

[Back](#)

The colour of our passports

Stopped from boarding a flight to London, recently, TABISH KHAIR reflects on how the new rule for transit visas had nothing to do with terrorism but everything to do with the terror of people with the wrong colour of passport.

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I SPENT most of November 4, 2003, at Kastrup, the shiny, efficient international airport of Copenhagen, trying to board a flight to an academic conference. I had a valid ticket, a valid (Indian) passport, a valid (Danish) permanent visa and the usual letters from my employers in Denmark and the conference organisers in Munich. I had taken the cheapest route — as is expected of scholars flying to academic conferences — via Heathrow, London. I had been to England many times for readings and lectures and I had also caught connecting flights from British airports in the past.

But this time I was not allowed on board the flight. Someone had changed the rules in London a few days ago. Now, I was politely and sympathetically informed at Kastrup, people with certain kinds of passports need to have a transit visa even in order to catch a connecting flight from the same airport in England. In the past, transit visas were required only if you had to leave the airport. Not so, any longer. The colour of my passport was wrong.

Finally giving up my plan of going to Munich, I returned to my university in Aarhus and was asked, by concerned colleagues and friends, the question that I had expected. Why don't you apply for a Danish passport? After all, you became eligible for one about four years ago.

It is a difficult question to answer. There is much I am proud of in India, and there is much I am ashamed of. So, I am not a nationalist in the sense in which parties like the Shiv Sena define the nation. Being born a Muslim, I have grown up on the margins of that nation; I have grown up having my identity, my past, my languages questioned and subtly discredited in such "nationalist" circles.

And yet, I have no desire to opt for a Danish (or any other) citizenship. Yes, it would make my life in Europe easier (and cheaper): I have given up on some conference invitations simply because they came too late or I did not feel like penetrating, with my wrong-coloured passport, the fortifications of the U.S. embassy in Copenhagen to apply for a visa.

But is convenience and cash enough of a justification? Or aren't they the very core of that heart of whiteness, as Arundhati Roy puts it, that we often get to know as global capitalism? Aren't the evils of capitalism finally reducible to two formulations: that financial profit (cash) is the final end of human existence and that we can conveniently murder, manipulate or ignore those who are different and less privileged?

If I hang on to my Indian passport, I hang on to my memories. But these memories are not of the sort that one hears canted in popular *ghazals* about paper ships and the shade of trees in the ancestral village. My memories are of difference, of alternatives. Not necessarily their celebration, but their existence. And strangely, every time I travel with my Indian passport, I am reminded of what I share with people travelling on Nepali, Algerian, Nigerian, yes, even Pakistani passports. Out in the world, the colour of all our passports is the same. Our difference is the same.

No number of nuclear devices being tested by India and Pakistan can change this defining "global" reality. The nuclear bombs we explode are little more than firecrackers in the hands of children. No, I am not under-estimating the damage they can do. I agree with Roy that nuclear bombs are "man's challenge to god". I agree with Amitav Ghosh that it is preposterous to justify their use. But finally, it is more than likely that our nuclear bombs will go off, like firecrackers do, in our own hands.

Perhaps because while we have the ambition and the hatred to develop these devices, we do not have the cash to keep them at the highest levels of maintenance. There are too many pressures on the means available to our states. Some one will cut edges some day and then what will be blown off will be Pakistani or Indian hands.

And the world — the heart of whiteness that claims to be first in the world — will remain largely unaffected. At the most, it will turn to us and repeat a colonial prejudice: what else can you expect of children and barbarians, it will ask. At best, it will give us pity and dubious aid; at worst, it will shower us with scorn and dubious legislation. The bomb has not and will not redefine our relationship to this world of whiteness. It will not make a change where it matters: our relationship to this world. But it might help us to forget further the relationship that we share with another world, the so-called Third World.

So, I hang on to my passport for I do not want to forget both these relationships. My passport reminds me how marginal I am in the global heart of whiteness, and how childish and superfluous are the squabbles of our (Third World) governments. My passport reminds me of what I share with Nepalis, Algerians, Nigerians, yes, even Pakistanis. My passport reminds me that bin Laden and his ilk are little more than excuses. The new rule for transit visas has little to do with terrorism and everything to do with terror of people with the wrong colour of passport. Europe and the U.S. — and their satellites like Australia — have long been frightened of those who have little cash and cannot be conveniently ignored. This fear goes back a long way: it did not grow out of the foolhardy act of a handful of young men flying planes into buildings in New York and Washington. That tragic event simply provided the excuse to take legislative and other action that many have wanted to take for decades in the "West".

And so, I hang on to my passport. For I was born in India. If I were to relinquish my passport, I would do so in favour of a country that I found superior to India. But while there is much to

be admired in places like Denmark and England, there is also much to be ashamed of. The heart of whiteness is lit with lamps of blood.

And today the heart of whiteness is closing its arteries. It is doing to people with the wrong colour (of passport?) what it tried to do to its own poor in the 18th and 19th Centuries. Even the discourse sounds familiar: undeserving poor, accountability, violence, criminality, free market, etc, we have heard all this before. But this time the struggle will be longer and more bitter as the poor cannot be deported and settled in "newly-discovered" continents, where they can get rich by their own sweat or the blood of the aborigines and slaves. Today the poor of the world can only be attracted like moths to the rich heart of whiteness. And hence the arteries of Europe and U.S. are being closed with new rules and regulations.

Medically, of course, we know that the choking of arteries to the heart leads to a heart attack.

The writer is an Indian scholar based in Denmark.

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