



# DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

## TOPIC

---

Enabling Voting Rights for Migrants

---

[www.nextias.com](http://www.nextias.com)

## ENABLING VOTING RIGHTS FOR MIGRANTS

### Context

- For millions of internal migrants in India — workers who relocate for livelihood, education, or family — the right to vote remains a pressing concern for participatory governance in the world's largest democracy.

### Voting Rights in India

- Universal Adult Suffrage [Article 326]:** Every citizen aged 18 and above, regardless of caste, gender, religion, or economic status, has the right to vote in **elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies**.
  - This right is **administered by the Election Commission of India (ECI) [Art 324]**, an autonomous constitutional authority responsible for **conducting free and fair elections** across the country.

### Migration and Its Electoral Consequences

- Migrants** are those individuals or groups who move from one region to another — either **within the country** (internal migrants) or **across national borders** (international migrants) — for reasons such as employment, education, marriage, displacement, or environmental stress.
- According to the **Census (2011)**, India has **over 450 million** internal migrants.
  - As of 2021, over **28.9% of India's population** were migrants, with **Bihar being most affected** by out-migration. It reached **over 600 million by 2023**.

### Challenges for Migrant Voters

- Low Participation:** In the **Lok Sabha elections (2024)**, Bihar's voter turnout was **just 56%**, well **below the national average of 66%**, largely due to migrants being unable to return home to vote.
- Policy Challenge:** The **Representation of the People Act, 1951** allows voting **only at a voter's place** of registration.
  - It **excludes those who move frequently** or lack the documentation to update their voter details in time.
  - About **99% don't update to their destination**, often due to lacking address proof.
- Distance & Financial Burden:** Many internal migrants work hundreds of kilometers away. A worker may **lose opportunity cost** (travel cost and daily wages), and **missing children's school** means they often skip elections.
- Gender & Social Dimensions:** Migrant women, especially those who moved after marriage, face **added constraints**: child care, uncertain housing, safety concerns—all reduce their voting capacity.

### Addressing the Problem

- For Intra-State Migrants:** Approximately 85% of migrants in India move within their own State. Many of them work in **informal jobs** and could potentially travel shorter distances to vote if supported with:
  - Enforced statutory holidays on polling day**
  - Government-organized transport services**
- For Inter-State Migrants:**
  - Remote Electronic Voting Machines (RVMs):** ECI piloted RVMs capable of handling up to 72 constituencies.
    - However, several political parties raised concerns about transparency, voter identification, and administrative feasibility.
  - Postal Ballots:** Already in use for armed forces, this system could be expanded to cover migrant workers.
    - Requires early registration and logistical coordination for issuing, collecting, and counting ballots.
  - Constituency Switching:** Suitable for longer-term migrants who can prove at least six months of residence in a new constituency.

- Empowers migrants to participate in local politics and policy-making.
- May face social resistance from existing residents but enhances democratic inclusivity.
- **Focusing Migrant Women:** A large segment of India's migrant population comprises women who relocate due to marriage.
  - ♦ Targeted voter registration drives in their new locations could integrate these women into the political process more effectively.

### Global Practices

- **Voting Rights for Immigrants:**
  - ♦ **New Zealand:** Noncitizens with permanent residency can vote in national elections after just one year of residence.
  - ♦ **Chile & Ecuador:** Allow legally present noncitizens to vote in both local and national elections after five years of residence.
  - ♦ **Norway:** Foreign nationals can vote in local elections after three years of residence.
  - ♦ **European Union:** EU citizens living in another EU country can vote in local and European Parliament elections, though not usually in national elections.
- **Voting Rights for Emigrants:**
  - ♦ **Mexico:** Citizens abroad can vote in national elections, including via in-person voting at consulates.
  - ♦ **Italy, Colombia, Dominican Republic:** Reserve seats in their national legislatures specifically for citizens living abroad.
  - ♦ **France & Canada:** Offer postal or consular voting for citizens overseas.

### Way Forward (Mix Strategy)

- No single mechanism will suffice to ensure electoral inclusion for all migrants. The migrant population is diverse — varying by geography, work type, and tenure of stay—so a combination of approaches is essential:
  - ♦ RVMs for short-term, inter-State migrants;
  - ♦ Postal ballots for those in stable but distant employment;
  - ♦ Constituency switching for long-term migrants;
  - ♦ Local support measures for intra-State workers;
- A hybrid strategy, tailored to the heterogeneity of migrant profiles, offers the most practical path toward ensuring every Indian—regardless of location—can exercise the right to vote.

### DAILY MAINS QUESTION

How can India reconcile the principle of universal suffrage with the logistical and policy challenges of enabling voting rights for its internal migrants? What measures would balance feasibility with inclusivity?

Source: TH