PIO to OCI? The Obstacles are in the Cards

By George Joseph

Though Ashook Ramsaran, former president of the Global Organization of Persons of Indian Origin (GOPIO) was a recipient of the Pravasi Samman, the highest honor given a member of the diaspora, he never received a Person of Indian Origin (PIO) card.

And when the PIO program is merged with the Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) Card on June 30, he will not get that card either - like millions of others.

The problem is that many card-seekers such as him have no record to show that their forefathers came from India.

"I am a fourth-generation PIO," he said. "But I have no official proof that my great-grandfather or great-grandmother was born in India except one line in a register kept in Guyana. It was not acceptable to issue a PIO card, although the government recognized me with the Pravasi Samman award and the state of Uttar Pradesh gave me the UP Ratna Award."

Ramsaran, who moved to the U.S. in 1968, believes a merger will adversely affect almost 8 million PIOs in Malaysia, South Africa, Mauritius, Reunion Island, Guyana, Trinidad,

Suriname, Jamaica, Guadeloupe, Martinique and Belize. Most have no records to show their Indian connection.

The government has come out with a way to accept alternate documentation. It is being tested in Mauritius.

Unlike the PIO card, the OCI card grants a lifelong visa and allows the cardholder to stay in India without registering with police. A person who registered as OCI for five years and is residing in India for one year out of the five is eligible to apply for Indian citizenship, while PIOs have no such option.

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"When the PIO and OCI cards are merged, those whose forefathers migrated four to five generations ago may not be qualified under OCI, though they are qualified to get a PIO card. That is a big concern," said Thomas Abraham, founder and president of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin.

But Jeevan Zutshi, a community activist based in California, welcomed the merger. He said it will benefit more people in the diaspora. Visit www.in.ckgs.us to apply to convert the PIO card to OCI card.