

# Strategic Transnationalism: The Indian Diasporic Elite in Contemporary Bahrain

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## Abstract

*This paper provides an ethnographic window into the lives of the middle and upper classes of the substantial Indian diaspora in Bahrain. Like all the Gulf States, Bahrain hosts an extraordinarily large contingent of guest workers. Through a variety of historical conjunctures, Indians have long predominated in the flow of foreigners to the small island. In this paper I consider the experiences of the elite minority of that diaspora. While many aspects of their day-to-day experiences differ from those of their impoverished diasporic countrymen and countrywomen, I argue that they also face a variety of noteworthy vulnerabilities and dilemmas unique to their class position. In the final accounting, members of this Indian diasporic elite deploy a strategic transnationalism against the systemic vulnerabilities rendered by the sponsorship system currently in place in Bahrain. [Keywords: Bahrain, Indian diaspora, transnationalism, structural, violence].*

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The Indian community in Bahrain is the largest national contingent of the sizeable foreign labor force at work on the island. Their presence on the island predates the discovery of oil by centuries. One can divide the long history of transmigratory connections between Bahrain and the subcontinent into three distinct periods. The earliest connections, which predate historical records, comprised Indian merchants who, generally speaking, moved the product of Bahrain's rich pearl beds eastward in exchange for foodstuffs, cloth, and assorted other commodities, all of which moved westward along those same routes. The second period began in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the British colonial presence on the small island. Administered via the colonial apparatus of British India, Bahrain received an influx of Indian bureaucrats over this period, along with numerous entrepreneurs to serve the burgeoning

population of civil servants. Finally, with the influx of oil wealth in the Kingdom of Bahrain, vast contingents of Indians arrived in the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s and early 1970s, professional, skilled and semi-skilled labor predominated in these migratory conduits; by the 1980s, however, the flow of unskilled labor to the island far surpassed the need for skilled labor. Today, the vestiges of the first two periods of Indian transmigration remain in place on the island, but both are dwarfed by the proportionally immense underclass of unskilled labor.

The lives of these men (and, less frequently, women) reveal a set of patterns: they come from the lower echelons of Indian society, and they come to Bahrain alone. "Behind them," as the Indian transmigrants say, are spouses, children, parents, siblings and debt. In boarding a plane to the Gulf, they gaze to an uncertain horizon where goals like marriage and its incumbent costs, the construction of a home, the purchase of agricultural land, or the accumulation of capital to start a small business in India will, someday, perhaps be within grasp. Their tenure in the Gulf is short, or at least it begins with the idea of a few two-year contracts followed by a return home to build upon the savings collected during their time abroad. Countless factors can derail these plans.

Upon their arrival in Bahrain, laborers enter a system in which their ability to shape their destiny is strictly limited. Plans for a two or four year sojourn in the Gulf frequently give way to stays of eight or ten years, often including long periods under illegal status. The luckiest migrants have constant work, against the backdrop of a foreign state that is at once powerful and vague in its manifestation in their lives. In previous work, I have built upon Longva's analysis of guestworker/citizen relations in Kuwait in describing the structure of dominance that shapes the experience of this transnational proletariat during their time in Bahrain, as well as the role this structure of dominance plays in shaping the citizens' expectations of the state (Gardner 2005, see Longva 1997). More recently, I have connected the experiences of this Indian transnational proletariat to the concept of structural violence (Gardner n.d.; see Farmer 2004; Green 1999; Scheper Hughes 2004).

In this article I examine the lifeworlds of the Indian diasporic elite in Bahrain. The size of this Indian elite is difficult to gauge, I roughly estimate them to include 30,000 to 40,000 individuals.<sup>1</sup> As merchants, accountants, bankers, doctors, or advertising executives, accompanied by spouses and children, these men and women work in the skyscrapers their impoverished countrymen helped build. Members of this diasporic elite lead lives significantly different from those of the Indian transnational proletariat. My goal is to provide an ethnographic description of this diasporic elite. In addition, I consider whether the significant social, cultural, and economic resources pos-

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essed by this diasporic elite insulate its members from the structural violence their impoverished countrymen endure. Finally, I conclude with a description of the strategic transnationalism that comprises the diasporic elite's principal response to the vulnerabilities they face in Bahrain.

To accomplish these tasks, I begin with Mahler's call to disaggregate transnational communities to discern the differential access and participation in transnational social fields (1998:81–82). Using the basic bifurcation between the working and professional class described by Leonard in her work with the Indian diaspora in the United Arab Emirates (2002:214), I explore the lifeworlds and perspectives of the Indian diasporic elite in Bahrain. This disaggregation of the Indian community is the basis for my use of the terms *diasporic elite* and *transnational proletariat*, terms that I imagine are unfamiliar and perhaps unwelcome additions to the growing lexicon of appellations used to describe people on the move. By transnational proletariat I mean the Indian working class guestworkers, usually men, who left their families in India. Their gaze remains fixed on their home in India, and they are transnational in the sense that their social fields, collectively and individually, are spread between two nations. Conversely, I use diasporic elite to describe the Indian subcommunity that is my central focus. These professionals, skilled workers, and merchants typically bring their families with them to Bahrain. Their tenure on the island may be short or long, but as a community their presence is centuries old. Their longstanding presence and the disparate ties they maintain with points around the globe do not necessarily make them less transnational than their impoverished countrymen. But those facets of their existence do conform to the basic pattern of a diasporic, if not cosmopolitan, existence.

The ethnographic data for this article were gathered in 2002 and 2003 when I spent nearly a year in Bahrain gathering "experience narratives" (Leonard 1999:45). I conducted 66 formal, semi-structured interviews, eight of which were with women. The majority were with individuals of Indian descent, although they may have possessed a Canadian, Bahraini, Australian, American, or other passport. Seven of the 66 interviews were with Bahraini citizens, and five were with individuals from other transmigrant communities. These migration narratives comprise the foundation of my ethnographic data. I supplemented these data with my fieldnotes, which include the details of interactions, conversations, and shorter or informal interviews with hundreds of other individuals. I attended meetings of numerous groups on the island, including the Lion's Club of Riffa and the Manama Toastmasters, and spent many evenings at various Indian diasporic social clubs and other gathering places. I also use newspaper articles from the two English language newspapers that serve the Bahraini foreign community.

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## Transnationalism and the Gulf States

In constructing a theoretical lens to understand the complex social fields wrought by the increasing mobility of labor, social scientists have largely focused on transmigrant populations spread between two nations. Like the Indian laborers described above, who remain fixed upon their home communities in India, the case studies that inform transnational theory produce and replicate this polar model. Basch, Schiller and Szanton Blanc (1994), for example, look at the institutions constructed by various groups of Caribbean and Filipino transmigrants in the United States. Similarly, Smith and Guarnizo (1998) rely almost exclusively on case studies of populations with a transmigratory endpoint in the United States. These scholars have hypothesized processes that strain or erode the foundations of the nation-state (Appadurai 1996; Kearney 1991; Hobsbawm 1990:182–183; Ong 1999:214), explored the social fields that cross national boundaries (Basch et al. 1994; Smith and Guarnizo 1998), delineated a “cultural bifocality” endemic to contemporary transmigrants (Rouse 1992:41), and assessed the viability of anthropology’s territorialized notion of culture (Hannerz 1996:19–22; King 1991:6).

There are certainly parallels between the Indian transnational proletariat in Bahrain and the case studies underpinning much of the theoretical production of transnational theory. Yet at the outset of this article, I briefly described a structure of dominance, rooted in the state and manifest in the everyday interactions between transmigrant and citizen-host. As a system, this structure binds and constrains transmigrant agency in very particular ways. This transnational proletariat’s movement back and forth across the Indian Ocean, for example, is fettered by the systemic controls exerted through a system that ties transmigrants to an individual sponsor. Their ability to move about the island, meet, organize, and communicate with other transmigrants is monitored and controlled. Their status on the island holds no promise of permanency or assimilation, and their inability to engage the Bahraini legal system hampers recourse in the many dilemmas they encounter. These differences point to a principal pattern in the transnational literature: while most of the case studies fit the bipolar model of home and away, most also focus upon migration from the global south to the global north, and therefore to particular types of states—wealthy, democratic, and nominally open societies, some of which (like the United States) have articulated an identity based upon assimilation and incorporation.

But what about populations migrating to other destinations? Some ethnographers now explore the transmigration experiences of those moving outside the western conduits. In her examination of the Lebanese diaspora in Senegal, Leichtman (2005:666) argues that the transnational canon fails to appropriately gauge the “important role colonialism has played in influencing transnational processes in other parts of the

world,” an influence she describes as shaping the destinations of transmigrants, promoting particular economic hierarchies, encouraging racism, and offering or withdrawing the protections implicit in citizenship. Ong (1999) describes the flexible positions negotiated by cosmopolitan individuals tethered to multiple locations around the Pacific Rim, including (but not limited to) endpoints in North America. More specific to transnationalism on the Arabian Peninsula, Longva (2000; 2005) argues that the large transnational populations in the region have played an integral role in forging the fundamental structure and logic of the Gulf States, a logic that she sees as “ethnocratic.” Gamburd’s ethnography (2000) of Sri Lankan housemaids and their time in the Gulf details the panoptic control exerted by host families over the women they hire, and the fleeting and contingent avenues by which these women exert agency. As ethnographers examine transnational populations moving outside the global north, analysis has charted alternative forms of the state, other regimes of repression and control, and new configurations of dominance over the subjects moving between nations. These works suggest the ability to forge transnational lives can, under particular configurations of state and culture, be significantly more constrained than the models emanating from analyses of transnational flows with endpoints in the global north (Leichtman 2005; Willen 2007; Ong 1999; Sarker and De 2002). Following Ong this article illuminates the processes by which governance is extended over contemporary mobile transnational populations (1999:214–215).<sup>2</sup>

I also use the experiences of the Indian diasporic elite in Bahrain to address the empirical bipolarity underlying transnational theories. Unlike the transmigrants portrayed in much of the literature, and unlike the Indian laborers described above, the Indian diasporic elite in Bahrain are, generally speaking, not caught between two places: their struggle has little to do with the dilemmas of maintaining a social field spanning Bahrain and India. Rather, members of the Indian diasporic elite build and maintain social fields that are rhizomic, stretching from Bahrain to India, but also to numerous other points around the globe. This bears some resemblance to Ong’s notion of flexible citizenship, yet the citizenship aspect becomes problematic in the Gulf States, since the Indian elite in Bahrain rarely finds sanctuary in Bahraini citizenship. Rather, they maintain transnational social relations and an identity that is, at best, tethered to Bahrain.

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### The lure of the Gulf

**O**n a warm spring day in 2003, I found myself lost in the traffic circles of Saar, one of Manama’s many burgeoning suburbs. I had arranged a five o’clock appointment with George,<sup>3</sup> a busy manager at a dairy plant and a fellow member of the Manama Toast-

masters, the international club I had recently joined. After circling the nondescript factory several times, I noticed the small sign on the side of the building, and passing through the security gate, I arrived ten minutes late for the interview. George's office was piled high with paperwork and files. George described his motivations for coming to Bahrain:

I'd been working in India—in different parts of India—for about three years. And I had been working with one of the best companies—one of the best paying companies in all of India. In spite of all my hard work and struggle when I was younger, I could only make . . . not more than 100 Dinars a month [\$265]. 100 Dinars, that used to be my salary, and I would work 16 hours [a day], sometimes 20 hours, whatever it is. I was in sales, moving to different places, traveling and touring. It's a big, vast country . . . Now when you come here to Bahrain, if you're lucky you can make two, three times that!

Six weeks later, at a manufacturing warehouse on the opposite side of town, I spoke with Deepali, a young professional, about her experience working in India.

So I started working in American Express in Delhi, and it was quite good—an international company and all that. But the money was so bad! . . . The pay there was equivalent to 50 Dinars [\$133] a month, and I was like, "what is this?" So I realized that I was living, but I was not happy. I would be sulking the whole day.

As George and Deepali make clear, the petroleum-rich nations of the Arabian Peninsula continue to provide economic opportunities that often surpass those in India. The lure of the Gulf draws individuals at many different points of their career. For every young professional recently arrived on the island, I met another near the end of his/her career. For example, as a former officer of the Indian Navy described, he and his wife, a radiologist, saw a sojourn in Bahrain as a stepping stone to retirement: "In two years, we could save what would take us seven or eight years in India."

Leonard concluded that "[m]arket forces rather than individual agency are driving the expatriate workers in the Gulf" (2003:156). As Deepali and George suggest, market forces *do* play a key role in many decisions to come to the Gulf. Yet, other justifications for the move abroad also figured prominently in decision processes. In general, many are seeking jobs more connected to global finance, insurance, business, and related arenas, all in the domain of what Appadurai calls the global financescape (1996). The oil wealth of the Gulf has fostered the growth

of these sectors, and work in Bahrain, the regional hub for significant portions of the Gulf's financial and service industry, is one avenue into the world of transnational business. The economic gain associated with occupations in sectors of this financescape is complemented by the possibility of transfers to other, more desirable locations (e.g. Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand). Thus Gulf destinations serve as a catalyst for even greater diasporic displacements (Leonard 2003:131).

Other reasons cited by professionals and skilled laborers fall outside the economic calculus often bound to migration. Shahzeb is an administrator in a higher education institution on the island. The son of a Pakistani (Muslim) diplomat, Shahzeb grew up in India, where he fell in love with a young Indian (Hindu) woman. After their controversial marriage, the young couple began to look beyond the borders of either country for a place to live. The difficulties of life in their home countries, with the incumbent pressures of a cross-national and cross-religious marriage were, in their estimation, too formidable. They noted that Bahrain "represented a sort of neutral ground for us. With the difficulties between Indian and Pakistan, neither place seemed ideal for settling down. Bahrain represented such a place—a neutral ground where we could begin our life anew." A successful Indian administrator, Mariam echoed this sentiment: "I came to Bahrain in 1981. I came not because I wanted to work—I just needed a change of scene. This is my second marriage. My first husband died in India. In India, when you get married . . . a widow is never looked on in the same fashion as a normal person." For Mariam (see below) Bahrain represented a horizon beyond the pressures and confines of the role of the Indian widow.

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The recent rise of the Hindu/fundamentalist BJP, a political party intertwined with the increasingly polemical relations between the Muslim and Hindu populations in India, has also pushed Muslim Indians out of India. As a wealthy Indian corporate executive described, "Hyderabad . . . no, India in general is no longer a safe place for Muslims. Every year things are changing, and for Muslims it is getting worse." Like many members of the Indian diasporic elite, he is looking westward for his future. He had established residency in Chicago, and was making preparations to move his family soon. He no longer maintained a household in India.

Many members of the diasporic elite were born in Bahrain. Some are of the second or third generation and might belong to old Indian subcommunities (Sindhis; Gujerati businessmen, Bohra Muslims, Dhobi laundrymen). Over the last two decades, these groups have been joined by the children of the second wave of Indian migration to the island. These second and third generations are children between, if not without, national allegiance. As one young woman, the daughter of a construction manager, answered my questions about her "home":

“Where am I from? It’s a very tough question. Sometimes I felt as if I was a kite, blowing between countries, from nowhere.”

While Leonard suggests the centrality of market forces in the “push” factors that encourage transmigration from South Asia to the Gulf, this centrality must be understood in the context of a wide variety of other factors in decision-making processes. These non-economic factors often play a larger role in the transmigratory calculus of the diasporic elite than in the decisions of the transnational proletariat (e.g. Gamburd 2000), and as such, serve as markers of class. While the transnational proletariat by and large arrives for economic reasons, members of the diasporic elite find themselves in Bahrain for a panoply of reasons, including—but not limited to—economic ones. Keeping in mind that economic factors are only one facet of the calculus that accounts for the presence of the diasporic elite in the Arabian peninsula, the question emerges: are members of the diasporic elite then free from the vulnerabilities rendered by this structure of dominance? Do the variety of compulsions, both economic and non-economic, that push members of the diasporic elite out of India correlate with a degree of freedom from the structural violence their impoverished countrymen encounter in the Gulf?

## Everyday encounters with citizens

Walking down the street, if I see five or six Bahraini guys coming towards me, I take the other road. I just don’t want to go through them—it’s to that point here. If you see five or six of them coming in a group, you go around the corner and come back later . . . One time I was parking my car, and this guy wanted to park in the same spot. He tells me to move my car, and this led to an altercation. He hit me. I hit him back. And all of the sudden his friends come, and there are ten of them. And then I thought, if I keep hitting this guy back, then ten guys are going to hit me. So I just left, and he hit me a couple of more times as I was getting away. When I got home, I realized that this was the stupidest thing I did, because I was in an alley, and these guys have no respect for—I hate to say this—but they have no respect for their lives.

And,

I used to have an office downstairs here. And this road, it’s all expat store owners—Indians, Filipinos. And what happens is this: we double park, and everybody knows everybody, they just come and ask us, and we just move the cars. So this Bahraini guy comes for the first time to the road, and my car was blocking



the street. Normally a guy would come in and ask me to move it. He comes into my office, storms right past my secretary, and bangs his hand on my desk telling me to move my car. And I just lost it—I told him not to bang the table. And the next thing you know, it’s a big thing, and he’s called the cops. The first thing the cop asks me is this: what nationality are you? I asked him what that had to do with anything. Finally I said that I was Indian, and he took my license. Then it became another big thing. I had to get my license back, and I had to pay fines for double-parking my car, which under normal circumstances in Bahrain isn’t anything . . . it’s a law that’s never enforced.

Incidents like this reinforce to me that the less interaction you have with Bahrainis the better.

I collected these stories from Anhil, a third generation merchant at the apex of the Indian diaspora in Bahrain. In the next two sections, I portray everyday interactions between citizens and guestworkers to describe the “specific power contexts” (Ong 1999:4) members of the Indian diaspora encounter on the island. The character of these interactions, where violence is always possible and recourse by the transmigrant to legal and institutional frameworks is difficult, comprise part of the “informal nature of domination” transmigrants face in Bahrain (Franklin 1985:104). Like others, however, I see the division between the formal and informal venues as problematic. Rather, through an analysis of these everyday interactions, we can see the state “implicated in the minute texture of everyday life” (Gupta 2006:211). I argue that patterns of these everyday interactions reveal the deployment of two contradictory logics that are key to understanding the systemic violence levied against guestworkers of all classes.

Elite members of the Indian diaspora, whether recent arrivals or the children of transmigrants, envision themselves as participants in the transnational financescape, a term articulated by Appadurai to describe the mysterious and rapid disposition of global capital in the contemporary world (1996:34). As highly trained individuals, these individuals contribute to key sectors of the Bahraini economy as engineers, doctors, managers, financiers, or advertising executives—jobs that the undertrained citizenry are incapable or unwilling to fill (Khalaf and Al Kobaisi 1999:284; Al-Rasheed 2005:1). In doing so, the diasporic elite find themselves in cadence with the version of Bahraini nationalism widely purveyed by the state and its citizenry, a blueprint that envisions Bahrain as the progressive hub of finance and service industries in the Gulf, a beacon of modernity in the region, and a tourist attraction constructed around the city as a site of consumption. Yet the hierarchical logic of this global financescape—the logic which, in many cases, drew the diasporic elite from their homeland to Bahrain—coexists with a contradictory set of power relations codified in the state and manifest in

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the everyday interactions between guestworker and citizen-host. In these interactions, even the lowliest citizen holds distinct power over the educated and successful transmigrant. The friction of these two competing visions is evident in the interview with Anhil. In exasperation, he appeals to the neoliberal logic edified in Bahrain's national vision: "I mean, I have a business. I run things! I import things into this country! I pay taxes! I export things! And there are very few Bahrainis who actually do that—I actually purchase things made in Bahrain and export them to other countries, and earn an income for Bahrain!"

Bourdieu's concept of habitus, or the learned dispositions individuals bring to bear in social interactions, helps my analysis move from the abstractions of different logics to the experiences of foreigners in their everyday interactions with citizens (Bourdieu 1977). In describing the interactions between citizens and non-citizens in the Gulf, scholars have connected the citizen's habitus to a "master-servant mentality" (Leonard 2003:144), often stretching back to the particular configuration of the pearling industry's indentured servitude or to the tribal structure of the Bedouin peoples (Beaugé 1985 quoted in Longva 1997:78). Others explain its historico-social production in terms of the explosive period of modernization wrought by the discovery of oil, a particular configuration that Champion argues has resulted in a "mudir syndrome," using the Arabic word for "boss," where citizens see themselves as entitled to a position of authority and command over foreigners at work in the Gulf States (1999:5).

These explanations provide a perspective on the genealogy of power relations in the Gulf, but as contemporary expressions of inequality these relations are more than simply vestiges of the past: they comprise modern forms of governance and serve contemporary purposes. This structure of dominance substitutes nationality, ethnicity, religion and citizenship for the class logic wrought by the neoliberal model, a model that is at once essential to the predominant national vision promoted by the state and, at the same time, antithetical to the ethnocratic and sectarian order of the Bahraini social sphere.

On an individual level, transmigrants encounter these forms of governance as a daily matter of course. At traffic stops and accidents—alarmingly common on the island—police commonly request the nationality of those involved as the first order of business. Several of my informants noted that altercations often devolved into citizens shouting, "I'm a Bahraini!" Newspaper articles ubiquitously list the nationality of foreign individuals. In everyday interactions and in the media, individuals are described in terms that locate their relationship to the state via their ethnicity and nationality, thereby reinforcing the bonds between the ethnocratic basis of state power and the meaning of citizenship (Longva 2005).<sup>4</sup>

The governance of the transmigrant, in the Foucauldian senses of both direct governmental control and, more obliquely, as regimes of

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order, discipline, and organization, is exercised in these daily interactions. The effects of this governance take shape in Bahrain's residential patterns. While poor and middle class members of the diaspora often live in urban enclaves, in particular neighborhoods, once Bahraini, and now abandoned to the foreign underclass, the upper segments of the diaspora often dwell in the upscale mixed neighborhoods peripheral to the city. There, they have little to no interaction with Bahraini neighbors. An Indian construction manager with an older villa in the suburb of Riffa noted, "We have never made any Bahraini friends. I've lived in Bahrain for so many years—23, 24 years—but I haven't made any Bahraini friends. I don't visit their families, and I don't go to their festivals." Their social activities are largely confined to the Indian restaurants, the many clubs and voluntary organizations dominated by the Indian diaspora, and the temples, mosques and churches of the expatriate elite.

These separate social worlds are characteristic of the Gulf, and the governance that produces this separation helps explain the function of exclusion and dominance in a plural society (Longva 1997; Nagy 1998:84–85). The national project channels a neoliberal logic, and is manifest in both the discursive terrain, where Bahrain is perceived and projected as a site of global consumption, a boomtown, and the financial and service hub of the Gulf, and also in a material sense, where shopping malls and skyscrapers rise along the low shores of the island, and educated and trained human capital streams to the island in service to this vision. Yet in the everyday interactions between citizens and foreigners, the fundamental class logic of this neoliberal model is mitigated by the logic of citizenship, itself the conceptual nexus for racial, ethnic, religious, and gendered vectors. The fundamental friction in this national project frames the structural and everyday violence guestworkers endure.

Encounters with power:

The diasporic elite and the *kafala*

The habitus deployed by citizens in their everyday interactions with non-citizen transmigrants represents a key force in the subjectification of all members of the Indian diaspora as servants of the Bahraini state and its citizenry. In Wolf's multi-valenced notion of power, this roughly corresponds to "interactional" power, manifest in relations between individuals, and "embodied" power, in the Nietzschean sense, that draws "attention to how persons enter into a play of power" (1999:5). Through the deployment of this power, the achieved differences and hierarchies wrought by the neoliberal logic of global capitalism are eclipsed by the citizen/non-citizen dichotomy. While one group

of impoverished laborers I interviewed complained of being constantly pelted with stones on their journey between their decrepit labor camp and the small grocery store a block away, Indian men of significant worth and accomplishment avoid Bahrainis on the street, endure constant ethnic slurs, and avoid any public or direct confrontation with citizens. In his analysis of the state, Foucault noted that,

[R]elations of power, and hence the analysis that must be made of them, necessarily extend beyond the limits of the state. In two senses: first of all because the state, for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations, and further because the state can only operate on the basis of other, already existing power relations. The state is superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology and so forth (1985:64).

Without denying the certain, interlocking relationship between everyday practice and the relations of power codified in the state, in the case of Bahrain we can also delineate the opposite of Foucault's point: the habitus deployed by citizens in their everyday interactions with transmigrant foreigners depends upon a state apparatus configured to maintain the hegemony of citizen over non-citizen. In other words, not only is the state dependent on a larger field of power relations; the habitus that citizens bring to their everyday interactions with non-citizens, and in that sense, the governance exercised over the diaspora as a whole, is itself premised upon a series of structural arrangements, codified in the state, that formally reinforce the power of citizens over transmigrants.

Central to this governance is the *kafala*, or sponsorship system. Unlike the working class, most members of the diasporic elite retain control of their passports. However, their *kafeel* (sponsor), whether an individual or a corporate entity, still mediates their relationship to the state. The power of the *kafeel* is invested in a series of procedures and documents, including the work contract, which specifies a particular period of time (typically two years) at a particular salary; a no-objection certificate (NOC) which clears the transmigrant to enter the country and take a job; and a residence permit (RP), which is associated with a particular employer and a particular job. These contractual, legal, and bureaucratic aspects of the *kafala* are essential components by which the asymmetrical relationships between citizens and guestworkers are constructed. In essence, they channel power to the *kafeel*.

The following letter to the editor in an English newspaper in Bahrain illustrates practical and bureaucratic dilemmas faced by the local Indian elite:

I have been working at a local further education institute as a senior lecturer in travel and tourism for almost fifteen years.

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During this period I am happy and proud to state that I played a pivotal role in training hundreds of Bahrainis sponsored by the Labour Ministry to take up jobs in various airlines and travel agencies.<sup>5</sup> [In December] I was asked by the owner to sign a document stating that I received all my dues from the institute since my date of joining in February 1989. Since I refused, my salary for December 2003 was not paid. I threatened to take the matter to court . . .

[In December] the owner convened a meeting where he verbally and in writing promised to pay BD 2,000 [\$5306] immediately and BD 1,000 [\$2656] by mid-2004. This amount, being only one-tenth of what I should receive, was turned down . . . I lodged a complaint at the Labour Ministry and since no settlement was reached, they passed the dispute on to the courts. [In January] the owner sent me two invoices to the tune of BD 16,800 [\$44,576] being sponsorship charges. A grave violation. All these matters were brought to the attention of the Indian Embassy.

The act was merely to intimidate me to sign the document. Six months have passed and I am without a job. My family is here and my daughter goes to school. I am living by begging and borrowing. Many institutes have come forward to hire my services. They all do have valid work permits and are willing to change my sponsorship. The major impediment, I need permission to work. When I approach the Labour Ministry with this request, they have directed me to the Ministry of Justice and on approaching the Ministry of Justice, I am directed to the Labour Ministry. So between these ministries I am being sandwiched for no fault of mine. I will be more than happy to leave the island if my dues are settled in full according to the labour laws for the private sector.

I strongly feel that only the press can play a role in bringing my plight to the attention of concerned authorities. Signed, Jacob Samuel" (Gulf Daily News, September 10, 2004)

Jacob's dilemma points to the vulnerabilities even well-placed individuals face in Bahrain. If we take his calculations at face value, his employer had accumulated a debt to Jacob of nearly \$80,000. After resisting his employer's attempts to erase this debt, he appealed to the bureaucratic institutions of the state. My informants were clear about the Indian Embassy's inability and/or unwillingness to negotiate such dilemmas with the Bahraini government. Like my informants, Jacob found himself "sandwiched" between the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Justice. While a handful of my informants had carried cases to the courts, none was successful. One person told me, "nobody I know has ever received a good judgment from the court."

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good judgment  
from the court"*

Longva, who spent many hours in the courthouses of Kuwait, concluded that nearly all of the “non-Kuwaitis, finally, had no absolute legal autonomy. They were all subordinate to their Kuwait employers/sponsors in what was to them one of the most important aspects of their lives, namely, work” (1997:129). This matches the perception of the Indian community I encountered. This perception—as much as the reality of the situation—keeps non-citizens from engaging the legal system. Jacob mentions that “many other institutes have come forward to hire my services.” Clearly, the *kafala* structures a labor market that is not free. Transmigrants are bound to particular jobs, and their ability to switch jobs depends upon the goodwill and acquiescence of their *kafeel*. Guestworkers, whether laborers or professionals, are bonded labor. The *kafala* fetters their ability to act as free agents and to escape the dominion and exploitation of particular sponsors.

The power of the sponsor to prevent guestworkers from leaving a particular exploitative job is only one facet of the systemic control the diasporic elite face. Many of the professionals arrive alone—in the parlance of the diaspora, they are “in front” of families that await the necessary paperwork and visas to join them. Individuals seeking a “family visa” must, again, work through their *kafeel* to obtain such permissions, and several of my informants reported this as another fulcrum of abuse. They must prove that they earn over 250 Dinars [\$664] per month, the state-mandated minimum for those wishing to bring their families, an amount barely large enough to cover the expenses of a family in Bahrain, including the cost of the Indian private schools (with Indian curriculum). But they also need the sponsor to sign the paperwork that will allow their families to reside on the island. Spouses seeking employment again find themselves dependent on the goodwill of the original migrant’s sponsor. Hence the state, through law and procedure, invests the citizen-sponsor with the responsibility and power of governing the individual transmigrant and his/her family.

Members of the diasporic elite, and particularly merchants and business owners, face risks unique to their economic position. Bahraini law requires that all businesses have at least one Bahraini owner. This has resulted in the formation of a class of “silent” or “sleeping” partners amongst the Bahraini citizenry, individuals who lend their name to the business registrations of foreign-born entrepreneurs. Leonard, working with the Indian population in Kuwait and the Emirates, notes that, “these working relationships are typically quite nominal, with sponsors taking commissions from many foreigners annually but not participating in the business” (2003:138). In my discussions with the professional and entrepreneurial community, the established rate for this relationship was 100 BD [\$265] per month. However, unlike the conditions reported by Leonard in the United Arab Emirates, in Bahrain these relationships are prone to abuse, and Indian entrepreneurs related stories of financial disaster resulting from these relationships. Ahmed, an Indian Muslim,

described his own experience with a Bahraini partner: “I started a business here a few years back, but it collapsed. Once it became successful, the sleeping partner stole it out from under me. Once he saw that the money was being made through my efforts, he took it from me.” As these comments suggest, the relationship is inherently fraught with complications wrought by the citizen/non-citizen polarity, and the vulnerability foreign entrepreneurs face is reinforced by difficulties they encounter in both accessing and utilizing the legal system.

A small number of migrants escape some of these vulnerabilities through gaining citizenship or residence permits, making Bahrain an exception to the norm of the Gulf, where transmigrants generally can never become citizens (Falzon 2003:675; Leonard 2003:139). Bahrain has recently opened channels for applications for citizenship. A small number of prominent foreign businessmen with longstanding ties in the Kingdom have successfully applied for citizenship. The explicit requirements include twenty-five years of residence (or fifteen years for those of Arab descent) although many of my contacts in the Indian community noted that some of the prominent businessmen who had achieved citizenship did not meet this requirement.<sup>6</sup> The application itself is followed by a series of interviews where applicants have to demonstrate a facility with Arabic. Individuals also reported that large fees were involved, although the amounts mentioned varied between 20,000 BD [\$53,000] to upwards of 70,000 BD [\$186,000]. Long delays are the norm: “I began the application process three years ago. They called me for interviews, they’ve interviewed me twice. The last one was a year ago, and they said they’d call me again. They haven’t called since, so I’m just waiting.” Another prosperous Indian merchant described his experience: after beginning the application process, they requested his passport. With a business that required constant travel back and forth to India, he rescinded his application after three months as he needed his passport to travel. Although Bahraini citizenship decreases the vulnerability foreign entrepreneurs and merchants face from the *kafala*, it is a path only available to the wealthy. Moreover, it does little to address the lived experience of the diasporic elite, a fact intricately related to the ethnocratic underpinnings of citizenship. One Indian merchant noted,

For the Muslims, maybe citizenship is a possibility, but for the rest of us, it’s a different ballgame . . . If I go to the market, to the *souq*, and I see you [the author], I know you’re a westerner. If somebody sees me, he says, okay, an Indian. If I take a Bahraini passport, my face says that I’m an Indian. The people will still not take me as a Bahraini. They will treat me as an Indian.

“If I take a  
Bahraini passport,  
my face says that  
I’m an Indian”

Although my informants reported that the number of Indian nationals who successfully obtained citizenship could be counted on one hand,

many of the older families on the island possess a commercial registration for the businesses they own. This frees them from the need for a “sleeping” citizen-partner, and also allows them to apply directly for a residency visa, and thereby escape the often-problematic relationship with a *kafeel*. For the vast majority, however, negotiating the complexities of residence permits, work permits, permits for family members, and contract renewals is a constant struggle.

Unlike working class Indians, the diasporic elite face less comprehensive risks in coming to Bahrain. While the amount of money involved may be much larger than those incurred by the transnational proletariat, few members of the diasporic elite incur debts of the relative magnitude of the working class. The vulnerabilities of the diasporic elite are typically confined to their businesses and the financial well-being of their nuclear families, while the vulnerabilities of the Indian transnational proletariat encompass the productive assets of the extended family and their basic ability to survive. Nonetheless, the Indian diasporic elite are susceptible to the power and inequities of a foreign system, a fact directly tied to their trans-status. While they may bring a variety of strategies to the table, none overcome the habitus deployed in everyday interactions, a habitus that reinforces the logic of race, ethnicity, nationality, religion and culture over that of class, and continually asserts the dominance of citizens. With this pervasive vulnerability as a backdrop, members of the diasporic elite commonly forge contingency plans as a response to the uncertain future.

## Strategic transnationalism

In one sense, the *kafala* comprises a system for managing and controlling the flow of labor to the petroleum-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula. Through an examination of the practical and everyday experience of this system, I have sought to portray the *kafala* as orchestrating a system that not only manages the flow of transmigrants to the island, but also seeks to manage and control these guestworkers during their time on the island. I have argued that we can see these power relations in the everyday interactions between guestworkers and citizen-hosts and in the structural, bureaucratic practices and policies that underpin those interactions. In this section, I seek to portray the agency deployed by Indian diasporic elite in reaction to the dominance they face in Bahrain.

In part, this agency can be seen as a response to the difficult conditions and problematic, everyday relations codified by the *kafala*. However, this agency can also be seen as a response to more general conditions—conditions beyond the ambit of the everyday interactions I have previously described. These conditions include a chronic uncer-



tainty about the future. As non-citizens, the great majority of the diasporic elite live by the whims of the state and the citizenry: their tenure on the island is always under threat of revocation; the positions they hold are subject to their individual sponsors and to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs which can, as its purview, revoke or fail to renew residence and work permits. Together, these more general vulnerabilities coalesce under the moniker of Bahrainization.

In its simplest reading, Bahrainization is the nomenclature of the Kingdom's efforts to replace foreign workers with citizens. The rudiments of this suite of policies were in place in the early 1970s. At the same time, Bahrainization comprises an ever-evolving set of policies and directives that mandate particular ratios of citizen employees to transmigrants, often in particular sectors of the economy. For example, in the mid 1990s the state mandated that all taxi drivers on the island must be Bahraini nationals. Business owners reported that in many sectors one must hire one citizen for every transmigrant employed; hotels track their citizen-to-guestworker ratios, and those with the largest proportion of citizens receive awards from the government. New Bahrainization policies are frequently announced in the newspapers of the island, and while infrequently codified in law or comprehensively enforced, they nonetheless destabilize the livelihoods of the foreign workers on the island. Foreign entrepreneurs and businessmen are never sure if the laws will allow them to continue working on the island; capital reinvested in the business is always at risk, for a single edict can close the door on particular sectors of the economy to foreign workers. During my fieldwork, for example, the new Minister of Labor and Social Affairs announced a directive of 100% Bahrainization for the Ministry itself, which included the Bahrain Training Institute, my sponsor institution and home to a large staff of expatriate instructors on multi-year contracts. Similarly, a year after my departure, the Kingdom announced the plans to fully 'Bahrainize' "car sales showrooms, supermarkets, travel agents and furniture stores" by 2006 (Gulf Daily News May 16, 2004).

With the future of the transnational presence in the Bahraini workforce always uncertain, the active transnational connections established and maintained by Indians are more than an attempt to keep in touch with their homeland. These connections are essential components of their livelihood strategies—active networks meant to balance the uncertainties of life outside India and, more specifically, the vulnerabilities unique to the GCC States. While many families maintained a presence in India, most had also extended their networks westward. Frequently these networks are a continuation of historic, transnational familial and social networks established in the colonial and postcolonial era—rebuilding, for example, connections with family members that had moved to colonial Africa under British rule or to England, where many of the former Indian colonial bureaucrats obtained citizenship. Mariam's and Farid's stories illustrate such strategies.

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## Mariam's story

Mariam's family hails from Goa, the former Portuguese colony on India's west coast. Her father worked for the British colonial administration, a post that eventually carried him to colonial Uganda, where Mariam and three of her siblings were born. Her father retired from that position and moved back to India, but was unable to secure sufficient employment to feed the family, so he returned to Africa. The three youngest children, including Mariam, remained in Goa with their mother to finish their schooling. When Idi Amin came to power in Uganda, her siblings, sensing trouble, began to move their money to Canada. At that time, Mariam noted, "Canada was still raw—they wanted people." One brother stayed in Africa, lost everything, and later went to Canada as a refugee. Mariam married in Goa and planned a life in India. She and her husband moved about India in search of better work, but after the untimely death of her husband she returned to Goa to work as a teacher. Goa is a conservative city, she noted, and the life of a widow was not easy. "A widow is never looked on in the same fashion as a normal person," she noted. With her family spread around the globe, Mariam began to consider other options. Her sister suggested she come to Bahrain. Although she had never been to Bahrain, it was like a homecoming: "We're a big family," she described, "and we're all separated. We're all out—some in Canada, wherever else, in Africa. My sister was here, so coming to Bahrain, I felt like I was returning to my family, you know?" Her sister helped arrange employment for Mariam at an embassy.

After some years in Bahrain, Mariam married a Goan transmigrant she met there. They are uncertain about how long they will remain in Bahrain. Her daughter attends the American University in Dubai, but intends to continue her studies in the USA. Her parents and siblings are naturalized British citizens. Three of her siblings were "out," a term she used to describe their presence in Canada, and the remainder were "here," meaning in Bahrain or India. When I noted that she used "here" to refer to both Bahrain and India, she replied, "I know, I know! It's because we're so close to Bahrain—Bahrain is so close to India, we feel we are there. It's just like India here!" Her brothers in Canada have children now, most of whom have married Canadians. They maintained a house in Goa, ("we have our own place—you have to have one! In case you're thrown out of Bahrain, you have to have a roof over your head,") a common enough practice, but one not shared by all members of the diasporic elite.

For Mariam, Bahrain represents one juncture in her family's long transnational history. Through her familial relations, she maintains contacts with her home city in India, the United Kingdom, fleetingly with Africa, and most strongly with Canada. Her daughter, while still in

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history*

the Emirates, planned on relocating to the United States, thereby establishing a new beachhead in the extended family's geographical distribution. Mariam's job in Bahrain is a good one, and her position at a western embassy provides an additional buffer against the tides of Bahrainization. Her husband's position at an advertising firm is more precarious, however, for it is the type of position that the government seeks to "Bahrainize." Networks of family and friends, established over a lifetime, provide Mariam and her nuclear family with the opportunity to weigh the vulnerabilities of life in Bahrain against the costs of relocation to another node in her global network.

### Farid's story

In the final decade of the nineteenth century, Farid's great-grandfather, a Bohri Muslim from Gujarat, embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca. The sojourn lasted nearly eight months. After a stop at Muscat, the gateway city to the Gulf, the ship anchored in the shallow bay between Muharraq and Manama. There, before journeying onward to Mecca, Farid's great-grandfather found a busy port and market, and a British/Indian colonial bureaucracy actively seeking Indian merchants and traders. Upon his return Farid's great-grandfather began to plan for the move to Bahrain, and after ten years of preparation, he arrived in 1902. His brother eventually joined him, and the two, shuttling back and forth between Bombay and Bahrain, profited as traders. The brothers' three sons eventually took over the business. Like the family's first generation of transmigrant merchants, the brothers shuttled back and forth between Bombay and Bahrain every two or three years. One brother managed the business. The second, either in transit or in Bahrain, was brought up to speed, and the third cared for the families and properties in Bombay. One of the three brothers, a reckless spendthrift, was eventually pushed out of the enterprise. The two remaining brothers now controlled the business in Bahrain. Later one brother's son fell in love with the other brother's daughter, and subsequently married against the wishes of their parents. Farid was this couple's firstborn son, and within a year of his birth (in 1966) the couple moved to Bahrain. Farid's father opened a haberdashery on one of the narrow thoroughfares of the *souq* under a business license acquired before regulations required a Bahraini partner. Thus Farid and his family are "self-sponsored." Today, they run their father's old store, along with several other businesses in the central *souq*.

*Despite his success, Farid remains insecure in Bahrain*

Despite his success, Farid remains insecure in Bahrain. Additional businesses that he has opened over the years required a Bahraini "sleeping partner," and while the initial agreement is typically for 100 BD [\$265] a month, the partners often increase their demands once a business shows a profit. As Farid noted, "he [the sleeping partner] comes and tells you he

wants 500 BD [\$1326], and you have no choice. You have to give it to him. Otherwise he'll just pack you off. Your whole existence in Bahrain depends on him." It is a constant threat, and he has avoided sleeping partners' attempted takeovers by loading threatened businesses with debt. Farid has the license for the haberdashery, but he is not a permanent resident. Every two years he has to renew his residence permit.

Farid considered getting a Bahraini passport. Through a well-placed local contact, he weighed the option of paying 20,000 BD [\$53,056] for the passport, calculating that he would then be able to save hundreds of Dinars per month on the costs of sleeping partners. Instead, however, he began moving his resources to Canada. As he described,

It wasn't easy. I had to do a lot of running around, but I got my [Canadian] passport. So if I get kicked out of here—and that could happen, because there really aren't any laws here—if they did revoke my residence permit, there are no courts I could go to or anything like that. It would just be done . . . But now I know I can go to Canada, and I'm relatively comfortable there. I could start a business, do something, get a job . . . It's a safety net. At least in the back of my mind, that part is safe. I mean, it was a big thing for me. You might not understand.

As a third-generation transmigrant, Farid's connection to Bahrain is significant. His businesses represent a significant financial resource built over several generations. Moreover, the business license he inherited provides his cornerstone business, the haberdashery, with a degree of insulation against the vulnerability wrought by the *kafala* and sleeping partner system. Nonetheless, the tenuousness of his existence in Bahrain, illustrated by his inability to use the legal system and his distrust of the mercurial Central Population Register (which issues residence permits), led him to procure citizenship in Canada. Simultaneously, Farid's business connections with China have recently solidified, and he considers it another possible destination. He described his calculations: "I would go anywhere. If I was offered a job in China, and I'd make more money than here, I'd go."

Ong uses the term flexible citizenship "to refer especially to the strategies and effects of mobile managers, technocrats, and professionals seeking to both circumvent *and* benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different sites for investments, work, and family relocation" (1999:112). While both Farid and Mariam generally fit this model, I have used the term strategic transnationalism as a means of downplaying the importance of citizenship in the diasporic elite's strategic geographical calculations. Although citizenship remains one important variable in their strategic planning, only a small handful of Indians are Bahraini citizens. Instead, like Farid, with citizenship in Canada and one eye on China, or Mariam, with citizenship in the UK

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and India, members of the Indian diasporic elite build transnational networks to mitigate the vulnerability non-citizens face in Bahrain while seeking to benefit from the local opportunities. As a primary regional nexus in the global financescape, Bahrain is dotted with transnational corporations that serve the more conservative surrounding nations. These opportunities, combined with the generally higher remuneration than similar positions in India, make work in the Gulf a lucrative, if risky, venture for the Indian diasporic elite. Responding to the vulnerabilities wrought by the structure of dominance that constrains guestworkers in Bahrain, they build upon historic networks forged in the colonial and postcolonial era, and transnational networks that connect them to multiple continents. They forge new networks that engage global capitalism in multiple territories and venues. Together, historic and new networks, the essential fabric of this strategic transnationalism, are at once a reaction to the vulnerabilities particular to the Gulf States and a strategic adjustment to the mobility of the neoliberal financescape.

## Conclusion: transnationals unbound

The great majority of case studies in transnationalism focus on migration to the West, and particularly to the United States. The structure of dominance Indian transmigrants face in Bahrain comprises a significantly different set of vulnerabilities than those typically portrayed in these case studies. In this article I focus explicitly upon the diasporic Indian elite, and through my analysis I challenge the fundamental bipolarity not only of these typical transnational models (in the sense of people with social fields spanning two nation-states), but also of typical diasporic models (in the sense of people with a particular relationship to a territorial homeland). And in concert with other ethnographers working in the Gulf States, I seek to illuminate the transnational lives of populations moving outside “the West,” widely conceived.

My analysis of the Indian diasporic elite in Bahrain suggests they face a set of vulnerabilities unique to their socioeconomic position: the presence of their families on the island, as well as the legal framework through which they share ownership of the businesses they run, open them to a particular set of vulnerabilities. At the same time, the ethnocentric underpinnings of the structure of dominance in place on the island reject the class-based logic of the neoliberal system, and generally subject members of the diasporic elite to the same forms of structural violence their impoverished countrymen—the transnational proletariat—face. The color of their skin, their language, religion, and culture, their nationality: these vectors coalesce in the subjectification of the diasporic elite as servants to the Bahraini national project.

Unlike their impoverished countrymen at work on the island, however, members of the Indian diasporic elite build and maintain a set of global networks to mitigate the vulnerabilities rendered by this structure of dominance. The insecurities of life in Bahrain, including the occasionally violent undercurrents of their everyday encounters with the citizenry, but also encompassing their structural inability to assert their rights in the bureaucratic machinery of the state, pushes them to a strategic transnationalism. Their lives are, in some sense, untethered from both the local milieu of Bahrain and the diasporic, ancestral homeland of India: their allegiance is to what Appadurai has called the “nonterritorial transnation” (1996:173).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>It is extremely difficult to gauge the size of the Indian diasporic elite, particularly as the Bahraini census aggregates all Asian transmigrants. The 2001 census reported the presence of 205,626 Asian transmigrants. This includes individuals from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and several other nations. It is generally agreed that the Indian population is the largest component of the Asian community. The same census reports that 32,662 individuals of Asian descent reported their reason of residence on the island as “with family.” This number, doubled to include spouses, serves as a basic proxy for the total size of the Asian diasporic elite, for only those with substantial incomes can afford to bring spouses and children to the island. Since this total (approximately 64,000) includes Indians, Pakistanis, Filipinos, Bangladeshis, and smaller communities from other South Asian nations, we can roughly estimate the size of the Indian diasporic elite to be in the tens of thousands.

<sup>2</sup>Here I am building upon the ideas presented in an American Anthropological Association session that I co-chaired with Heather Hindman entitled “Movements Outside ‘the West’: Contemporary Issues and Current Dilemmas in Transnational Anthropology,” November 2003.

<sup>3</sup>All the names in this article are pseudonyms.

<sup>4</sup>Like the neighboring GCC States, Bahrain is ruled by a Sunni family/tribe. Unlike its neighbors, however, the Al Khalifa family rules over a much more varied citizenry that includes a significant population of citizens of Persian descent and, perhaps more importantly, a disenfranchised Shi'i majority. While still fitting Longva's model of ethnocracy, the context is much more complex in Bahrain than in Kuwait.

<sup>5</sup>Like Anhil, above, he makes an explicit appeal to the neoliberal logic of the Bahraini national vision.

<sup>6</sup>These requirements are spelled out in the Bahraini Nationality Law of September 16, 1963.

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