

Internal migrants in India experience a lesser citizenship status and curtailed rights

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*The Government of India is often criticised for its failure to guarantee the constitutional rights of its citizens. The problems are often attributed to inefficiency, corruption and poverty. However, **Rameez Abbas** writes that development-related issues do not fully explain the exclusionary aspects of citizenship in India. Drawing on her research in Mumbai and Kolkata, she highlights how internal migrants often face both informal and legally-sanctioned discriminatory practices.*

India offers a full menu of citizenship privileges to its people, from economic rights like housing and food to political rights like universal suffrage. When the Indian government falls short of ensuring these rights, many assume that development-related reasons are to blame. Bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, and poverty are compelling explanations for why, in practice, not all Indians are able to exercise their legal citizenship rights. But these explanations tell an incomplete story. Indian citizens who are internal migrants experience a lesser citizenship status and curtailed citizenship rights because of their status as migrants, not just because of their impoverishment or due to the limited capacity of the state. Using case studies of internal migration in the cities of Mumbai and Kolkata, my work demonstrates how internal migration highlights some of the exclusionary aspects of citizenship in India.

69 per cent of India's 1.21 billion people live in rural areas (Census of India 2011), but the country is rapidly urbanising—it has 25 of the 100 fastest-growing cities worldwide. A significant source of this growth is rural-to-urban migration, as many Indians cannot find sufficient economic opportunities in rural areas and move instead to towns and cities. The 2001^[1] Census counted about 191 million people—or 19 percent of the Indian population at the time—as internal migrants who had moved to other districts or other Indian states.^[2] The North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have the highest percentages of rural populations, and are also the largest migrant-sending states. Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata are the largest destinations for internal migrants. While many of the migrants to these cities are intrastate migrants, relocating from surrounding rural areas, all three cities also absorb large numbers of people from other states across India.



Migrant Workers from Odisha making bricks in Andhra Pradesh. Credit: [ILO CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 IGO](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

These internal migrants raise many of the same citizenship questions in their receiving communities as international

migrants do—namely, who belongs here and what are their rights? Like international migrants, internal migrants encounter backlash against their presence due to fears they will take scarce jobs, drain public resources, or transform the local cultural character. In Mumbai, for example, anti-migrant political movements accuse migrants of taking jobs from Maharashtrians and diluting the Maharashtrian character of the city. Activists have used intimidation tactics to enforce the use of Marathi-only signs across Mumbai, and hundreds of thousands of internal migrants fled the state in 2008 for fear of violence and persecution.

In Kolkata, a city without such volatile identity politics between migrants and locals, migrants still face discrimination. For example, local officials raze slums or deny food rations to internal migrants, accusing the victims of being infiltrators from Bangladesh rather than Indian citizens. On the whole, internal migrants often face both informal and legally-sanctioned discriminatory practices. When locals face similar conditions, the denial of citizenship rights is also often justified by accusing them of being outsiders.

The process by which this normally happens is documentation. For impoverished internal migrants, proving their identity is one of the core issues they face when they arrive, and the problem can persist for years if not decades after they migrate. In many Indian cities, the ration card is the de facto necessary proof of identity. In practice, this document is essential for public services such as education, and is always requested as a proof of identity for things like opening a bank account. The ration card is also required for casting a vote, since it is difficult to obtain a voter identification card without one. Despite its original, legal purpose of only being a pass for subsidised food, it has informally become a definitive proof of citizenship, necessary for demonstrating legal status, and ultimately accessing a range of citizenship rights. But many migrants do not know the correct procedure for obtaining a new ration card at their destination. Additionally, rationing officials are often unwilling to accept the documentation provided by some migrants. Many migrants who are entitled to ration cards and apply for them do not actually receive them. In Mumbai and Kolkata, one of the justifications offered by rationing officials was that many of the people applying for cards are illegal migrants, and so not entitled to documentation of their citizenship status.

This gap in documentation affects migrants' political rights. Many of India's migrants try to find a way to vote because the act of voting is itself a way to verify one's identity: being on electoral rolls year after year helps migrants establish residency and tenure in a particular place, and this record is often enough to serve as a proof of address, which can in turn help migrants obtain ration cards. In these cases, the primary goal of voting is not to participate in the political process, and neither are voter turnout rates an appropriate indication of the extent of citizenship rights in a particular community. Instead, there is a circular relationship between voting and the expression of citizenship rights. Voting is a way of establishing eligibility for other basic rights of citizenship, such as housing and education. But the ability to vote is itself an expression of citizenship rights. The major difficulty for most migrants is finding a point of entry into this cycle. One implication or understanding the informal practices of citizenship in India is that instead of conceptualising suffrage as a goal or ultimate expression of political integration, in some cases it is only a step in the process.

The experiences of internal migrants show that impoverished citizens do all not experience low economic development and weak institutions the same way, and migration status matters for citizenship outcomes. Internal migration highlights the restrictive aspects of India's citizenship regime, since citizens who are migrants experience diminished legal status and rights compared to those who are not. They consistently—though not always—encounter trouble in establishing their legal status through identity documentation. Without such documentation, their citizenship status is called into question, and subsequently, they are unable to access constitutional rights such as housing, food rations, and voting. While economic development and institutional capacity do structure citizenship for all citizens, being an internal migrant creates additional barriers to accessing rights or documenting one's legal status.

This post is based on an article [Internal migration and citizenship in India](#), published in the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, Volume 41, Issue 1, 2016.

This entry reflects the author's own views and does not represent the views of the U.S. government or the

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India @ 70: LSE India Summit, presented by [Apollo Tyres Ltd](#), takes place in Delhi on 29-31 March 2017 and will feature a panel on citizenship and the Constitution. Click [here](#) for more information about the conference.

[1] Although the 2011 Census is complete, the Indian government has not yet released the full migration statistics.

[2] More recently, the Economic Survey estimates falling net out-of-state flows of migrant laborers, which peaked at 9.4 million for 2013-14 and were approximately 8.4 million in 2015-16; attributing the decline to the national economic slowdown. More [here](#).

About the Author

Rameez Abbas is Assistant Professor of Regional and Analytic Studies at the National Defense University, where she teaches courses on South Asian politics, statecraft, and the Muslim world. She has also been Lecturer and Program Coordinator at the MA in Global Security Studies at Johns Hopkins University; and Editor and Publications Manager at the Migration Policy Institute.

Dr Abbas earned a BA in government and politics from the University of Maryland and a PhD in political science from Johns Hopkins, where her work focused on migration and citizenship politics in India and included extensive fieldwork in Mumbai and Kolkata. Her research has been supported by the East West Center in Washington, and she was also awarded a Fulbright grant.

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