



Mobility Should Not Erase Citizenship: Internal Displacement and India's Electoral Roll Revision

This insightful blog examines how internally displaced persons (IDPs) in India are disenfranchised from voting and participating fully in civic life. Widespread failure to recognise people's displacement status and circumstances shifts many of the burdens of proving identity, residence and voter eligibility onto the shoulders of already traumatised people. IDPs fleeing disasters, conflict or communal violence may have lost their homes and documentation, crossed state boundaries and taken refuge in regions where their native languages are not spoken. Digital access challenges and bureaucratic inefficiencies place the burden of administrative adaptation on those least able to bear it. Too many IDPs are thereby excluded from voter lists.

Though India records large numbers of new disaster displacements every year, it does not maintain a consolidated national displacement database. Such a database, the author argues, would ensure the voting and other rights of internally displaced persons are protected while providing a much-needed tool for monitoring whether IDPs are progressing toward durable solutions.

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India's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has been presented as an administrative exercise to strengthen the accuracy and integrity of voter lists. In principle, this is a legitimate objective. As of April 2026, 72 million voters were [removed](#) from electoral rolls across 12 states. But an electoral verification exercise does not affect all citizens equally. For those who live stable lives in the same residence, with access to documents, digital services and local language support, verification

may be inconvenient but manageable. For internally displaced persons, it can become something much more serious: a test of whether they can prove who they are, where they belong and whether they remain visible to the state.

That is the core problem. Internal displacement often disrupts exactly the forms of proof on which electoral systems rely. People flee homes suddenly because of conflict, communal violence, floods, cyclones, landslides, river erosion or other disasters. In the process, [identity documents](#) may be lost, destroyed, damaged or left behind. Families may be separated from household records, land papers, ration cards, school certificates or older voter documents. People may move into relief camps, informal settlements, rented accommodation, relatives' homes or entirely different states. Their legal identity may remain intact, but their documentary trail becomes fractured.

The Special Intensive Revision makes this problem visible. The process asks voters to confirm their [eligibility](#), residence, identity and documentary continuity within a defined administrative framework. This may be rational when applied to certain segments of the population assumed to be settled, documented and linguistically integrated within the state where verification is taking place. But internally displaced persons often do not fit those criteria. Their displacement may have separated them from the documents required to prove identity or residence. Their place of ordinary residence may no longer be physically accessible. Their local administrative office may be in an area to which they cannot safely return. Their current place of refuge may be in another district or state, where the forms, helpdesks and officials operate in a language they do not fully understand.

For internally displaced persons, each of these barriers can become can further amplify their circumstances.

The first barrier is documentation. Displacement is not only physical movement. It is also a bureaucratic rupture. A person may remain a citizen but lose access to the papers that make citizenship administratively legible. This is especially acute when the verification process asks voters to demonstrate residence, previous inclusion, lineage, identity or other forms of documentary continuity. A settled citizen may retrieve older documents from home, family files or local offices. A

displaced citizen may no longer be able to return to the area where those documents are stored. In situations of conflict, return may be unsafe. In disaster contexts, the [home](#) itself may no longer exist.

This is not an abstract concern. In Manipur, people displaced by ethnic violence have often been unable to [return](#) to their places of origin, including to retrieve documents or access local administrative offices. In disaster-affected areas, documents can be lost with damaged homes, washed away in floods, or rendered inaccessible as families move repeatedly between temporary shelters and informal accommodation.

When verification systems approach documentation in a non-citizen centric manner, the emphasis remains on the *output*; the binary of the presence of absence of required documents, how many people were retained in the roll and how many were excluded. However, the ethical consideration would also focus on the *outcome*. The decision to require documentation and consequently make life-altering decisions on the same basis should be considerate of the desperate circumstances IDPs often find themselves in. The absence of the said documents should be addressed in the context of *why* they are absent and how the State can further support them.

The second barrier is digital access. Electoral processes increasingly rely on online portals, downloadable forms, app-based support, digital searches and electronic submission or tracking systems. These may improve efficiency for many voters, but they can exclude those with limited digital literacy, no smartphone, unstable connectivity or little ability to pay for repeated documentation and printing. Displaced households are often dealing with loss of livelihoods, shelter insecurity, interrupted schooling, trauma and legal uncertainty. Expecting them to navigate complex digital procedures without assistance or analog processes places the burden of administrative adaptation on those least able to bear it.

The third barrier is language. This becomes particularly important when displacement occurs across state borders or into areas where the local language differs from that of the displaced population. Electoral forms, helpdesks and local outreach are often conducted in the dominant state vernacular. For many voters, this is appropriate. For displaced persons from another linguistic region, it can become a direct impediment. A

person who is eligible to remain on the electoral roll may fail to understand what is being asked, which documents are acceptable, how to correct an error, or how to appeal an exclusion. Language access is therefore not a soft issue. It is part of the infrastructure of democratic participation.

The risk, then, is not simply that individual displaced voters may face inconvenience. The greater risk is de facto disenfranchisement through a process that is formally neutral but displacement-blind. A verification system can apply the same rule to everyone and still produce unequal outcomes if it assumes that everyone has documents, stable residence, local language access and digital capacity. For IDPs, the absence of these conditions is not incidental. It is a known feature of displacement.

This is where [India's](#) wider displacement data gap becomes relevant. India records large numbers of new disaster displacements every year, but it does not maintain a consolidated national disaster stock database that clearly tracks how many people remain displaced over time after disaster events. As a result, prolonged disaster displacement is often difficult to see after the emergency phase ends. Relief camps close, compensation processes move on, households disperse, and people may remain unable to return or rebuild without being counted as still displaced.

This matters because the distinction between displacement flow and displacement stock is not technical alone. Flow data captures new displacements that occur during a given period. Stock data estimates how many people remain displaced at a particular point in time. India's disaster displacement flows are significant, but the absence of official disaster stock data means there is limited visibility on how many people continue to live away from their homes months or years after a disaster. IDMC's disaster stock estimates for India, therefore, rely significantly on proxy methodologies, including indicators such as housing destruction and average household size. These are useful for producing estimates in the absence of comprehensive official data, but they are not a substitute for a national or state system that tracks people's displacement status over time.

The result is a familiar governance problem: the flow of displacement may be visible at the moment of crisis, but the stock of people still displaced can become invisible soon after. This invisibility has electoral

consequences. If the state does not know who remains displaced, where they are or whether they have returned, resettled, or remain in temporary accommodations, electoral systems cannot be easily adapted to protect their rights. Displaced people then have to prove their status separately to each administrative system: for relief, compensation, housing, documentation, education, welfare access and voter registration. Each system treats them as a new case. Each process demands proof. Each missing document becomes another barrier.

A disaster stock database would not only improve humanitarian and development planning. It would also help protect political rights. A properly designed system could record displacement status, location, documentation loss, place of origin and protection status, including whether they are progressing toward durable solutions, while respecting privacy and avoiding securitised misuse. It could help election authorities identify districts with displaced populations, deploy assisted registration, accept alternative documentation, provide multilingual support, and prevent wrongful deletion from electoral rolls. It could also help authorities ensure that displaced voters do not fall between constituencies, especially when they are away from their original residence but not permanently settled elsewhere.

This would benefit governance beyond elections. A clearer displacement stock database would help authorities understand whether disaster-affected populations have returned, integrated locally or resettled. It would improve planning for housing reconstruction, livelihood recovery, education continuity, health services and compensation. It would also make recurring and protracted displacement more visible in states affected by floods, erosion, cyclones, landslides and other hazards. In short, electoral inclusion and displacement governance are not separate problems. They are connected through the same question: does the state continue to recognise displaced people after the immediate emergency fades?

The legal and normative framework already points in this direction. Indian electoral law recognises the importance of 'ordinary residence', but ordinary residence should not be understood in a way that penalises people for forced absence. A person who has fled because of violence, disaster or insecurity may be away from home without having voluntarily abandoned their civic ties to that place. Similarly, the [Guiding Principles](#)

[on Internal Displacement](#) affirm that internally displaced persons should enjoy equal rights, access to necessary documentation and participation in public affairs. These principles are especially relevant where the practical exercise of voting depends on access to documents, language, administrative support and recognition by local authorities.

The remedies are not difficult to imagine, but they require a conceptual shift. India's disaster management framework still does not clearly recognise internal displacement as a distinct typology within disaster response. The Disaster Management Act is primarily organised around preparedness, mitigation, response, relief and rehabilitation, but it does not create a clear legal or administrative category for disaster-displaced persons. In practice, those living in relief camps are often treated through the language of relief administration, and are described as "[inmates](#)" of camps. National jurisprudence and policy discourse on IDPs has also tended to arise more visibly in the context of conflict or through the nexus of development, land acquisition and rehabilitation, rather than as part of a comprehensive framework for disaster displacement.

A principal consideration, therefore, is not only how electoral verification should accommodate displaced voters, but how India categorises and records displacement in the first place. Disaster response systems should distinguish between people who are temporarily evacuated, sheltered during an emergency, living in relief camps, relocated elsewhere, unable to return because their homes or livelihoods have been destroyed or moving through longer-term pathways of return, local integration or resettlement. These categories need not be rigid, but without them, displacement disappears into generic relief administration. Once people leave camps, or once camps are officially closed, displaced people may cease to be visible to the state even if their displacement has not ended.

Electoral verification processes should therefore include displacement-sensitive safeguards. These could include accepting alternative forms of proof where documents have been lost, such as camp records, relief registration, disaster assistance documentation, local authority certification or sworn affidavits. Multilingual materials should ideally be made available where displaced communities do not speak the dominant state language. Most importantly, election authorities should coordinate with disaster management authorities, relief departments and local administrations to identify displacement-affected populations before

verification exercises begin. The burden should not fall entirely on displaced people to prove that they still exist in the civic record. Administrative systems should be capable of recognising displacement as a condition that requires procedural accommodation.

This does not mean weakening electoral verification. It means making it fairer. Accuracy and inclusion should not be treated as opposing objectives. A voter roll is not made stronger by excluding eligible citizens who cannot produce documents because they were displaced. Nor is democratic legitimacy strengthened when people affected by conflict or disaster lose political voice precisely when their needs are most acute.

The issue is primarily structural. The Special Intensive Revision need not be understood as intentionally targeting IDPs to recognise that it may have unequal effects on them. The problem lies in a system designed around settled populations being applied to people whose lives have been disrupted by forced movement. The solution is to build displacement into the design of electoral administration, rather than treating it as an exception to be handled after exclusion occurs.

India's electoral roll revision offers an opportunity to recognise this before the next crisis turns administrative difficulty into political exclusion. The experience of [Ghoramara](#) island in the Sundarbans is instructive. Booth-level officers were reportedly working through poor electricity, weak connectivity and late-night internet windows to complete SIR enumeration for voters on an island that has sharply shrunk because of erosion and has been battered by repeated cyclones, with many residents already migrating to the mainland or other states.

In this edition of the SIR, many such voters may still have been found, counted and retained on the rolls. But by the next revision, whenever that takes places, some of their homes may have been abandoned, their documents lost, and their occupants forced to move without formal recognition, assistance or a clear administrative record of their displacement. They may display every telltale sign of displacement caused by slow-onset environmental degradation, or by the sudden-onset disasters that follow on, yet still remain outside the categories through which India's disaster policy currently recognises and responds to affected populations.

That is the visible gap at the moment. People displaced by an erosion, cyclone, flood or landslide does not stop belonging to a constituency because their land has disappeared, their home has become unsafe or survival has required movement elsewhere. Yet if disaster governance does not record them as internally displaced persons and electoral governance later requires proof of residence, origin or documentary continuity, they risk being rendered invisible twice: first as disaster-displaced persons and then as voters.

By linking electoral safeguards with better displacement data, including a credible disaster stock system and clearer displacement categories within the disaster response framework, India could protect the franchise of displaced citizens while improving displacement governance more broadly. That would not only prevent exclusion from voter lists. It would affirm a basic democratic principle: mobility caused by crisis should not lead to exclusion from public life.

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