

# Fractured Belonging: Citizenship Renunciation and the Reconfiguration of the Indian Diaspora

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## Abstract:

The problem of citizenship is a hot academic and non-academic topic in India. The year 2022 witnessed a record number of Indians (2,25,620) apply to renounce their citizenship in the country. As per the figures released by the Ministry of External Affairs, between 2021 and 2024, around 811,587 Indian nationals gave up their Indian citizenship. While dual citizenship restrictions are widely identified, this paper aims to highlight the effects of more profound societal and political shifts, like the CAA, religious divides, and rising fears of inclusion/exclusion, as key drivers of citizenship surrender.

The study explores citizenship laws, policies, and protests that erupted to show how changing ideas of belonging and the state's push for "real" citizenship drive disenchantment, particularly among young, educated minority communities. Drawing on government data and diaspora studies, this article highlights the emerging complexities of fractured belonging in an era of global mobility and rigid national identity frameworks. The paper also examines how these shifts transform the Indian diaspora—its scale and spread, growing political voice, identity debates, and complex, often uneasy ties with the Indian state.

**Keywords:** Citizenship, Renunciation, Diaspora, CAA.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Migration and seeking new settlements are human nature. History has witnessed people from different parts of the world moving out of their places in search of new spaces and possibilities. The onset of globalization enhanced the flow of human resources, whereby the massive number of diverse cultures and communities is visible almost everywhere in the contemporary world. Instead of just leaving their native country for foreign nations aiming for employment and a better standard of life, the new migrant now aspires for citizenship rights and equal status there. However, for people of the Indian Diaspora, the possibility of having citizenship in the country they migrated to follows the loss of their native citizenship. India's Constitution does not let people cling to two flags at once—you cannot officially be Indian and claim citizenship of another country.

To understand the current debates around citizenship and diaspora, it is essential to briefly revisit the historical evolution of Indian citizenship. Before 1947, citizenship was more a matter of colonial subjecthood than national identity. Between 1946 and 1949, the Constituent Assembly Debates tackled the tricky question of who would qualify as a citizen in a newly independent India, split by Partition. They wrestled with ideas like secularism, where everyone was born, and the messy realities of people moving across borders. When the Constitution of India was finalised in 1950, it set clear rules for citizenship based on birth, family ties, or migration—but made it crystal clear that holding dual

citizenship was a no-go. However, post-independence India adopted an inclusive approach to citizenship, sensitive to social inequalities and group identities (Jayal, 2013). The Citizenship Act 1955 formalised these principles and remains India's cornerstone of citizenship law. Later, the introduction of the Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) scheme in 2005 reflected an attempt to maintain emotional and economic links with the diaspora without offering full dual citizenship. However, this progressive vision has been challenged by exclusionary practices based on socioeconomic factors and, more recently, religious grounds (Verma, 2023). The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 sparked heated debates about who belongs in India, stirring up old tensions. It demonstrated how citizenship in India is used as a tool for inclusion and exclusion.

The idea of global citizenship has taken a new turn, with more people chasing second citizenship to gain better travel freedom, safety, and financial perks. According to the 2024 World Citizenship Report, wealthy individuals primarily focus on finding countries that offer security, a high quality of life, and economic flexibility when choosing an extra passport (CSGP 2024). The global trend of "strategic citizenship" or 'economic citizenship'<sup>1</sup> highlights a growing flexibility in how nations view citizenship as a strategic asset rather than a national identity. While the world embraces flexible citizenship as a lifeline for opportunity and safety, India clings to its all-or-nothing rule, forcing people to choose between roots and reach. The irony? Millions of Indians today chase global jobs, education, and stability, yet the law treats dual citizenship like betrayal. This rigidity is not just outdated; it alienates the diaspora that fuels India's economy and soft power. As renunciations climb, the question grows louder: Can a nation built on ancient ties afford to ignore the modern reality of fractured belonging?

Subscribing to these realities, there is an emerging trend in the number of people renouncing citizenship in India. In 2021, over 160,000 Indians officially cut ties with their citizenship (The Hindu 2022). In 2022, the number was 225,620 and 216,219 in 2023 (ET 2024). In 2024, according to the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, around 2,06,378 Indian citizens renounced their citizenship of India (Moe 2025). This number feels less like a statistic and more like a quiet exodus of people chasing jobs, passports, or fresh starts abroad. This paper aims to investigate this matter to understand the laws and other regulations regarding citizenship in India and the troubles of being an Indian citizen that emerge from such restrictions. Also, this part investigates various socio-political, demographic, and other aspects that prompt people to renounce their citizenship in India. The much more discussed general elements, like a better standard of life, employment, and a progressive society behind citizenship renunciation, are not a concern of this paper. Instead, this paper attempts to look at how citizenship renunciation relates to the new development by which the citizenship problem entered the streets and everyday lives of the people, with the state's changing socioeconomic and political context, in a more pronounced manner.

Apart from that, the renunciation of Indian citizenship and the formation of the Indian Diaspora have a relationship. The question is how the form and construction of the Indian Diaspora are influenced and related to the citizenship renunciation tendency in India. The Diaspora people of India, specifically in the USA, mainly consisted of people who migrated as foreign temporary workers, family-oriented migrants, and student admission programs (MPI, 2014). So, these diasporic formations and their form are subject to change with changing citizenship renunciation patterns in India. This paper examines how

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<sup>1</sup> **Strategic or economic citizenship** means obtaining a second citizenship mainly for benefits like easier travel, business access, or security, often through investment programs. It treats citizenship as a practical tool rather than just a national identity.

the aforementioned increasing trends in citizenship renunciation have affected the structure and formation of the Indian Diaspora.

## 2. Citizenship in India: A Legal and Historical Overview

The journey of citizenship in India has been a long and evolving one. Before the country's independence, no comprehensive law defined who could be considered a British subject in India, resulting in the ambiguous status of native Indians. During the colonial period, residents of the provinces of British India were classified as British subjects, while those living in princely states were designated as British-protected persons. After independence, Indians were initially classified as British subjects until the country enacted its nationality legislation. Today, the Constitution of India and the Citizenship Act of 1955 govern the conditions regarding a person who holds Indian citizenship.

The Citizenship Act of 1955 provided a comprehensive framework that defined the requirements for Indian citizenship. While individuals of Indian descent living outside the country can apply for citizenship, those who voluntarily acquire citizenship of a foreign state are ineligible for Indian citizenship, except for Commonwealth member states. Citizenship acquisition, renunciation, and loss in India follow the evolved rules and regulations. For instance, between 1950 and 1987, anyone born in India was automatically granted citizenship regardless of their parents' nationalities. From 1987 until 2004, children born in India were granted citizenship if at least one parent was a citizen, but this requirement was tightened afterwards. There is a possibility of 'citizens by descent' for children born abroad if at least one parent is a citizen. In 2003, the Indian Government introduced an even stricter amendment to the Act. According to it, both parents must be Indian citizens. At least one parent must be Indian, while the other is not an undocumented migrant. The 2005 amendment created the Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) scheme, replacing the earlier "PIO" (Person of Indian Origin) status. The prohibition of dual citizenship but permitting OCI (overseas citizenship of India) is ambiguous in the sense that OCIs are treated as "second-class citizens" despite constitutional guarantees of equality (Article 14). OCIs lack political rights (voting, public office) and face arbitrary revocation.

There are also provisions for non-citizens to become citizens by registration. This applies to people married to Indian citizens, minor children of Indian citizens, or people of Indian origin living inside or outside of pre-partition India. People whose parents were Indian citizens, or who themselves or their parents had earlier held Indian citizenship, or who have held overseas citizenship for at least five years, can also acquire citizenship by registration. However, there are residency requirements that applicants must meet, which vary depending on the criterion under which they qualify. Foreigners who do not qualify under these categories may become Indian citizens by naturalization. Still, they must have resided in the country for at least 11 out of the previous 14 years, with an extra 12 months of residence immediately preceding their application, for 12 years. However, Indian citizens who permanently settle in Pakistan or Bangladesh or voluntarily acquire foreign citizenship automatically lose their Indian citizenship.

Voluntary relinquishment of Indian citizenship is possible for anyone over 18. However, if a person gives up their citizenship, their minor children also lose citizenship. These children have the option to resume their Indian citizenship within one year after reaching adulthood. Before 2003, relinquishment required holding the nationality of another country, and married women were considered of full age to give up citizenship, regardless of their actual age. Until 1992, minor children lost citizenship only if their fathers (not mothers) relinquished their status. Finally, any Indian citizen who permanently settles in

Pakistan or Bangladesh or voluntarily acquires citizenship of another country loses their Indian citizenship automatically.

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 has been widely criticized for setting religion as a criterion for obtaining citizenship in India. The CAA fast-tracks citizenship for non-Muslim migrants (Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, Christians) from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh who entered India before 2014. This violates Article 14 (equality before law) and Article 15 (prohibition of religious discrimination) of the Constitution (EPW, 2020). The year 2019 has witnessed substantial nationwide protests against the discriminatory move of the government. The everyday insecure atmosphere in the country has sparked a quiet 'escape' of young, educated, and affluent Muslims of India (Saikia, 2022). It is possible that the controversy surrounding the CAA and its implications for religious and ethnic minorities in India could have contributed to a sense of disillusionment and alienation among some Indians. This could have led some individuals to seek citizenship in other countries. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) overlaps with CAA, thus creating a contradiction. The NRC procedure in Assam (2019) required residents to prove ancestry pre-1971, disproportionately affecting Muslims and marginalised communities. Many lacked documents, thus risking statelessness. The NRC and CAA together created a situation where non-Muslims excluded from the NRC could gain citizenship under the CAA, while Muslims remain stateless. This understanding of CAA has created divisions and feelings of sidelining among the Muslim community of India. The sense of alienation has resulted in increased instances of Indians renouncing their citizenship because of reduced confidence in constitutional ideals (Roy, 2019).

India's single-citizenship trap forces heartbreaking choices—keep your passport but lose global opportunities, or gain mobility abroad by cutting constitutional ties. The 1.6 lakh who surrendered citizenship in 2021 weren't rejecting India; they chose survival. Most would gladly stay connected if the law allowed, but life rarely fits in nationalist boxes. This "trouble of being an Indian citizen" includes limited global mobility due to the lack of dual citizenship and the risk of exclusion based on religious or political identities, which further fuels renunciation (Jayal, 2019).

The following section will discuss India's vast diaspora and rising citizenship renunciations, linking trends to opportunities abroad, education migration, and domestic factors like CAA-driven religious anxieties among minorities.

### 3. Citizenship Renunciation and Its Implications for the Indian Diaspora

This part of the article dives into two big questions: First, why are more Indians renouncing their citizenship, and how have the recent changes in the citizenship policies and debates on citizenship affected citizenship surrenders? Second, how are these departures reshaping the Indian diaspora—its size, character, and sense of Indianness? By examining these questions, this section delves deep into the interplay between India's citizenship rules, socio-political environment, and the evolving dynamics of its diaspora.

As we have explained before, there is a spike in the number of Indians renouncing citizenship compared to before. There is a wide range of reasons contributing to this trend, like ;

1. **Global Mobility and Opportunities:** Many Indians are moving abroad for better education, jobs, and business opportunities. Some foreign countries (like the USA, Canada, Australia, and Germany) make it easier for immigrants to settle permanently, but require them to give up Indian citizenship because India does not allow dual citizenship. "Absence of opportunities remains the main driver of

migration” (The Hindu, 2025)

2. Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) Comfort: Even after surrendering their citizenship, Indians can apply for an OCI card. This gives them lifetime visa-free travel and rights to live and work in India (with a few exceptions). This "middle path" makes it easier to relinquish citizenship without cutting off ties to India. On the other side, dissatisfied with the limited rights offered by OCI, many Indians have opted for full foreign citizenship instead.
3. Taxation and Regulatory Pressures: High-net-worth individuals (HNIs) and businesspersons sometimes renounce citizenship to avoid complicated tax laws or regulatory scrutiny in India. Some move to countries with more business-friendly or tax-friendly environments.
4. Quality of Life Factors: Concerns about healthcare, education, safety, political stability, and even air pollution in India. For example, we can see many Indians migrating and settling in Canada because the country provides a good quality of life and an excellent healthcare system. The low quality of life in India is also driving high-skilled migration.
5. Education Exodus: The number of Indians studying abroad has seen a 52.2% rise, rising from 5,86,337 in 2019 to 8,92,989 in 2023 (Hindustan Times, 2025).

however, this doesn't mean that whoever migrates to other countries tends to settle there. However, the growing trend of migrating temporarily to foreign countries allows Indians to experience a better life than that in India, leading to more people choosing foreign countries over India, creating a large population contributing to the Indian diaspora. Currently, the Indian diaspora is the largest in the world. As of May 2024, the global population of overseas Indians is estimated at around 35.42 million, comprising approximately 15.85 million non-resident Indians (NRIs) and about 19.57 million persons of Indian origin (PIOs), as reported by India's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Indian Express 2024).

Indian Diaspora is simply Indians who reside or originate outside the Republic of India. There are various classifications for Indian Diaspora, like Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), and Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs). India has the world's second-largest Diaspora population. As of December 31, 2021, 4.7 crore Indians lived overseas (Barman, 2023). According to the World Migration Report, India has the largest emigrant population (Natarajan, et al., 2022).

Some common reasons, like better employment opportunities, higher education, good quality of life, family reasons, and political or social instability, show that migration is varied and complex and depends on various individual factors and circumstances. The socioeconomic and political conditions in India, thus, can affect the pattern of citizenship renunciation and, through that, the composition, profile, and perception of the Diaspora. Historically, the Indian Diaspora has diverse demographic, economic, and social backgrounds. Young adults are a particularly large demographic within the Diaspora, as many choose to study abroad and then remain in their host countries after completing their education. The Union education department provided data in Parliament, revealing that more than 650,000 Indian students went overseas in 2022 to pursue higher education (PTI, 2023). Many members of the Diaspora work in high-skilled, high-paying fields such as technology, finance, and medicine. Diaspora is also diverse in terms of religion, caste, and regional identity. However, it is worth noting that certain groups may be overrepresented in the Diaspora due to historical factors or economic opportunities. For example, members of the Gujarati and Punjabi communities have historically been more likely to migrate to countries such as the UK, the US, and Canada for economic reasons. However, it cannot get an exact picture of the demographic composition of the Indian Diaspora due to the lack of available data. "There is not a single register available that can capture the exact size, internal diversity, and



geopolitical dimensions of the Indian diaspora” (Garha & Domingo, 3, 2019). Some studies, however, attempt to quantify the size of the Diaspora population and demarcate the geopolitical boundaries of the Indian Diaspora from available sources like the national register, UN Global Migration Database, and Big Data (Garha & Domingo, 2019). This study looks into the internal diversity of the Diaspora population with the help of Facebook Data. Hence, it demands proper data collection on the composition and profile of the Indian Diaspora for a better understanding of its link with the citizenship renunciation pattern. The table below shows the year-wise data on citizenship renunciation in India. The table reveals a surge in the renunciation in the post-pandemic period. The data shows spiked apprehension among Indian society because of the citizenship policies and ground realities that prompt skilled professionals in India to opt for foreign passports despite their emotional ties with the nation.

**Table: Indian Citizenship Renunciation (2011–2024)**

Year	Number of people who gave up Indian citizenship
2024	2,06,378
2023	2,16,219
2022	2,25,620
2021	1,63,370
2020	85,256
2019	1,44,017
2018	1,34,561
2017	1,33,049
2016	1,41,603
2015	1,31,489
2014	1,29,328
2013	1,31,405
2012	1,20,923
2011	1,22,819

**Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2025, March 20)**

Citizenship renunciation by individuals in India can potentially impact the Indian Diaspora. However, the nature and extent of this impact would depend on various factors, such as the number of individuals renouncing their citizenship, their reasons for doing so, and the destinations they migrate to. The data in the table shows the number of people who gave up Indian citizenship each year from 2011 to 2024. Over this period, the number of citizenship renunciations has fluctuated, significantly increasing from 2021 to 2024. This dynamic change could be associated with the alterations in the citizenship rules introduced by the Indian government and the socio-political unrest, including reactions to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). There is rising anxiety among religious minorities, notably Muslims, as citizenship has become more conditional and exclusionary (Jayal, 2019).

The high number of citizenship renunciations in recent years could be affecting the size and composition of the Indian Diaspora. As more people leave India to live abroad, the Diaspora could become more extensive and diverse regarding demographic, economic, and social factors. While it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about how this citizenship renouncement pattern affects the dynamics of the Indian

Diaspora, it is possible to make some observations. According to the data, the highest number of people gave up their Indian citizenship in 2022, whereas the lowest did in 2020. Checking the pattern of citizenship renunciation from 2011 to 2022 witnessed many citizens relinquishing their citizenship in India. The 2020 low rate can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic and the year that followed a steep spike in the renouncement, as it felt like people were waiting for worldwide travel and easing of outdoor migration. Hence, citizenship renunciation would have a significant direct impact on the form and formation of the diaspora. However, there may be indirect effects. For example, if many highly skilled and educated individuals renounce their Indian citizenship, it could affect the composition and profile of the Indian Diaspora in certain countries. It could also affect the Indian government's ability to engage with the Diaspora and provide consular services and support to Indian citizens living abroad. Furthermore, citizenship renunciation could also affect the perception of India and the Indian Diaspora in the international community. If the reasons for renouncing citizenship are linked to dissatisfaction with the Indian government or policies, it could potentially impact how India is viewed by the international community, which could, in turn, affect the Diaspora.

Recent citizenship renunciation trends and socio-political changes in India significantly reshape India's diaspora. The strengthened political influence of the Indian diaspora is visible with Individuals born in India and migrated to Canada, the USA, and the UK contesting for prominent governmental positions in the respective countries. This political activeness of leaders belonging to the Indian diaspora could also be seen among the large diaspora community, by which they have become more publicly assertive about their Indian and political identities. There are numerous incidents where Indians are seen in the streets of the UK, USA, Canada, etc, as part of protests (Times of India 2025, Kaur 2023, Rajvanshi 2023, Mujtaba 2022).

As Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot (2019) discuss in *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, the Indian diaspora, especially in North America, has increasingly played an active role in promoting Hindu nationalist ideologies, marking a distinct departure from earlier, more pluralistic forms of cultural nationalism. However, this increasing presence of Indians is facing backlash and other challenges. There were reports of increasing online racism against the people of the Indian diaspora in countries like Australia, which could restrict their attempts at socio-political integration (ABC News 2025). The tightening of Immigration policies is also a challenge which disrupts the Indian diaspora (Times Now News 2025). Despite these developments, the Indian government is identifying and giving much more attention to the diaspora's position as a critical agent of diplomacy and soft power in the International arena (Katju 2025).

#### 4. Conclusion

In today's world, having citizenship is crucial for individuals to enjoy their rights. However, some individuals find themselves in a unique situation where they have no place to call their own. This tragedy is often observed with refugees who are in a state of "non-citizenship," and their plight has been extensively discussed in academia, influenced by the concept of "bare life" by Agamben (Agamben, 1998).

Exclusionary aspects of citizenship have also been discussed in academia, particularly in the context of the dominant nature of national and territorial sovereignty of the modern nation-state, which can restrict individual freedom. Hannah Arendt's "Origins of Totalitarianism" highlights the "right to have rights" as a precondition for protecting other rights, recognizing the importance of this concept to prevent the

denial of human rights by states that exclude specific categories from their citizenship distribution (Arendt, 1951).

Here, the focus has been on the citizenship renunciation of citizens themselves. Citizenship is a hard-won right many fight for—so why do others willingly abandon theirs? What pushes them to sacrifice jobs, passports, and roots: unlivable conditions or fading hope? Influenced by Agamben's idea of "bare life," which refers to a state of existence in which a person's life is reduced to its essential biological functions and is excluded from the political community, the situation above could be a condition as they may feel that their political rights and freedoms are being compromised or threatened by the government. By renouncing their citizenship, they may seek to escape the state's exclusionary practices and regain some control over their lives.

The growing number of Indians relinquishing citizenship reveals deeper cracks in the nation's social and political fabric. While dreams of higher education, career mobility, and financial security abroad remain key motivators, recent changes to citizenship laws have politicized the very idea of belonging, leaving many, particularly religious minorities and dual-nationality families, questioning their place in India's future. This surrender of Indian citizenship and acquiring foreign citizenship discreetly reconfigures the Indian diaspora. Once dominated by professionals and labourers, today's overseas Indian communities include entrepreneurs in Dubai, tech workers in Silicon Valley, and students in Australia—all navigating hybrid identities. Yet their relationship with "Indianness" is fraught, constructing a diaspora growing in global influence and fracturing its cultural coherence.

However, life abroad isn't the promised utopia. Indian professionals face rising xenophobia in the West. Paradoxically, as India leans on its diaspora for soft power—celebrating their Bollywood fame or corporate success—many feel reduced to economic assets, their struggles overlooked. The stakes are high. Every surrendered passport chips away at India's human capital, draining doctors, engineers, and innovators. To stem this flow, India must reimagine engagement, not through symbolic gestures, but by addressing root causes: stagnant wages, political polarisation, and bureaucratic hurdles to dual citizenship. The question for the diaspora lingers: Can you truly outgrow a homeland that still claims your heart, even if it pushes you away?

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