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Democracy's Paradox, The Chosen People of the State

Context

- The question of what constitutes proof of citizenship lies at the centre of India's democratic governance.
- The Indian passport and electoral rolls are often viewed as indicators of belonging, yet **neither document conclusively proves citizenship**, as both can be forged.
- This tension between evidence of status and the status of evidence frames the current debate around the Election Commission of India's (ECI) Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls.
- The controversy raises deeper questions about how states define and verify membership in a political community.

The Legal Dispute: Institutional Authority and Procedural Limits

- Challenges to the ECI's SIR rest on three key arguments. **The ECI has no legal authority to determine citizenship**, a power reserved for the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).
- **No law permits a nationwide, en masse SIR**, and voter roll revisions are meant to be selective.
- Finally, decisions on foreigner status belong to bodies constituted under the Foreigners Act, not the ECI.
- The ECI argues that its **constitutional duty to prepare accurate electoral rolls** requires verifying an applicant's citizenship, even if this does not amount to a formal citizenship determination.
- The dispute unsettles a long-standing democratic presumption: **that all residents are citizens unless proven otherwise**.
- With the burden shifting toward individuals, the nature of the state's relationship to its people becomes central.

The Quest for a 'Master Document' and the Burden of Proof

- India lacks a single document with the legal status of definitive proof of citizenship.
- The Citizenship Act, 1955 and the Citizenship Rules, 2003 provide for a **National Register of Citizens (NRC)** and **National Identity Cards**, but these frameworks remain incomplete.
- The **National Population Register (NPR)**, which lists all residents, is intended to feed into the NRC, which includes only those who have proven their citizenship.
- A critical principle governs this regime: when citizenship is questioned, **the burden of proof rests on the individual**, not the state.

- Past exercises, such as the 2010 NPR and the 2008 Multipurpose National Identity Card pilot, reflect efforts to build comprehensive identification systems.
- Political hesitation remains evident, particularly as the NRC disappeared from the 2024 election manifesto.
- The interplay between policy ambition and political caution continues to shape India's approach to documenting citizenship.

Evolving Conceptions of Indian Citizenship

- India's early citizenship framework leaned toward *jus soli* or birth-based citizenship.
- Over time, **elements of descent-based citizenship (*jus sanguinis*) grew stronger**, introducing multiple caveats to citizenship by birth.
 - Those born before July 1, 1987 are citizens by birth without condition.
 - Between 1987 and 2004, one parent must be a citizen.
 - After December 3, 2004, one parent must be a citizen and the other must not be an illegal migrant.
- The 2003 amendments introduced the category of **illegal immigrant**, excluding such persons and their children from birth-based citizenship.
- The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 further altered the landscape by introducing a **religion-based path to citizenship**, marking a significant shift in the principles governing membership in the national community.

Who Determines Citizenship? The Administrative Paradox

- A fundamental paradox sits at the heart of citizenship governance: **while a democracy derives legitimacy from the people, the state controls the mechanisms that define who the people are.**
- In practice, citizenship determinations are made by frontline officials, clerks, constables, border agents, and local administrators, whose decisions shape political inclusion and exclusion.
- Whether conducted under the ECI or the MHA, exercises such as SIR, NPR, or NRC rely on the same local bureaucracy.
- **Institutional location** does not resolve the deeper contradiction, for the state retains authority to determine membership in the very polity that legitimises it.

Assam: A Case Study in Bureaucratised Citizenship

- Assam offers the only example of a completed draft NRC, created under Section 6A following the Assam Accord.
- The 2019 draft identified **19 lakh individuals as D-voters or doubtful citizens**, based on their inability to establish lineage or residency beyond reasonable doubt.
- Reliance on decades-old legacy documents placed immense burdens on individuals, and political reactions intensified when large numbers of excluded individuals were found to be Hindus.
- Being marked a D-voter can result in **loss of voting rights**, proceedings before Foreigners Tribunals, and potential deportation.
- Assam demonstrates the human and administrative complexity inherent in large-scale citizenship verification.

The Democratic Dilemma

- Efforts to verify citizenship reveal a core democratic tension: **a democracy presupposes that people create the state, yet the state decides who counts as the people.**
- With individuals bearing the burden of proof and the state exercising decisive authority, the balance between administrative control and democratic inclusion remains fragile.
- Without resolving this paradox, initiatives such as SIR, NPR, or NRC will continue to shape anxieties over identity, belonging, and the meaning of citizenship in India.

Conclusion

- India's ongoing contestation over citizenship verification sits at the **intersection of law, politics, and philosophy.**
- While administrative accuracy in electoral rolls is essential, the mechanisms used to determine citizenship must balance state interests with **constitutional guarantees** of fairness, transparency, and democratic inclusion.
- The unresolved question remains: how can a democratic state verify its citizenry without undermining the very principle that the people precede and authorise the state?

Democracy's Paradox, The Chosen People of the State FAQs

Q1. Why is an Indian passport not considered conclusive proof of citizenship?

Ans. An Indian passport is not conclusive proof of citizenship because it can be obtained fraudulently.

Q2. What key principle governs citizenship verification in India?

Ans. The key principle is that the burden of proving citizenship lies on the individual.

Q3. Why does the Election Commission argue it can verify citizenship during SIR?

Ans. The Election Commission argues it can verify citizenship because it must ensure that only eligible citizens are included in electoral rolls.

Q4. What major shift occurred in India's citizenship framework over time?

Ans. India's citizenship framework shifted from a birth-based system toward one that increasingly emphasises ancestry and immigration status.

Q5. What consequence can individuals face when marked as "D-voters" in Assam?

Ans. Individuals marked as "D-voters" can lose voting rights and face proceedings before Foreigners Tribunals.

Source: **The Hindu**

The Real Story of the India-Russia summit

Context

- The 23rd India–Russia Summit in New Delhi highlighted the complex geopolitical landscape India must navigate.
- With the Ukraine war straining relations between India’s key partners—Russia on one side and the US and Europe on the other—New Delhi faces a particularly delicate diplomatic challenge.
- Despite these opposing pressures, India has managed to maintain strategic autonomy, balancing ties with both camps.
- Its calibrated approach has positioned it as a country showing the world how to operate amid deep global polarisation.

India–Russia Summit: Strategic Optics and Sensitive Timing

- The warm, high-profile welcome extended to President Vladimir Putin carried deliberate diplomatic signalling.
- For India, the message was one of **confidence**: reaffirming its long-standing partnership with Russia and removing ambiguity about the relationship at a time of global polarisation.
- For Russia, it underscored **India’s continued importance** in its foreign policy calculus.
- The timing of the summit was equally significant. With Russia holding a strong battlefield position, Ukraine facing potential defeat, and the U.S. largely disengaged, India’s vocal support for broader peace efforts aligns closely with Washington’s backing of the Trump-led initiative.
- India and the U.S. are therefore converging on the peace process, even as Europe remains the main outlier.
- India’s strategic challenge now lies in ensuring that this deepening Russia engagement does not erode the substantial diplomatic and economic gains it has made with European partners.

Key Pillars Strengthening India–Russia Relations

• Programme 2030: Expanding Economic Cooperation

- India and Russia adopted *Programme 2030* to deepen strategic economic ties.
- Key goals include:
 - Facilitating bilateral trade settlement in **national currencies**
 - Removing non-tariff barriers
 - Diversifying the trade basket
 - Boosting investments in non-energy sectors
- Sectors like fertilizers, railways, pharmaceuticals, minerals, and critical raw materials are central to India’s growth, and Russia’s vast resources make it a natural partner.
- Achieving **\$100 billion in trade by 2030** is considered feasible if these steps succeed.

• Energy Security: The Core of the Partnership

- India, as the world’s second-largest fossil fuel importer, sees affordable and reliable energy as a national security priority.
- Russia’s unmatched energy reserves make it indispensable for India’s long-term energy future.
- China has already secured dominant access to Russian resources, and U.S. companies are also seeking entry.

- India risks losing strategic ground unless it strengthens its presence in Russia's energy sector.

• **Emerging Strategic Sectors: Maritime, Arctic & Manpower Mobility**

- **Maritime Connectivity** – Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor; Northern Sea Route; Joint development in shipbuilding. These routes expand India's access to Eurasian markets.
- **Arctic Cooperation** – India welcomes Russia's offer to **train Indian seafarers** for Arctic operations—an area of rising geopolitical and commercial significance.
- **Export of Indian Skilled Workers** – A breakthrough labour mobility agreement will allow Indian skilled workers to fill shortages in Russia, especially in the Far East—driven by:
 - Russia's demographic crisis
 - Loss of labour due to the Ukraine war
 - Declining Central Asian workforce
 - Russian unease over increased Chinese influence
 - Easier tourist visas complement this growing mobility framework.
- **Traditional Strengths: Defence, Space and Nuclear Collaboration**
 - India-Russia ties have deep roots in:
 - Defence manufacturing and technology
 - Space cooperation
 - Nuclear energy projects
 - Russia remains a trusted technology supplier with fewer restrictions than Western partners.
 - Example:
 - **BrahMos missile** — a pillar of India's strategic capability
 - **S-400 system** — crucial during Operation Sindoor
 - Increasing levels of localisation, technology transfer, and co-production
 - India will continue to rely on Russia to maintain legacy military platforms while pushing domestic indigenisation.

India-Russia Ties in Perspective: A Relationship Re-Engineered

- The key outcome of the summit lies not in the announcements but in the strategic recalibration of the India-Russia partnership.
- Both nations are consciously reshaping their ties to keep pace with global shifts, especially the evolving power dynamics between the U.S. and China — a factor that increasingly pulls India and Russia closer despite external pressures.
- On Europe, India recognises that lasting peace in Ukraine will require direct engagement between Europe and Russia, not mediation through New Delhi.
- India's stance is rooted in historical lessons — knowing when to emulate examples of successful diplomacy and when to avoid past mistakes.
- Ultimately, India sees itself as a trusted partner to both sides, capable of maintaining balanced relations even in a deeply polarised world.

The Real Story of the India-Russia summit FAQs

Q1. Why was the India–Russia summit strategically significant for both sides?

Ans. The summit reaffirmed India’s commitment to a long-standing partnership with Russia while signalling strategic clarity amid global polarisation, particularly the Ukraine conflict and shifting U.S.–Russia dynamics.

Q2. What is Programme 2030, and why is it important?

Ans. Programme 2030 outlines plans to expand economic cooperation, promote national currency trade, diversify sectors, and remove trade barriers to help achieve a \$100-billion bilateral trade target by 2030.

Q3. Why is energy cooperation a central pillar of India–Russia relations?

Ans. India’s massive fossil fuel demand and Russia’s vast energy reserves create a strategic fit, making energy security a core driver of future bilateral engagement.

Q4. What new areas of collaboration are emerging between the two countries?

Ans. Key emerging areas include maritime connectivity, Arctic cooperation, shipbuilding, and labour mobility, with Russia seeking skilled Indian workers due to demographic shifts and labour shortages.

Q5. How does India aim to balance ties with Russia, the U.S., and Europe?

Ans. India seeks strategic autonomy, supporting peace efforts while avoiding actions that alienate Western partners, recognising that lasting peace requires direct Europe–Russia engagement.

Source: TH

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