

REVIEW PAPER

When Documents Override Belonging: A Conceptual Qualitative Analysis of Administrative Disenfranchisement, Kinship, and Human Values under the SIR Process in India

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ABSTRACT

Recent administrative initiatives aimed at revising electoral rolls in India have renewed scholarly and public debate on citizenship, documentation, and democratic inclusion. This paper presents a conceptual qualitative analysis of the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process, focusing on its implications for internal migrants who work in urban centres while maintaining enduring kinship, social, and moral ties with their native villages. Drawing on sociological theories of citizenship, bureaucracy, migration, and belonging, and supported by illustrative experiences reported in the media, the paper argues that document-centric governance may generate forms of administrative disenfranchisement that extend beyond formal legal exclusion. Voting rights are conceptualised not merely as procedural entitlements but as expressions of dignity, recognition, and social membership. When socially embedded individuals are rendered administratively invisible due to mobility and documentation gaps, the consequences include social disconnection, moral injury, and erosion of democratic belonging. By integrating sociological analysis with ancient Indian perspectives on village-centred social solidarity, the paper contributes to human values-oriented scholarship on democracy, justice, and inclusion in the Global South.

HIGHLIGHTS

- ❶ Examines India's SIR electoral roll revision through a human values and sociological lens.
- ❷ Frames voting rights as markers of dignity, recognition, and social membership, not just procedure.
- ❸ Shows how document-centric verification can disenfranchise mobile, socially embedded citizens.
- ❹ Links circular migration patterns to risks of administrative exclusion from village electoral rolls.
- ❺ Integrates Weberian bureaucracy theory with ancient Indian village-centered social thought.
- ❻ Proposes kinship-based verification and ethical impact assessment as inclusive policy safeguards.

Keywords: Citizenship, Human Values, Internal Migration, Disenfranchisement, Kinship, Bureaucracy, India

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Modern democratic governance increasingly relies on documentation-based administrative systems to regulate citizenship rights and political participation. Across the world, electoral democracies have adopted intensified verification mechanisms to ensure the integrity of voter rolls, prevent duplication, and curb illegal inclusion. In India, the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls represents one such administrative exercise, undertaken in the name of transparency, accuracy, and democratic fairness. While these objectives are normatively legitimate, the sociological consequences of such processes warrant careful examination.

India's social structure is characterised by extensive internal migration, informal labour markets, and enduring kinship-based attachments to place. Millions of citizens migrate temporarily or cyclically from villages to towns and cities for employment, education, or service, while continuing to maintain strong social, emotional, cultural, and political ties with their native villages. For such populations, village affiliation remains central to identity, moral belonging, and social recognition. Voting in the village is not merely an administrative act but a symbolic affirmation of continued membership in a moral community.

The SIR process has generated widespread public discussion regarding the potential exclusion of such internal migrants from electoral rolls due to documentation gaps, residence-based verification norms, and procedural rigidities. Media reports and public narratives have highlighted anxieties among migrant workers, students, and informal-sector employees who fear losing their voting rights in their native villages. These developments raise critical questions about the relationship between administrative rationality and lived citizenship.

This paper argues that beyond questions of legality or procedural correctness, the SIR process must be examined through the lens of human values, particularly dignity, belonging, recognition, and social solidarity. The risk of disenfranchisement faced by internal migrants represents not merely a technical issue but a deeper ethical concern, as it threatens to sever

symbolic and social ties between individuals and their communities of origin. Drawing on sociological theory, Indian social thought, and media-reported experiences, this study offers a conceptual qualitative analysis of administrative disenfranchisement and its implications for democratic life in India.

The concept of citizenship has undergone significant transformation in sociological and political theory. Marshall's (1950) classical formulation conceptualised citizenship as an evolving set of civil, political, and social rights embedded within the nation-state. Subsequent scholarship has critiqued this formalistic approach, emphasising the lived, relational, and performative dimensions of citizenship (Isin, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Citizenship, from this perspective, is not merely a legal status but a practice constituted through participation, recognition, and belonging.

Belonging occupies a central place in contemporary citizenship studies. Yuval-Davis (2011) distinguishes between belonging as emotional attachment and the politics of belonging as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. In societies marked by mobility and inequality, belonging is often contested, negotiated, and administratively regulated. Voting, therefore, functions not only as a political right but also as a powerful marker of recognition and social membership.

Internal migration in India has been extensively studied as a structural feature of the economy and society. Breman (1996) describes Indian labour as 'footloose', characterised by informality, precarity, and circular movement between rural and urban spaces. Deshingkar and Akter (2009) highlight that a significant proportion of migrants do not permanently relocate but maintain continuous ties with their villages, returning seasonally or periodically.

Such patterns of migration challenge administrative assumptions of fixed residence and singular place-based identity. Migrants often possess fragmented documentation, multiple addresses, and overlapping social affiliations. Yet, their political identity and sense of belonging frequently remain anchored in their villages of origin.

Max Weber's analysis of bureaucracy emphasised rational-legal authority, rule-based procedures, and impersonality as defining features of modern administration (Weber, 1978). While bureaucratic rationality enhances efficiency and predictability, it also tends to simplify complex social realities. Scott (1998) argues that state projects often fail because they render society 'legible' through narrow administrative categories that overlook lived practices.

In the Indian context, Gupta (2012) demonstrates how bureaucratic procedures can produce structural violence by marginalising those who lack documentary capacity. Documentation becomes a gatekeeping mechanism that disproportionately affects the poor, mobile, and informal populations. Electoral verification processes, when excessively document-centric, risk reproducing similar patterns of exclusion.

This study adopts a conceptual qualitative methodology, focusing on theoretical interpretation rather than empirical generalisation. In the absence of primary fieldwork, media reports, public testimonies, and documented narratives are used as illustrative qualitative material to ground abstract arguments in lived experiences. Such materials are treated analytically, not as representative samples, but as windows into broader social processes.

Conceptual qualitative research is particularly suited to examining ethical questions, normative dilemmas, and structural tensions in governance. The objective of this paper is not to measure the extent of disenfranchisement but to interpret its social meaning and ethical implications. By synthesising sociological theory with civilisational perspectives from ancient Indian thought, the study seeks to deepen understanding of citizenship as a value-laden social practice.

Citizenship, in everyday life, is enacted through participation in social institutions, fulfilment of obligations, and recognition by others. For internal migrants in India, citizenship is deeply relational, shaped by kinship ties, caste affiliations, village councils, and ritual participation. These forms of belonging often operate independently of formal residence or documentation.

Voting in the native village represents continuity of social membership and moral legitimacy. It affirms that migration for livelihood does not entail abandonment of one's community of origin. Administrative processes that prioritise physical presence over social embeddedness risk undermining this relational dimension of citizenship.

Administrative systems seek clarity, uniformity, and verifiability. Within the SIR process, documentation and proof of residence function as primary criteria for inclusion. However, such criteria may inadvertently disadvantage circular migrants whose lives do not conform to sedentary norms. Administrative disenfranchisement occurs when individuals are excluded not due to lack of citizenship but due to inability to satisfy procedural requirements. This form of exclusion is particularly insidious because it appears neutral and rule-bound while producing unequal outcomes. From a human values perspective, such disenfranchisement constitutes a moral injury, undermining dignity and voice.

Villages in India have historically functioned as centres of social organisation, moral authority, and cultural continuity. Srinivas (1962) and Bêteille (1996) emphasise that kinship, caste, and locality continue to structure identity even amid social change. Migrants maintain village ties through festivals, remittances, marriages, and political participation. The potential removal of migrants from village electoral rolls threatens to symbolically sever these ties. Such exclusion risks transforming economic mobility into social marginalisation.

Ancient Indian social thought conceptualised the village (*grāma*) as the foundational unit of social and moral life. Texts such as the *Dharmashastras* and *Arthashastra* recognised kinship (*kula*, *jāti*) and locality as bases of obligation, identity, and governance. Villages preserved traditions, rituals, and collective memory, ensuring social continuity despite individual mobility.

This civilisational emphasis on relational belonging resonates with contemporary patterns of circular migration. Administrative disconnection from the village, therefore, represents not merely loss of voting rights but erosion of identity and recognition.

Democratic citizenship is grounded in values of dignity, justice, and inclusion. Disenfranchisement, even when procedurally justified, undermines these values by denying voice and recognition. At the same time, ensuring electoral integrity and addressing illegal immigration are essential democratic objectives.

The ethical challenge lies in balancing these imperatives. A value-sensitive approach recognises that internal migrants and illegal immigrants occupy fundamentally different moral and legal categories. Failure to maintain this distinction risks social fragmentation and loss of trust in democratic institutions.

In the absence of large-scale ethnographic fieldwork, media reports and publicly available narratives provide important qualitative insights into how administrative processes such as the SIR are experienced by ordinary citizens. Newspapers, digital media platforms, and civil society statements have repeatedly highlighted anxieties among internal migrants regarding potential deletion from electoral rolls in their native villages. These narratives, while not statistically representative, are sociologically significant as expressions of perceived exclusion, uncertainty, and moral injury.

Several media accounts describe migrant workers employed in construction, manufacturing, domestic work, and informal services who reside temporarily in urban centres but return to their villages during festivals, agricultural seasons, or family events. For many such individuals, voter registration in the village is described as a matter of pride and continuity. The fear of being removed from village electoral rolls due to absence during verification drives or inability to produce updated residence proof is frequently articulated as a fear of social erasure rather than mere procedural inconvenience.

Students pursuing higher education in cities similarly express concerns about documentation gaps. Media narratives point to cases where young voters, whose names were originally registered in their native villages, worry that prolonged absence for education may be interpreted as relocation. For these individuals, voting in the village symbolises enduring affiliation with kinship networks and ancestral land, even as their educational trajectories necessitate temporary urban residence.

Women migrants present a particularly complex picture. Reports highlight married women who move between natal and marital villages or accompany spouses to cities while retaining emotional and ritual ties to their parental homes. Documentation regimes that demand fixed residence often fail to accommodate such gendered mobility, increasing the risk of exclusion. From a human values perspective, such experiences reveal how bureaucratic neutrality can inadvertently reproduce social inequalities.

Civil society organisations and legal aid groups quoted in the media have raised concerns that documentation-heavy verification processes disproportionately affect the poor, the informally employed, and those lacking stable housing. These narratives echo earlier sociological findings on bureaucratic exclusion and structural violence. Importantly, many reports do not reject the objective of electoral integrity but call for procedural sensitivity and contextual judgement.

Analytically, these media narratives function as illustrative cases that reveal the moral meanings attached to voting and village affiliation. They demonstrate that for internal migrants, disenfranchisement is experienced not only as loss of political voice but as symbolic severance from community, ancestry, and identity. Such experiences underscore the need to interpret administrative processes through the lens of lived citizenship.

While the present study is conceptual in nature, it offers several reflections that may be useful for policymakers engaged in electoral governance and democratic reform. These suggestions are not prescriptive blueprints but value-oriented considerations aimed at reconciling administrative integrity with social inclusion.

First, *recognition of circular migration* should be institutionally embedded within electoral verification processes. Policy frameworks may explicitly acknowledge that residence for livelihood purposes does not negate village-based social membership. Electoral rolls could therefore incorporate flexible criteria that recognise dual attachments without forcing migrants to choose between economic survival and civic belonging.

Second, *kinship and community based verification mechanisms* may complement document-centric approaches. Village-level institutions, local knowledge holders, and community attestations, long recognised within Indian administrative traditions can serve as supplementary forms of verification, particularly for individuals with fragmented documentation. Such mechanisms would align bureaucratic procedures with lived social realities while retaining safeguards against misuse.

Third, *procedural safeguards against inadvertent exclusion* are essential. Extended notice periods, multilingual communication, grievance redressal mechanisms, and assistance desks for migrants can reduce the risk of unintended disenfranchisement. A value-sensitive design emphasises prevention of exclusion rather than post-facto correction.

Fourth, *ethical impact assessment* may be incorporated into large-scale administrative exercises. Just as policy decisions are evaluated for legal and economic consequences, their implications for dignity, belonging, and social cohesion warrant systematic consideration. Embedding ethical review within electoral administration can strengthen democratic legitimacy.

Finally, efforts to *identify and eliminate illegal immigration*, which are indispensable for democratic integrity, should be clearly distinguished from processes affecting internal migrants who are citizens by birth and social membership. Maintaining this distinction in policy communication and implementation can prevent moral panic, stigma, and unintended social fragmentation.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that electoral governance grounded in human values, dignity, recognition, inclusion, and justice can enhance both the effectiveness and legitimacy of democratic institutions.

This paper has examined the SIR process as a site where administrative rationality intersects with lived citizenship. By foregrounding human values and civilisational perspectives, it argues for a careful, inclusive, and context-sensitive approach to electoral governance. Democratic integrity and social solidarity need not be opposing goals; when aligned through value-sensitive policy design, they can mutually reinforce one another.

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