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From Privilege to Right: Transformation of Passport Issuance in Post-Independence India

Aastha Sharma[1], Dr. Reena Sharma[2]

1. **Research Scholar (Sociology)**, S.D. Degree College Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh.
2. **Professor (Sociology)**, Department of Sociology, S.D. Degree College Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh.

(**Corresponding Author:** aastha.sharma421@gmail.com)

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Abstract

The Indian passport has undergone a significant transformation from a colonial instrument of surveillance and executive control to a citizen-oriented mechanism that facilitates international mobility and economic opportunity. While the passport system initially retained many restrictive features after Independence, constitutional developments and administrative reforms gradually reshaped its legal and institutional character. This paper examines the historical evolution of passport governance in post-independence India, with particular emphasis on constitutional jurisprudence, legislative reforms and digital transformation. Adopting a qualitative doctrinal approach, the study draws upon judicial decisions, government reports, policy documents and scholarly literature to analyse this transition. It argues that landmark judicial interventions, especially Satwant Singh Sawhney v. Assistant Passport Officer (1967) and Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India (1978), established the right to travel abroad as an essential component of personal liberty under Article 21 of the Constitution. The study further examines the role of the Passport Seva Project, Passport Seva Kendras, Post Office Passport Seva Kendras and biometric e-passports in improving accessibility, transparency and administrative efficiency. It concludes that the contemporary passport system represents more than an administrative document; it reflects the expansion of constitutional rights, strengthened state capacity and India's growing integration into an increasingly interconnected global society.

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1. Introduction:

A passport carries two journeys—the traveler's and the issuing state's narrative. The evolution of the Indian passport reflects a profound paradigm shift: it has transformed from a highly restrictive tool of colonial surveillance into a massive engine of global economic aspiration and citizen empowerment. Today, with over 1.38 crore (13.8 million) passports issued annually, the document stands as a testament to India's burgeoning middle class and its deep integration into the global economy.

The framework for the modern passport emerged during World War-I. Prompted by imperial anxieties over wartime subversion and political dissidents, the British administration introduced the Indian Passport Act of 1920. Passports were granted strictly at the discretion of the colonial executive. The regime sought to keep "political undesirables"—such as anti-colonial nationalists—confined within India's borders. The passport also functioned to regulate the

movement of Indian labor. While British commercial interests relied on the structured circulation of indentured labor across the British Empire, the colonial state simultaneously utilized localized protocols to filter out lower-class or "unsuitable" travelers to avoid upsetting racial and class hierarchies in white settler Dominions.

For decades following its independence in 1947, India's engagement with international travel was defined by an inheritance of colonial anxieties. The newly formed sovereign state did not immediately democratize the right to step across its borders; instead, it weaponized the passport as an instrument of elite validation and demographic containment. Operated through opaque executive discretion, the early post-independence passport regime was designed to control the state's international image by deliberately suppressing the mobility of lower-class and lower-caste citizens, fearing that an influx of uneducated laborers abroad would solidify the colonial-era stereotype of the "coolie" (Natarajan, 2022). Consequently, possessing a passport was an exclusive privilege reserved almost entirely for the socio-economic upper echelons of society.

In the 21st century, the passport has undergone a structural and psychological metamorphosis. It has evolved from a defensive administrative shield into an active enabler of global economic mobility. India has become one of the largest passport-issuing societies in the world. This explosive growth is driven by structural changes in Indian society and structural and technological reforms of its infrastructure. Partnering with the private sector, the government decentralized the application process. Densely packed, bureaucratic regional offices were replaced by hundreds of citizen-centric Passport Seva Kendras (PSKs) and Post Office Passport Seva Kendras (POPSKs), taking the service deep into rural and semi-urban India.

The contemporary Indian passport is backed by assertive bilateral diplomacy, steadily expanding visa-free or visa-on-arrival access across the globe, thereby elevating its functional value as a tool of frictionless global mobility.

No longer has a mechanism of post-colonial surveillance or elite exclusion, the contemporary Indian passport served as a vital democratic asset of economic aspiration. It acts as a launchpad for a globalized middle class, a massive student diaspora and skilled professionals seeking international opportunities. This paper examines this profound institutional evolution, analyzing how the Indian passport shed its colonial shackles to become a foundational tool of global economic empowerment and citizen sovereignty.

1.1. Objectives of the Study: The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the historical and constitutional transformation of passport issuance in post-independence India from an executive privilege to a recognised component of citizens' personal liberty.
2. To analyse the role of administrative and digital governance reforms in reshaping passport issuance into a more accessible, transparent and citizen-centric public service.

2. Literature Review:

2.1. Colonial Origins of Passport Regulation: The historical evolution of the passport has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in relation to colonial governance, border regulation and state surveillance. Rather than viewing the passport merely as a travel document, scholars have interpreted it as an administrative instrument through which modern states regulate mobility, establish legal identity and exercise authority over population movement.

Singha (2013) demonstrates that the passport system introduced in British India during and after the First World War was primarily designed to strengthen imperial security rather than facilitate international travel. According to her, passport regulations emerged as part of a broader surveillance framework intended to monitor political activists, revolutionaries and individuals whose movement was perceived as a threat to colonial authority. Similarly, Mongia (1999) argues that the development of passport documentation was closely linked with imperial migration

policies and racial governance, particularly in regulating the movement of indentured labour across the British Empire.

Extending this historical perspective, Torpey (2000) conceptualises the passport as one of the defining instruments through which the modern state acquired the exclusive authority to regulate legitimate movement across national borders. Likewise, Zamindar (2007) explains that the political upheavals surrounding Partition reinforced documentation practices and strengthened state control over citizenship and cross-border mobility in South Asia.

Collectively, these studies establish that the passport originated as an instrument of administrative control rather than an expression of individual rights. However, they devote relatively limited attention to the institutional transformation of the Indian passport after Independence, particularly the constitutional, administrative and technological reforms that gradually reshaped passport issuance into a citizen-oriented public service. It is within this broader historical transition that the present study is situated.

2.2. Passport, Citizenship and the Right to Mobility: The relationship between passports, citizenship and the freedom of movement has increasingly attracted scholarly attention in contemporary political and legal studies. Rather than treating the passport solely as an administrative document, recent scholarship views it as an important indicator of the evolving relationship between the state and its citizens. Access to a passport reflects not only the state's authority to regulate international mobility but also its constitutional responsibility to protect individual rights.

Natarajan (2022) argues that the Indian passport remained an exclusive privilege during the first two decades after Independence. Despite the transition to democratic governance, passport issuance continued to reflect colonial patterns of exclusion, with executive authorities exercising broad discretionary powers over citizens' mobility. The study further demonstrates that concerns regarding India's international image and labour migration significantly influenced passport policies during this period.

From a broader citizenship perspective, Jayal (2013) explains that citizenship extends beyond legal status to encompass the substantive enjoyment of rights guaranteed by the Constitution. The ability to travel abroad, seek educational opportunities, pursue employment and participate in global economic networks represents an important dimension of contemporary citizenship. Consequently, restrictions on international mobility should be understood not merely as administrative decisions but as issues affecting the effective exercise of constitutional rights.

Existing studies have substantially contributed to understanding citizenship and mobility in India. However, relatively limited attention has been devoted to examining how constitutional jurisprudence, administrative reforms and digital governance collectively transformed passport issuance from an instrument of executive discretion into a citizen-oriented public service. This broader institutional transformation provides the central analytical focus of the present study.

2.3. Constitutional Transformation of Passport Rights: The constitutional status of passport issuance in India has been examined primarily through the lens of judicial interpretation and the expanding scope of fundamental rights. Legal scholars generally agree that the evolution of passport governance cannot be understood without considering the transformative role of constitutional jurisprudence, particularly the judicial interpretation of Article 21 of the Constitution.

Austin (1999) observes that the Indian Constitution has evolved through judicial interpretation, allowing fundamental rights to respond to changing social and political realities. This constitutional dynamism became particularly significant in matters relating to individual liberty and state authority. In this context, the decision in Satwant Singh Sawhney v. Assistant Passport Officer (1967) marked a turning point by recognising that the right to travel abroad forms an integral part of personal liberty and cannot be denied without the authority of law. The

subsequent enactment of the Passports Act, 1967, provided the statutory framework governing passport issuance and established legal safeguards against arbitrary executive discretion.

The constitutional protection of mobility rights was further strengthened through Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India (1978), where the Supreme Court expanded the interpretation of Article 21 by holding that any procedure restricting personal liberty must be fair, just and reasonable. The judgment also reinforced the interrelationship between Articles 14, 19 and 21, thereby subjecting administrative decisions concerning passports to the broader principles of equality, fairness and natural justice.

While legal scholarship has extensively analysed these landmark judgments from a constitutional perspective, comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining how these judicial developments subsequently influenced administrative reforms and the modernisation of passport governance. The present study addresses this institutional linkage by analysing constitutional jurisprudence alongside administrative transformation and digital governance reforms.

2.4. Digital Governance and the Modernisation of Passport Services: The growing body of literature on digital governance suggests that public service delivery has increasingly shifted towards technology-driven administrative systems that emphasise efficiency, transparency, accountability and citizen participation. Within this broader context, passport administration has emerged as one of the most successful examples of digital public service transformation in India.

The Passport Seva Project has attracted considerable attention in studies on e-governance and public administration. Developed as a Public–Private Partnership between the Ministry of External Affairs and Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), the project introduced an integrated digital platform for passport application, document verification, appointment scheduling, police verification and service tracking. Existing studies suggest that the project significantly reduced processing time, enhanced transparency, minimised administrative discretion and improved citizens' access to passport services (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

The expansion of Passport Seva Kendras (PSKs) and Post Office Passport Seva Kendras (POPSKs) has further strengthened last-mile service delivery by extending passport facilities to semi-urban and rural areas. Recent government reports indicate that decentralised service centres have substantially improved accessibility while reducing the geographical and administrative barriers previously faced by applicants (MEA, 2025; Ministry of Communications, 2026). Likewise, the introduction of biometric e-passports in accordance with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards represents an important step towards strengthening document security, facilitating international mobility and enhancing the global credibility of Indian travel documents (ICAO, 2022).

Although existing studies acknowledge the administrative success of these reforms, they generally evaluate digital governance from the perspective of service efficiency and technological innovation. Comparatively less attention has been given to understanding how these reforms have transformed the relationship between the citizen and the state by making passport issuance more transparent, accessible and rights-oriented. By integrating administrative reforms with constitutional and historical developments, the present study offers a more comprehensive understanding of passport governance in contemporary India.

2.5. Research Gap: Existing scholarship on the Indian passport has primarily examined its colonial origins, diplomatic significance, or constitutional development. Historical studies have documented the emergence of passport regulations during British rule, while legal scholarship has focused on landmark judicial decisions that recognised the right to travel abroad as part of personal liberty. More recent policy discussions have highlighted improvements in service delivery through digital governance initiatives. However, these strands of literature have largely remained disconnected from one another.

There is limited scholarly work that examines the transformation of the Indian passport as a continuous institutional process linking colonial legacies, constitutional jurisprudence, administrative reforms and digital governance within a single analytical framework. In particular, insufficient attention has been paid to how technological innovations such as the Passport Seva Project, Post Office Passport Seva Kendras and biometric e-passports have expanded citizens' access to international mobility while simultaneously strengthening state capacity and public service delivery.

This paper seeks to address this gap by offering an integrated analysis of the historical, legal, administrative and technological evolution of passport governance in post-independence India. It argues that the transformation of the passport system represents not only administrative modernisation but also a broader shift in the relationship between the state, citizenship and individual mobility.

3. Research Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative doctrinal research design to examine the transformation of passport issuance in post-independence India. The analysis is based exclusively on secondary sources, including constitutional provisions, landmark judicial decisions, parliamentary legislation, government reports, policy documents, official publications of the Ministry of External Affairs and relevant scholarly literature. A historical-analytical approach has been employed to trace the evolution of the passport system from a restrictive administrative instrument to a citizen-oriented public service.

The study also applies a thematic approach to analyse the constitutional, administrative and technological dimensions of passport governance. Particular attention has been given to the impact of judicial interpretation, legislative reforms and digital governance initiatives on accessibility, transparency and service delivery. The findings are interpreted within the broader framework of citizenship, state capacity and public administration. As the study relies entirely on documentary sources, no primary survey or field investigation has been undertaken.

4. Theoretical Framework: The transformation of passport issuance in post-independence India may be understood through the complementary perspectives of citizenship and rational-legal governance. While the passport has traditionally been viewed as an administrative document authorising international travel, it also represents the evolving relationship between the state and its citizens. The institutional changes examined in this study therefore extend beyond administrative reform and reflect broader developments in constitutional rights, public administration and democratic governance.

T. H. Marshall's theory of citizenship provides an appropriate framework for understanding this transformation. Marshall (1950) argues that citizenship evolves through the progressive expansion of civil, political and social rights. Civil rights include the protection of individual liberty and freedom before the law, enabling citizens to exercise personal autonomy within a constitutional framework. From this perspective, the recognition of the right to travel abroad through judicial interpretation of Article 21 represents an important expansion of civil citizenship. The transition of passport issuance from an executive privilege to a legally protected right illustrates the broader democratisation of state institutions and the increasing recognition of citizens' constitutional entitlements.

The administrative transformation of passport services can be further understood through Max Weber's concept of rational-legal bureaucracy. Weber emphasised that modern public administration derives its legitimacy from clearly defined legal rules, institutional accountability, procedural uniformity and professional administration rather than personal discretion. The introduction of the Passports Act, 1967, followed by the establishment of the Passport Seva Project, Passport Seva Kendras (PSKs), Post Office Passport Seva Kendras (POPSKs), online application systems, digital police verification and biometric e-passports reflects this transition

towards a more rule-based and technologically integrated administrative framework. These reforms have reduced procedural arbitrariness, improved transparency and strengthened citizens' confidence in public institutions.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide an integrated framework for analysing how constitutional developments and administrative modernisation collectively transformed passport issuance in post-independence India. They enable the study to interpret passport reforms not merely as improvements in public service delivery but as part of a broader process through which democratic governance, state capacity and citizenship have evolved in contemporary India.

5. Historical Foundations & Post-Colonial Continuity (1914–1967)

5.1. Colonial Era: There were various phases in the evolution of Passport in India in the colonial era.

Pre 1920's: There were no standardized booklets. There were distinct means used for identification of Indians such as Letters of Identification, special permits etc. There was no specific need to hold a passport.

Passport Act 1920: After World War -I, in the prevailing conditions, there was a need to identify traveler and restrict unsolicited movement. In 1920 League of Nations International Conference on Passports was held and it led to regulation of travel for British Indian subjects

Indians needed special permission to travel to specific destinations as there was a need to intercept anti-colonial revolutionaries, communist sympathizers and wartime subversives.

5.2. Early Post Independence Era: The transition from the British Raj to an independent India in 1947 is often celebrated as a sharp rupture in governance. However, in the realm of state surveillance, border control and population management, the early post-independence state heavily relied on administrative continuity. Rather than dismantling the colonial architecture of suspicion, the newly formed Indian state inherited, adapted and institutionalized British surveillance mechanisms to navigate the anxieties of partition, state-building and geopolitical image-making.

Between 1947 and 1967, the Indian government treated the passport as a scarce privilege rather than a right. It was heavily regulated to prevent lower-class and lower-caste citizens from migrating, driven by a diplomatic anxiety that an influx of uneducated laborers would perpetuate the colonial-era "coolie stain" and damage the young nation's international prestige.

5.3. Judicial Revolution for mobility of Indians (1967; 1978):

1967: Reinterpretation of Article 21 of the constitution to expand on the principle of Freedom: In the landmark case Satwant Singh Sawhney v. Assistant Passport Officer, the Supreme Court of India fundamentally reinterpreted the nature of citizenship and personal freedom under Article 21 of the constitution. The apex court ruled that the right to travel abroad is an essential constituent of "personal liberty" guaranteed under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, declaring that no citizen could be deprived of this right except according to procedures established by law. The Court famously reasoned that because a individual cannot practically cross borders or return to India without a passport, withholding it effectively deprives them of their liberty. The Court ruled that leaving passport issuance entirely to the unguided, unchanneled discretion of executive officers violated Article 14 (Equality before the Law). Without established legal criteria, the system inherently led to arbitrary discrimination. This judicial intervention effectively compelled the Indian Parliament to enact the Passports Act of 1967. The legislation marked a pivotal systemic shift, transitioning the passport from a highly gatekept state privilege into an enforceable statutory right.

1978: Inclusion of Principles of Natural Justice as the basic right: The State impounded the passport of journalist Maneka Gandhi 'in public interest' under Section 10(3) (c) of the Passports Act, refusing to provide any further reasons. Maneka Gandhi was herself a member of the highest political echelon and a journalist. The state's arbitrary impoundment of her passport demonstrated

a sociological reality: if the post-colonial state could weaponize its administrative machinery to strip an elite, highly visible citizen of her mobility without cause, the vulnerability of the average, less-privileged citizen was unimaginable.

The apex court declared that Articles 14, 19 and 21 form an inseparable "Golden Triangle," the Court recognized that human rights do not exist in isolation. Sociologically, this shifted the Indian state's legal sub-system from a rigid, mechanical application of rules to an organic, value-driven framework that prioritizes substantive human dignity over bureaucratic literalism. It established that a citizen's identity and international existence are not property owned by the government, but are intrinsic to their personhood.

5.4. Technological Transition and the modern era of Passport Issuance: With over 1.38 crore passports now issued annually, India has become one of the largest passport-issuing societies in the world. The Indian passport is now a standard rite of passage for the expanding Indian middle class, students and skilled professionals.

For decades, the standard path to an Indian passport was defined by mountains of physical paperwork, mandatory tips to middlemen and an arbitrary police verification process.

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) radically changed this obsolete framework by replacing manual processing with digital integration. Partnering with the private sector, the government decentralized the application process. Densely packed, bureaucratic regional offices were replaced by hundreds of citizen-centric Passport Seva Kendras (PSKs) and Post Office Passport Seva Kendras (POPSKs), taking the service deep into rural and semi-urban India by making following intrinsic changes to the operations and existing framework:

- **Elimination of Paper and Intermediaries:** The modern Passport Seva system shifted the entire front-end application process online. By implementing central scheduling, mandatory online payments and direct document uploading, the state removed the physical checkpoints where touts and middlemen traditionally extracted bribes.
- **mPassport Police App and Algorithmic Auditing:** The police verification process was completely restructured via mobile integration. Using the mPassport Police App, field verification officers submit verification data directly from the applicant's doorstep using handheld smart devices.
- **Real-Time Data Pipelines:** Physical files have been replaced by secure, end-to-end encrypted networks that integrate directly with state police databases and national criminal records. By automating background checks and removing physical paperwork, the average time for police verification plummeted from nearly 49 days in 2014 to under a week in most urban centers, removing arbitrary delay points entirely.

5.5. TCS – MEA Partnership: The Passport Seva Project (PSP), executed as a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) between the MEA and Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), stands as a definitive success story of Indian e-governance. The system is established by utilizing a transaction-based pricing model. TCS invested the initial capital to build the infrastructure and the government compensates them through a fixed fee per passport application processed. There exists a strict operational wall. TCS handles non-sovereign, front-end logistics: maintaining the tech infrastructure, operating the physical Passport Seva Kendras (PSKs), providing the digital queue management system and running customer care. Conversely, the MEA retains absolute, exclusive control over sovereign, fiduciary functions: checking original documents, validating identities and executing the actual "granting" or denial of the passport. The result was a revamped and user-friendly experience resulting in rapid positive outcomes and citizen centric infrastructure leading to ease of access and utilization of fruits of digitization in a wonderful manner.

5.6. Role of POPSK's: The establishment of Post Office Passport Seva Kendras (POPSKs) a joint initiative between the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Department of Posts—represents a masterful exercise in scaling state capacity. By decentralizing essential citizen

services, the Indian state has effectively bridged the geographic and digital divide between urban tech hubs and the rural hinterland.

Historically, state capacity was intensely centralized. To obtain a passport, a rural or semi-urban applicant had to travel hundreds of kilometers to a capital city or a major urban Regional Passport Office (RPO). This spatial disparity created a massive economic and physical barrier. A single passport appointment required long train journeys, expensive overnight stays. By repurposing the existing, vast infrastructure of India's Head Post Offices, the state brought the sovereign apparatus directly into the applicant's district. Rather than requiring citizens to travel to the state, the state deployed its capacity to the citizen's doorstep, enacting a form of geographic and social equity and lost daily wages.

The Department of Posts already possessed unparalleled real estate and trusted community reach. By injecting modern digital infrastructure—biometric scanners, high-speed data links and computerized queue management—into local post offices, the state transformed colonial-era mail rooms into highly efficient e-governance nodes.

While the front-end application process is entirely online, the physical requirement for biometric data collection and document verification remained a bottleneck. POPSKs eliminated this hurdle for rural citizens. POPSKs alone processed nearly 39.5 lakh (3.95 million) applications in 2025, proving that the center of gravity for global Indian aspiration has decisively shifted toward the grassroots.

5.7. E-Passports: An e-passport (or biometric passport) is a traditional paper booklet upgraded with an embedded Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) microchip and an antenna inlay, usually built into the cover. It is visually distinguished by a small, globally recognized gold biometric symbol printed on the front cover. For the modern Indian traveler—be it a student migrating for higher education or a business professional—the most tangible benefit of the e-passport is speed. Because it complies with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) guidelines, it integrates seamlessly with automated border control systems (e-gates) at major international airports. Travelers simply scan their passport on a contactless reader and look into a camera for facial recognition, bypassing long manual immigration queues. By introducing robust, globally recognized biometric safeguards, India drastically reduces the global risk profile of its travel documents. This institutional reliability acts as a key diplomatic bargaining chip, systematically paving the way for expanded visa-on-arrival allowances, simplified visa processing and friction-free transnational mobility.

Conclusion: A secure, swift and democratized passport ecosystem is no longer merely an administrative achievement; it is a critical macroeconomic asset that strategically positions India within the 21st-century global economy. By digitizing the state’s frontier architecture—epitomized by the nationwide rollout of cryptographic e-passports—India has systematically elevated the sovereign trust of its national travel document.

This institutional reliability has direct geopolitical dividends. In an era where global commerce is dictated by the fluidity of human and intellectual capital, a streamlined passport system transforms India's massive demographic dividend into an agile, cross-border workforce.

By allowing professionals, tech workers and students from both metropolitan hubs and rural districts to transition seamlessly into the international market, the modern passport framework effectively operationalizes the vision of a "global workforce for a global workplace." Ultimately, as India strengthens its footprint as a global economic powerhouse, its secure and rapid

passport delivery mechanism ensures that its citizens are not contained by territorial boundaries, but are instead equipped to lead, trade and innovate on the global stage.

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