

Precarious ID Cards - Studying Documentary Practices in India through the Lens of Internal Migration

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Abstract : This research will attempt to understand how documents are materially indispensable civic artifacts for migrants in their encounters with the state. Documents such as ID cards are sites of mediation and bureaucratic manifestation which reveal the inherent dynamics of power between the state and a delocalized people. While ID cards allow the holder to retain a different identity and articulate their demands as a citizen, they at the same time transform subjects into 'objects' in the exercise of governmental power. The research is based on the study of internal migrants in India, who are 'visible' to the state through its host of ID documents such as the 'Aadhaar card', electoral IDs, Ration cards, and a variety of region-specific documents, without the possession of which, not only are they unable to access jobs, public goods and services, and accommodation, but are liable to exploitation from state forces and mediators. Through semi-structured interviews with social actors in the processes of documentation and welfare of migrants, as well as with settlements of migrants themselves located in the state of Kerala in India, the thesis will attempt to understand the salience of documentary practices in the lives of inter-state migrants who move within Indian states in the hope of bettering their economic conditions. The research will trace the material and evolving significance of ID cards in the tenacity of states dealing with these 'illegible' populations. It will try to bring theories of governmentality, biopolitics and Weberian bureaucracy into the migrant issue while critically grounding itself on secondary literature by scholars who have worked on South Asian 'governments of paper'.

Keywords : migration, historiography of documents, anthropology of state, documentary practices

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