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Identification
and
Misrecognition
in an
Identity
Database

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“You know that mosque at the corner of this street? The caretaker of that mosque got a letter from NADRA [the National Database and Registration Authority] addressed to me. He was the one who read it out. When I heard the words ‘your identity card is temporarily blocked,’ I nearly had a heart attack.”

This was how Brekhna Bibi, a Pashtun woman who lives in an informal settlement in Islamabad, told me that her card had been “blocked.” She had been placed under “citizen re-verification” by NADRA, the techno-bureaucratic organization that manages Pakistan’s national identity database and produces the biometric-based national identity card.

Brekhna Bibi was responding to my question, early on in my fieldwork in 2017, about how people found out that their card, often still in their possession, had been blocked? While Brekhna had received an official notice from NADRA, many citizens find out that their card is blocked when they try to use it. For instance, many of my interlocutors had found out about their blocked card when trying to buy a cell phone chip.

Yet, at the time of our conversation, Brekhna had just returned home after an errand, immediately taking the ID card off her person and carefully placing it in a steel trunk in her room. She told me that ever since she was informed that her card was blocked she keeps her ID card safe under lock and key in that trunk. “Every time I look at that piece of paper it causes me so much stress and takes me back to that time when I first heard that news.” Brekhna’s card was never physically confiscated from her—in a sense, the computational affordances of the biometric-based national identity card allow for it to be remotely “turned off.” Nevertheless, she maintained an anxiety-laden association with the material card itself.

Asl aur Naqal Making “Genuine” Pakistanis

In 2016, Pakistan’s interior minister announced that NADRA would be “re-verifying” identity cards as part of a broad national security drive. In NADRA’s terms, this effort to re-verify identity cards was aimed at differentiating non-Pakistanis from Pakistanis.

The immediate reason behind the 2016 press conference and the public announcement of a mass identity re-verification campaign was an American drone strike that killed Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mansoor. Mansoor, an Afghan, was not only killed in Pakistan but was also found to be in possession of a NADRA identity card

and a Pakistani passport under the name Wali Ahmed—an incident that subsequently became a source of considerable international embarrassment for Pakistan. The minister reported at the press conference that around 200,000 “fake” cards had been blocked. A blocked card meant that the card holder’s citizenship status was “under verification.” It also meant that the blocked card holder would no longer be able to do a range of things, from buying property and voting to enrolling children in school or buying a SIM card for their phone.

The minister recognized that some “genuine” Pakistani citizens might be affected but that they would be given a chance to appeal their case through NADRA.

Brekhna Bibi was one of these “genuine Pakistanis.” Her concerns about her identity card were intertwined with her home, always at risk of demolition. Brekhna Bibi lives in a small *katchi abaadi*, an informal settlement, in Islamabad. *Katchi abaadis* are often termed “encroachments” by city authorities, but since the formal residential sector began to grow, middle-class people’s houses were in fact beginning to encroach into Brekhna’s settlement, now encircling the *katchi abaadi* dwellers.

Brekhna Bibi is active, confrontational, and loud in her fight against city authorities’ threats of demolition. She is fond of telling stories about how her name has brought bulldozers to a screeching halt in the past. An important source of her influence is the amount of time she has spent in the hallways and offices of bureaucrats: “getting work done.” As for her middle-class neighbors, she shares an electricity line with one of them, in return for which she pays most of the bill. She is forced to be civil but is not shy about confronting them with sharp words when they redirect monsoon water that floods her home. Her home, and its precarious location, was an important part of Brekhna’s desire to be recognized in an official domain. When discussing her blocked card, Brekhna Bibi appeared personally offended; it was not only her legal status but also her reputation that was at stake, crucial to maintaining her position in her community.

To re-verify her status, she frantically traveled from Islamabad to multiple cities and her hometown to collect crucial identifying documents and bring these to her board interview—an interview-based process where a number of officials from NADRA as well as occasionally the intelligence agencies would question those being reverified.

Pakistan Ka Matlab Kya? Citizenship: A Moving Target

In order to meet the documentary requirements for reverification, blocked persons had to demonstrate in particular that they were inhabitants of Pakistan before 1978. During my fieldwork, when I first encountered this date, I became curious about which particular historical event it was supposed to signify—in other words, why 1978?

As I spoke to NADRA officials, they referenced not only one but a few interconnected events. First, in the late 1970s, a large number of Afghan refugees entered Pakistan due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Second, in the wake of the violent civil war of 1971, which led to the separation of East Pakistan and the creation of an independent Bangladesh, the criteria of Pakistani citizenship was amended to reflect the country's new territorial configurations. While Pakistani citizenship can be acquired by birth, descent, migration, naturalization, or marriage, each path to citizenship has its own conditions and caveats.

Further, Pakistani citizenship can also be revoked: in effect, after 1971, those who continued to reside in the territories that became Bangladesh “lost” the right to Pakistani citizenship.*

While Pakistan's citizenship law was passed in 1951, the decade of the 1970s was instrumental in shaping the meaning of citizenship in Pakistan. This was not only due to the creation of Bangladesh, which has been called a “second partition” of the Indian subcontinent—an event that indeed brought questions of belonging to Pakistan to the fore yet again—but the changing meaning of citizenship was also connected to the Cold War, as it unfolded in South Asia and began to intensify on Pakistan's western frontier during the 1970's, ultimately culminating in the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan. In the context of increasing Soviet influence at its borders, the Pakistani state grew increasingly concerned about dissident activity, particularly

* My book manuscript explores why a citizenship amendment was passed in Pakistan in 1978, more than six years after Bangladesh came into existence. In fact, by December 1972, a Temporary Provision Order was in effect regulating (and restricting) which Pakistanis were cleared for repatriation (to West Pakistan) under the Delhi Agreement and which East Pakistanis could be excluded from claims to Pakistani citizenship. In this context, the 1978 amendment was likely an attempt to settle the question of citizenship for the Bihari or “Urdu-speaking” community still in Bangladesh (commonly referred to as “stranded Pakistanis”) and for negotiating the terms (and numbers) of relocation to Pakistan.

in relation to the anti-state movements in regions bordering Afghanistan.

Pakistan's first national identity card scheme was launched within this milieu of insecurity, suspicion and anxiety. This anxiety centered on the question of who belonged and who did not. In particular, for the early paper-based identity registration system, the figure of the "Afghan" residing in Pakistan posed a special problem—not least because government officials simultaneously questioned how "Afghans" had acquired Pakistani identity cards alongside the difficulty of ascertaining whether some of these "Afghans" were in fact definitively *not* Pakistani.⁽¹⁾

To reduce the level of ambiguity surrounding this question, and in order to impose more stringent identity verification criteria, Pakistan's early identity registration system deployed the documentation of kinship. The identity registry included a list of household members in its paper registers, and eventually began to require that family members accompany the individual applying for an identity card, as a means to authenticate individual citizen identity.⁽²⁾ This legacy of a household registry, which accompanies individual identity documentation, came to coalesce in the identity database at present.

Yet, it is important to recognize that NADRA's identification practices are not part of a linear historical trajectory. Rather, variegated, historical contingencies inform NADRA's production of digital citizen identity. Through this historical context we can see how biometrics, today, do not function solely as an individualizing technology. As an evidentiary technology, biometrics came to be deployed toward the authentication of familial relations. In so doing, they reveal the ways that biometrics and databases—even as they emerged late as technologies of identification—are imbricated within a longer history of identifying communities of belonging. Further, the quality of citizenship is passed on through kinship, imbricated within the ability to prove inter-generational descent.

While NADRA recruits information about kinship through extant documentary infrastructures, kinship's role—as a technology of scalar identification—is repurposed and refigured anew. It is precisely the movement and meaning of identification in the lives of ordinary people like Brekhna that we must follow.

Rast-e-Rishtidari Vectors of Relatedness

Identity re-verification also required Brekhna to evidence not just her individual identity but also to authenticate her relations with her family members. And so, while Brekhna had managed to successfully re-verify her identity and her citizenship, she remained severely anxious about her status. This was because her daughter was married to an Afghan refugee—one of approximately four million, many of whom share neighborhoods, social networks and kin with Pakistani Pashtuns. This Afghan man, Rasheed, had fallen in love with Khaista, Brekhna’s daughter. Rasheed had convinced Brekhna Bibi that despite his precarious refugee status he was a hardworking man, a taxi driver, who would provide for Khaista. Brekhna told me that Rasheed indeed had not left any need unmet and most importantly, was very respectful toward his mother-in-law.

Khaista’s daughter, Brekhna’s granddaughter, was now old enough to go to school, but she did not have the document required for enrollment in public schools. This document, called the “B-form,” is essentially a list of family members for each household. To get the B-form for her daughter, Khaista would need an ID card first, and that was the problem. Early on in their marriage, Khaista and Rasheed had accompanied Rasheed’s family to a wedding in Kabul. Brekhna Bibi explained “my throat went hoarse telling Khaista, ‘Don’t go to this wedding, don’t go to Afghanistan.’ While Khaista was there, there was some trouble so they could not come back. She got stuck there for months.”

She eventually had to return through the Torkham border crossing. When Khaista crossed Torkham, border officials took a photograph and all ten fingerprints on the biometric reader. Brekhna Bibi told me this in an exasperated tone with her head in her hands. The whole family was now terrified that if Khaista went to NADRA now—on the basis of fingerprints recorded at the border now digitally transmittable—NADRA might know that she was married to an Afghan and had traveled to Afghanistan, all pointing to the assumption that she, too, was likely Afghan. While legally Khaista and her husband could hold different citizenship statuses (and indeed they do), given that digital identification is structured to rely on a model of networked kinship, it was likely to flag Khaista’s case as potentially one of dubious citizenship. As a result, on the basis of Khaista’s (marital) link to an Afghan, NADRA could potentially deny her an identity card.

Biometrics, and perhaps more importantly their imaginary, take on a unique significance in this context. Ordinary citizens with cross-border familial networks are forced to speculate about the digital affordances of databases as well as biometrics, which could trump existing identity documentation and entitlements.

Brekhna Bibi's hesitation and concern for her own identity card, which came up repeatedly during our conversation about Khaista's card, emerged from a combination of unknowability (not knowing what NADRA knows) and anxieties about a chain of kin relations that threatened contagious connection: her own to Khaista's, Khaista's to her husband, and his to his Afghan kin. Thus, Khaista's identification by NADRA was not hers alone but connected to her husband as well as her mother.

The identity-card holder engages NADRA's identification protocols collectively (as a family) as opposed to as a single individual. In part, this is a function of how the database is structured. It heightens the visibility of relatedness, such that if one is related to a noncitizen, it brings the citizen into the fold of suspicion as well. How this both connects and departs from the regime of legal citizenship creates a space of indetermination that ordinary citizens like Brekhna frequently struggle with. My conversations with Brekhna illuminated that datafied kin were not only entities in a database, but lived and experienced. Families as well as individuals were both objects and subjects of data.

Months later, I was visiting Brekhna Bibi at her home and she mentioned that she had just returned from the NADRA Registration Center—one of my primary sites during ethnographic fieldwork, where I spent time with Data Entry Operators and other NADRA employees as they processed identity registration cases.

Brekhna told me she had accompanied her other daughter and her daughter-in-law—not Khaista—who were both registering for fresh ID cards. It had all gone smoothly. The Data Entry Operator they were assigned turned out to be a former neighbor (who lived in the formal part of their neighborhood, not the informal settlement). It had taken her a while to place him. "Did you live behind Azhar Mahmood's (a well-known Pakistani cricketer, now retired) house?" she asked him. He looked surprised and said yes. Then he recognized her as well. "Aunty, I think I've seen you around too!" Once this familiarity was established, Brekhna Bibi felt more comfortable now that he was an acquaintance, and so told him about Khaista's problem. He told her to come the following morning, and if Khaista's biometric records *didn't* show up already, he would be able to make the card.

Recounting this, Brekhna said, “I think this is the right moment for me to be entirely honest with NADRA.” She proceeded to narrate the speech I had heard a few times. It was an opportunity to rehearse the truth. She repeated that *this*—Khaista’s marriage—was the girl’s *kismet*, her fate. Even ending up across a closed border was another iteration of ill-luck. She was quick to clarify: Khaista’s husband is a good man and a caring father. The fact that he happens to be Afghan ... that was up to God. She intended to go into NADRA and tell them this quite honestly. How could they dispute that this was a matter of *kismet* and no fault of her or her daughter’s?

She had even set a condition for their marriage: Khaista’s husband would never take her to Afghanistan permanently, as she didn’t want her to be so far from home, which was Pakistan. Even when Khaista went for a brief period, like the wedding, Brekhna Bibi had a terrible, sinking feeling in her heart that lasted two weeks. She would tell NADRA everything, Brekhna Bibi reiterated.

Jahan Jor, Wahan Tor Joints and Fractures

I offered to accompany Brekhna Bibi and her daughter to the NADRA registration center if they thought me coming along would help. They insisted I come. And so the following day, we showed up but when we went downstairs to Brekhna’s former neighbor’s Data Entry station, he was nowhere in sight. Brekhna called his cell phone, but he did not answer.

At this point, I went upstairs to look for an assistant manager, who approved all applications, and one that I had gotten to know well during my fieldwork at the registration center. When I was almost about to give up my search, I saw another person waving to catch my attention. Earlier, the man now waving at me, Khurshid, had been employed as a helper to assist people in navigating the various windows for the ID registration process. Today, Khurshid was sitting at a data entry station. He asked me why I was there, and I explained Brekhna Bibi’s situation. He responded that since Brekhna had an existing identity record in the database, he could make Khaista’s card, he said “*through*,” or “*on the basis*,” of her mother’s. In Urdu, the phrase is *un ke card ke uper banana*—translating literally to “on top” of her mother’s card. This phrasing is telling, suggesting the layered nature of identity records; the interconnectedness between family members, represented through the cards.

Khaista's registration process initially began smoothly. However, after Khurshid put in Brekhna Bibi's card number, he saw that her brother (Khaista's maternal uncle) had two cards. In other words, he was duplicated within the database.

Khurshid questioned Khaista about this, and she said she vaguely remembered that one of her uncle's cards had gotten lost but was unaware of anything else. Khurshid did not pursue this further. When I asked how a duplication was even possible—given the uniqueness and singularity of an individual's biometrics within the database—I did not receive a direct answer, just that in any system, no matter how good, “where there is a joint, there can be a break” (*jahan jor wahan tor*).

The ability to prevent identity duplicates through the singularity and uniqueness of any individual's biometric prints raises questions about the need for the interpersonal and messy complexities of datafying kinship. Yet by recording parental links in the database at the time of registration, datafied kinship works to establish a unique relation between parent and child: every individual only has one mother and one father in the database. This biological, descent-based link serves the function of identity deduplication of sorts in the context of the multiple relations recorded during the registration process, including marital and sibling relations.

As soon as we left, with Brekhna Bibi and Khaista in high spirits and jubilant about the success of Khaista's identity registration, they told me that a few years ago this particular uncle had been in possession of Brekhna Bibi's parents' original identity cards and had withheld them from her in a time of need. When she needed these documents for her reverification process, he would not give her any of their parents' identity documents. This deeply angered Brekhna Bibi. As a result, through means she would not disclose to me—she simply said, “I have my ways”—she got a hold of her brother's card and refused to give it up.

Such a conflict is entangled with tensions built within NADRA's identification practices. NADRA is by no means at the origins of fraught kin relations. However, the manner in which kin ties are strengthened or frayed in the context of identification is closely tied to the element of mutual need. This need is heightened by kinship-based bureaucratic work. Family members frequently share documentation requirements—such as the identity cards or other documents from parents—but only one or two members, likely their male children, possess the originals, creating inequities in terms of access and favors. In turn, the mode in which vengeance is enacted can also be through documentation. For some of my other interlocutors, the willingness of kin to provide documents, or to accompany family members to vouch for them in person, was seen as proof of loyalty and care.

The kinned interconnections between refugees and citizens blur the relationship between identity and identification—that is, being related to a noncitizen complicates the process of identification as a citizen. In this sense, the networked nature of datafied identification infrastructures reflects, simultaneously, the complex nature of an interconnected social fabric as well as the difficulty of maintaining separate legal and juridical categories. Given how identity re-verification takes root in the lives of people like Brekhna—the fact that it interpolates *particular* axes of interconnections (such as between refugee and citizen)—reveals that identification is also a story about postcolonial identity.

The historical production of identification systems, where they are both built upon and exceed extant infrastructures, calls for a cogent political and social analysis as well as critique. Brekhna’s story, as parable, suggests that we must move beyond the technological into the political, in an attempt to apprehend the relationship between technical systems and the broader sociopolitical forms they are a part of. This means attending to both the process of recording kinship within the database and following how these digital modes of identification extend into the lives of people like Brekhna—who in turn know this, live with it, and build strategies for navigating it.

Zehra Hashmi is an anthropologist and historian who works on identification technologies in South Asia. Her research explores the everyday workings of securitization and surveillance in Pakistan through the intersection of identification, migration, kinship, and postcolonial and colonial governance.

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Endnotes

- (1) Summary for the Cabinet from Census and Registration Organization (Interior Division), "Report on Problem of Issuance of Identity Cards to Foreigners," dated 17 April 1976. No. ID/5/3/76-Regn (T.I), Secret, NDC.
- (2) Office Memorandum from Brig. Abdul Latif, Registrar General and Ex-Officio Joint Secretary, Census & Registration Organization (Interior Division), 17 May 1976. No. ID/5/11/76-Regn (T.I), NDC.