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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Right to Belong: Citizenship Beyond Documentation

 THE HINDU

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The Right to Belong: Citizenship Beyond Documentation

 **The Hindu** 6 July 2026 **GS2**

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THE LIFT LINE

Citizenship is not a document you carry; it is a constitutional relationship between a person and the Republic. The current controversy over the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls and the status of the passport asks a deeper question: when the state demands ever more paper to prove belonging, does the burden of proof quietly migrate from the state to the citizen, and can dignity survive that shift?

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This debate sits at the intersection of electoral machinery, fundamental rights and the constitutional idea of citizenship, making it a high-yield theme for both Prelims and Mains.

GS Paper 2: Indian Constitution, provisions relating to citizenship (Articles 5 to 11); functions and responsibilities of constitutional bodies (Election Commission of India); **statutory** (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/statutory/>) framework (Representation of the People Acts, 1950 and 1951); appointment and role of the Supreme Court in reviewing electoral processes.

Prelims angle: Which document proves citizenship, the difference between a passport and a citizenship certificate, Section 6A of the Assam Accord, the constitutional articles on citizenship, and the two RP Acts.

Mains angle: Discuss the tension between administrative verification of voter rolls and the constitutional guarantee of dignity; evaluate whether shifting the burden of proof of citizenship onto the individual is consistent with the spirit of the Constitution.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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The Election Commission of India (ECI) is conducting a Special Intensive Revision (SIR (<https://ujivari.com/terms/sir-special-intensive-revision/>)) of the electoral rolls, an exercise to update, verify and cleanse voter lists. Electoral rolls are governed by the Representation of the People Act, 1950 (which deals with the preparation of rolls) and the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (which deals with the conduct of elections). In 2026, the Supreme Court upheld the legality of the SIR, confirming that the ECI has the constitutional and statutory authority to revise rolls.

Parallel to this, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) clarified an important legal distinction: a passport is a travel document that establishes a person's identity and nationality for the purpose of travel, but it is not, by itself, conclusive proof of citizenship. That clarification, though technically correct, sharpened public anxiety, because for millions of ordinary Indians the passport had felt like the most authoritative proof of belonging.

The deeper context is a decade of documentary contestation: Section 6A of the Assam Accord (which fixed cut-off dates for regularising migrants in Assam), the National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise, and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (<https://ujivari.com/legislation/citizenship-amendment-act-2019/>). Together they have made the question “which paper proves you are Indian?” a live and unsettling one.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The burden of proof is quietly shifting

In a constitutional democracy, the state ordinarily bears the burden of proving that a person is not a citizen before stripping rights. When verification drives multiply and each accepted document is narrowed, the practical burden inverts: the individual must now assemble a paper trail to prove she belongs. For the poor, the migrant, women without inherited land records and the digitally excluded, this inversion is not a technicality; it is a threat to the franchise.

No single document is conclusive, which is the point and the problem

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DOCUMENT	WHAT IT ESTABLISHES	WHAT IT DOES NOT ESTABLISH
Passport	Identity and nationality for travel	Conclusive proof of citizenship by itself
Aadhaar	Residence and identity	Citizenship (explicitly not a citizenship document)
Voter ID (EPIC)	Enrolment on the roll	Underlying citizenship status
Birth certificate	Place and date of birth	Citizenship where descent rules apply
Citizenship certificate / registration	Citizenship directly	Rarely held by ordinary citizens

The table reveals the trap: almost no ordinary document is, on its own, “conclusive.” A verification regime that demands conclusiveness therefore risks disenfranchising the very people the Constitution most wants to protect.

Constitutional anchor: personhood, not paperwork

Articles 5 to 11 of the Constitution define citizenship at commencement and empower (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/empower/>) Parliament to legislate on acquisition and termination. But the rights that flow from citizenship, and indeed many rights that flow simply from personhood (Article 21’s guarantee of life and dignity applies to every person, not only citizens), cannot be made to rest on shifting documentary standards. The constitutional promise is that belonging is a status recognised by law, not a privilege renewed by producing the right file at the right counter.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Use a three-lens frame:

- 1 The legality lens.** The ECI is empowered to revise rolls; the Supreme Court has upheld the SIR. Cleaning rolls of duplicates and ineligible entries is legitimate and necessary for electoral integrity.
- 2 The proportionality lens.** A legitimate aim can still be pursued through *disproportionate* (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/disproportionate/>) means. The test is whether the documentary demands are the least restrictive way to achieve accurate rolls, and whether adequate safeguards, appeals and inclusion-friendly presumptions exist for the vulnerable.
- 3 The dignity lens.** Even a lawful, proportionate process must protect the constitutional dignity of the individual. Disenfranchisement by paperwork, however inadvertent, wounds the basic structure idea that democracy rests on universal adult franchise.

The mature position is not “SIR bad” or “SIR good,” but “SIR yes, with the burden of proof kept where the Constitution places it, and with generous, inclusive procedures.”

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture two arrows. In a healthy democracy, the arrow of proof points from the state to the citizen: the state must show cause before it removes anyone. Now imagine a second arrow, generated by an expanding thicket of documentary requirements, pointing back from the citizen to the state: the citizen must continually re-prove her belonging. When the second arrow overpowers the first, the individual stands not inside the circle of citizenship but perpetually at its gate, holding files, waiting to be let in. The constitutional task is to keep the first arrow dominant.

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Codify** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/codify/>) **inclusion-friendly presumptions.** Where a person is already on the roll and holds multiple ordinary identity documents, the presumption should favour inclusion, with the state bearing the burden of showing ineligibility.
- 2 **Robust, accessible grievance redress** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/redress/>). Time-bound appeals, free legal aid and door-to-door verification for the elderly, disabled and migrant workers.
- 3 **Delink verification from suspicion.** Roll revision should be framed as administrative hygiene, not a citizenship test, to avoid chilling effects on marginalised communities.
- 4 **Data protection and transparency.** Any documentary data collected must be governed by the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (<https://ujiyari.com/legislation/dpdp-act-2023/>), with clear limits on retention and use.
- 5 **Public communication.** The ECI and MEA must communicate clearly that revision is about accuracy, not exclusion, to preserve trust in the franchise.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

The theme connects to past questions on citizenship and the ECI. **UPSC Mains GS2 (2021):**

“Constitutional morality (<https://ujiyari.com/terms/constitutional-morality/>)’ is rooted in the Constitution itself and is founded on its essential facets. Explain the doctrine of ‘Constitutional Morality’ with the help of relevant judicial decisions.” It also links to recurring Prelims questions on the difference between Aadhaar, voter ID and citizenship proof, and on the powers of the ECI.

Practice question (Mains, 15 marks, 250 words): “The distinction between a travel document and proof of citizenship has profound constitutional consequences. In light of recent electoral roll revisions, examine whether India’s documentary approach to citizenship risks shifting the burden of proof from the state to the individual, and suggest constitutional safeguards.”

Sources: *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com>)

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