strong community based on common identity.” (Janoski & Gran, 2002: 19). Theories on participatory democracy emphasises on the rights and greater inclusion of marginalised or excluded groups than the previous theories, occupying a liminal space between individual and community rights, between liberalism and communitarianism (Singer, 1993). While some postmodern theories suggest that citizenship

has ceased to exist, recent events on global movement of people, transnationalism and multicultural citizenship suggest a ‘cultural turn’ in citizenship rights, wherein “various race/ethnic/ gender and other groups have a claim to some type of group or cultural rights.” (Janoski & Gran, 2002: 20). To engage with the case of French nationals in India through the lens of citizenship theories, it is germane to engage with the citizenship rights regimes in the countries involved in their situation: India and France.

To analyse French citizenship from the realm of theories of citizenship rights, it predominantly exhibits a liberal citizenship rights perspective, reflecting an atomistic, individual rights regime. However, they demonstrate a strong sense of community identity in their rights regime, based on territorial, racial and cultural markers. French multiculturalism has also been a matter of critique, given its strong practices of assimilation which tends to be both obtrude and discriminatory in nature, as opposed to integrating the various cultural cohorts with the French society on equal grounds, yet retaining their distinct identities. “French identity is so deeply linked to its colonial past that there is a fear of a reversal, where there is a perception that France would transform into a “colony” by a foreign cultural invasion, an argument often made by populist groups.” (Helke, 2019). If India is looked at through the theories of citizenship rights, which was born out of the British colonial yoke, it has borrowed and overlapping characteristics of the rights’ theories discussed above. While it has borrowed liberal citizenship rights regime from its coloniser, given the existence of social hierarchies, inherent marginalisation and discrimination, it has characteristics of participatory democracy. Furthermore, it is germane to account that Indian national identity is one which was born out of a nationalist struggle and is deeply embedded in a diverse, but in a strong sense of community and territorial identity. If these observations are extrapolated on the questions of national identity and citizenship of the French nationals of independent India, they most certainly raise interesting questions.

The French nationals of Pondicherry are ethnically Indian Tamils (with some proportion of Malayali and Telugu speaking groups) who exercise their French political citizenship rights as overseas citizens. However, their community identity and cultural rights lay in the territory of which they are alien citizens. Such a scenario contests the frameworks of citizenship regimes of both the nation-states. While being politically French and ascertaining their French citizenship rights, they are neither territorially nor culturally French. Though their nationality is French, how politically French they are, to what extent do they actively influence French politics and whether their national identity is indeed French is a matter of contestation. While being ethnically, culturally and territorially Indian, they are not Indian citizens, and legally they remain foreigners. While they exercise their French citizenship rights, they are bound by the obligations of the territory they belong from; India. Such contestations regarding their national identity and citizenship open up avenues to explore their sense of belonging. Can communities seek membership or personhood to a nation-state without any sense of territorial or political belonging? How alien can a community remain in a territory from where they belong and how strongly can they belong to territory they never set their foot on? How do such ambiguities shape their identity?



Part III

The sense of belonging and the French nationals of India

As discussed earlier, nationality and citizenship cannot be looked at as standalone political stances of communities. These concepts tend to inform as well as contradict the belonging and identity of communities in certain ways. In the case of the French nationals of India, their sense of belonging and the ambiguity surrounding it, forms a key part in understanding their community and national identity. What is a community's sense of belonging and their identity, when it is not rooted in a territory? How does it shape and impact a community's identity when their national identity and ethnic identity are different? What tends to define a community's identity? The national, the territorial or the ethnic? Can a community belong to an alien territory, remaining alien to their homeland? How does such an ambiguous sense of belonging inform their politics of belonging?

“People can ‘belong’ in many different ways and to many different objects of attachments...belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification by others, in a stable, contested or transient way...belonging is always a dynamic process...naturalized construction of a particular hegemonic form of power relations” (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 199). Yuval-Davis’s observation comprehensively sums up the very idea of belonging, which can be both stable and contested, permeable and/or impermeable, laying on a terrain of multiple intersectionality, resulting in identity(ies) which is fluid. Belonging, in itself, is a broad category which houses belongings on multiple domains and is marked by the intersectionality among varied belongings. However, the broad idea of belonging can be understood through certain analytical levels. Social locations or social positions is one analytical level of belonging. An individual’s affiliation to a particular gender, race, class, nationality, are the social/economic locations of one’s belonging. These categories to which one’s belonging lay are not isolated categories. They are the loci on the axis of power on which these categories belong. Furthermore, while one may identify her belonging to a certain category, multiple categories of belonging nonetheless inform and impact one’s identity. For example, “to be a woman is different if you are middle-class or working-class, a member of the hegemonic majority or a racialized minority.” (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 200). Therefore, the social locations of belonging are permeable categories which are not mutually exclusive, but inform each other to shape individual and/or community identities. Cornelius Castoriadis (1997) opines that these categories are often underpinned by ‘creative imaginations’ of communities based on certain signifiers (like language, ethnicity, nationality etc.) in which communities lay their belonging and draw their collective identity from. For example, as Benedict Anderson (1983) opines that the idea of nation is based on the imagination of a community landscape and from there, the community derives their national identity. It is the collective identity narratives and cultural memory which become instrumental in sustaining this imagination or construction. Furthermore, the performativity of a community, such as the repetitive practices of their collective spaces is crucial in maintaining the community constructions, their belonging and identity (Bell, 1999). “Such an abstract form of community is necessarily based on an abstract sense of imagined simultaneity.” (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 204). However, in certain historical contexts, constructions of belonging are also imposed on communities, from which they derive their collective identity.

If belongings are categories which are permeable, informing and intersecting with one another, how does then, a community identity, based on a particular category of belonging, become exclusive and contest the other categories? It is when the communities feel threatened of their identity dilution, is when they resort to the politics of belonging, through which they maintain and reproduce their community boundaries, moving from a paradigm of 'us' to a paradigm of 'us' and 'them'. (Crowley, 1999). "Any construction of boundaries, of a delineated collectivity, that includes some people, concrete or not, and excludes others, involves an act of active and situated imagination" (Yuval-Davis, 2006), laying in a category or categories of belonging. For example, the category of nation, which is a location of belonging, develops its politics of belonging through a bounded territory, and through the exclusive, legitimate and complete participation of its community members through a citizenship rights' regime, thus marking a community's national identity. However, citizenship struggles across the globe has witnessed varied politics of belonging, from marginalised and discriminated groups from within the framework of citizenship rights, interacting with the politics of belonging of the nation-state. Therefore, it can be argued that while belongings are permeable categories, interacting with one another, the politics of belonging encloses these categories and the contestations arise amidst these enclosed categories, which either challenge such enclosure or exclude the other.

In the case of the French nationals of India, the immediate categories of belonging that interact with each other are national, ethnic and territorial. The ambiguity surrounding their locations of belongings and their contested identities, makes them an interesting focus to engage with their politics of belonging. One may argue that their social location of belonging marked by nation/ nationality is one imposed on them due to colonialism. Their locus of national belonging is a result of colonial imposition of an imagined community. What cannot be discarded is the presence of an anti-merger group during the transfer of power of Pondicherry to India who agitated for retaining their French nationality. However, a merger sentiment and pressures from the Indian government led to the merger with India. The interesting aspect that should then be brought to focus is the increasing number of Pondicherrians, ethnic Tamils, claiming French nationality and citizenship, after 1962. How does one, then, engage with such an ambiguous stance of nationality? Does their stance regarding their nationality entail a national belonging or national identity? In the context of Quebec, which was torn between an Anglo-Canadian and French-Canadian identity, the politics of belonging of the separatist group agitating for a French Quebec invoked their belonging to French culture and language, enclosing the boundaries of their belonging from the rest of Anglo-Canada, deriving their national identity from such markers (Rocher, 2014). Such an invocation of belonging to the French nation, their culture, has not been witnessed in the case of French Pondicherrians, even though there was an increasing number of Pondicherrians seeking French citizenship. Their politics of belonging is narrowly demonstrated when they protest against the Indian government when it poses a threat to their citizenship rights. However, they retain and exhibit their cultural and ethnic belonging which is rooted in India, while they also exhibit a territorial and cultural belonging to France. As seen in the context of diaspora communities whose nationality and national identity lay in the foreign territory where the 'homing of the diaspora takes place' (Brah, 1996), where they build their home, but their strong sense of belonging is rooted in their territorial homeland, based on the markers of birth, ethnicity, culture etc. In the case of the French nationals, whose legal



homeland is France and ethnic homeland is Pondicherry, an ambiguous sense of territorial belonging is witnessed.

It can also be argued that the citizenship rights' regime in which French nationals of postcolonial India belong has never demanded full participation of the community in the French nation, wherein there are a greater number of rights they are entitled to than the duties they are obliged to. On the surface, it may appear that their location of belonging is primarily for economic reasons, which informs and interacts with their class identity. Such an arrangement helps them comfortably maintain their ethnic belonging and national identity as distinct realms, interacting with each other but not contesting one another. Had there been a situation which demanded complete participation in the French nation, and the application of the French technique of ruthless assimilation, a politics of belonging based on their ethnic marker may have been witnessed, similar to or stronger than the contestations which are witnessed whenever the Indian government attempts to prohibit them from exercising their citizenship rights. Some may argue that the ambivalent identities of the French nationals of India may resemble the case of diaspora communities, who are residing as French diaspora in India. The diaspora communities are marked by their ambivalence surrounding their national identity and their ethnic identity. The diaspora communities can be regarded as citizens of the host society, with a social contract with the host state, while their ethnic belonging is rooted in their homeland, which is predominantly a territorial category located on the ethnic/cultural landscape. Though the diaspora is aware of their national identity, they retain their ethnic identity, and their politics of belonging is demonstrated, through the invocation of their citizenship rights to retain and be recognised for their difference, where national identity and ethnic identity interact. The French nationals residing as French overseas citizens in India fail to make a case for the French diaspora in India. They signify more of Indian diaspora who reside in India, which in itself makes an ambiguous case, challenging the very contours of diaspora study. Therefore, there is a need to look at them from beyond the affixed category of nation-state and territorial boundaries.

Conclusion

The French nationals of India make an interesting case for analysing and challenging the very concepts and contours of citizenship, belonging and identity. *Two Flags*, opens the avenue for a close reading of this community. While it successfully delves into the question of their national identity, there remains scope to analyse their case through the analytical categories of colonialism, class, culture and the intersections among these and to move beyond a nation-statist paradigm.

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