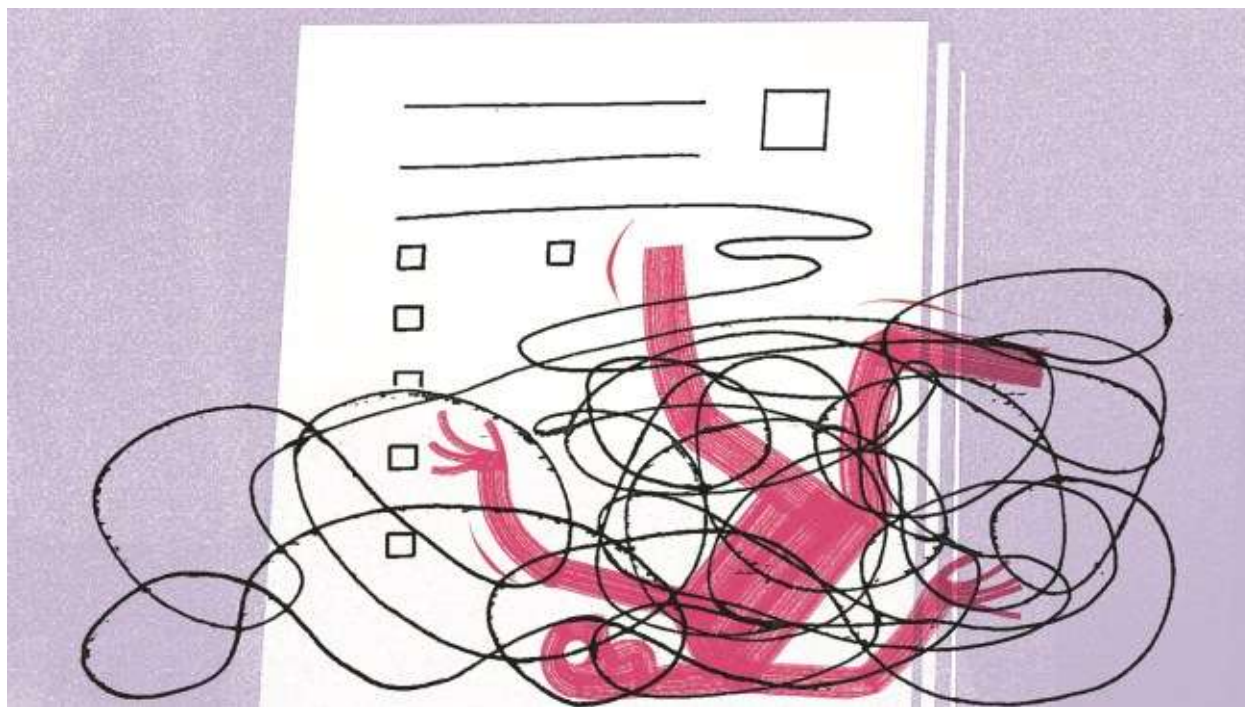


A fiction called SIR

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ECI's claims about progress of electoral roll revision in Bihar are sharply at odds with first-hand accounts of chaos and procedural violations



At least a quarter or more of the total forms filled in (the ECI reports a success rate of 98.01 per cent) could belong to this fraudulent category. (Illustration by C R Sasikumar)

We were in Patna when the news channels started reporting on the Election Commission of India's (ECI) counter-affidavit on the Special Intensive Revision (SIR). We had just finished a day-long jansunwai, a public hearing organised by peoples' organisations, on the ground experience of the SIR in Bihar. About 250 ordinary people from 19 districts across Bihar, mostly villagers and a majority of them women, had come to Patna to share their stories. Some had travelled through the night in trains packed with kanwariyas and job aspirants coming to the state capital for a major exam. Exhausted, a few snoozed off and on, squatting uncomfortably on chairs. About three dozen of them got to tell their stories to a distinguished panel comprising Justice (Retd) Anjana Prakash, Wajahat Habibullah, Jean Drèze, Nandini Sundar, D M Diwakar and Bhanwar Meghwanshi.

We read news reports about the affidavit late in the evening. And we recalled what we had heard through the day in the multiple languages of Bihar. The first-hand accounts we heard that day and in the preceding weeks had no resemblance to the official account. These two were clearly about two different worlds. The official account attributed to the ECI could well have been a piece of creative writing, a fiction about an imagined land, if only it were written better. On the ground, it has been a month of dystopia.

Phulkumari Devi, a farm labourer from Hasanganj in Katihar, was asked for her photo, a copy of her Voter Card and her Aadhaar Card. (For context: the ECI had dispensed with the requirement of a photograph; EPIC was unnecessary as it was pre-printed on her form; Aadhaar number was “optional” and the card inadmissible as per the ECI.) She had to sell the rice obtained from the ration shop, the only thing she had, to get photocopies and a photograph from the nearby town. She went hungry and lost two days of wages.

Sumitra Devi, around 60 years old, came from Saharsa. She was told she needed to submit papers for her parents, who died long ago, and give caste or domicile certificates for herself, or else she would cease to be “sarkar ke log”. She has spent Rs 300 to apply for a caste certificate, which she awaits. Gobind Paswan, again from Saharsa, was asked to give a copy of his passbook and land records. (Context: both were on the voters’ list in 2003 and were not required to give any documents.) We heard many stories of touts (the husband of an anganwadi worker who was a BLO, for example) who charged poor people Rs 100 for filling in the form. Woman after woman spoke of how difficult and in many cases impossible it was to arrange documents from their mayaka (which was in Nepal in many cases) on the status of their parents in the 2003 electoral rolls.

In this context, the idea that migrant workers would “fill the enumeration form in online mode using their mobile phones through the ECINet App” is a joke. The findings of a rapid survey of migrant workers by Stranded Workers Action Network were reported in the jansunwai. Of the 235 migrant workers staying outside Bihar who were surveyed over the phone, one-third had not heard of the SIR. Among those who had heard, almost three in four had no idea of the required documents. Only one-tenth had heard about the official announcement of online submission.

Let’s compare just one sentence of official fiction with ground reality. Here is Guideline 3(b) of the SIR order, which the ECI claims to have followed faithfully: “BLOs shall visit each household and distribute Enumeration Form, with pre-printed details of existing electors, to each existing elector in duplicate and will guide them in filling up the form.” This simple instruction contains six tasks. And it exposes six lies of the ECI.

One, the BLOs were supposed to visit each household within their booth. They did not. Given the impossible deadlines, they could not. After trying for the first few days, they were instructed not to “waste their time” in going from house to house. In nearly half the cases, we heard about voters chasing the BLO and not the other way round. Two, the distribution was to be done by the BLOs. In many urban areas, this was done by municipal employees with no official credentials. Three, they were supposed to give a unique form to each voter with pre-printed details. In many urban areas, including Patna, residents were given a blank form with no personal details. Four, the forms were to be given to each person on the existing voters’ list. We heard numerous cases where not every member got the form. Five, the forms were to be given in duplicate, one copy to be given to the BLO and the other to be retained by the voter with a proof of receipt. This simply did not happen, unless an exceptionally persistent voter took a photocopy of her own form and forced the BLO to give an acknowledgement. Mostly, people were given only one form, with no proof of having submitted it to the BLO. Six, the BLO was to assist and guide people in filling in the forms. This was an impossible ask of the poor BLO, often ill-informed and already beleaguered. The best they could do was not misguide the voters.

Senior journalist Ajit Anjum has released a number of video reports exposing on camera the SIR's biggest fraud: Enumeration forms being filled in without the voter's consent or even knowledge. We came across a multitude of cases of voters reporting this gross violation of the process. Either family members signed for a person out of station, or people were informed by the BLO that their forms had been submitted, without their having seen or signed them. In several cases, the voters discovered on the ECI website that they could not file their form as it had already been submitted. At least a quarter or more of the total forms filled in (the ECI reports a success rate of 98.01 per cent) could belong to this fraudulent category.

These are not exceptions or operational lapses that often happen in a large exercise of this nature. The confusion and chaos of the SIR are an inevitable outcome of its design. What else should you expect if you kickstart such a massive exercise with less than 24 hours' notice, if you expect an ill-equipped and over-burdened administrative machine to carry out multiple tasks within four weeks, and if you demand of 8 crore people the documents you know they may not possess? The brazen violation of rules and norms and fake documentation being reported from all over Bihar was built into the SIR. It is pointless to blame the BLOs and the rest of the administrative machinery. They are as much victims as the ordinary people. The blame lies squarely with the ECI. It is not too late for it to acknowledge the reality and cease this experiment on the people. The jansunwai in Patna ended with a unanimous call to annul the SIR.

Swami is state coordinator of Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan, Bihar. Shastri and Yadav work with the national team of Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. Yogendra Yadav has filed a petition in the Supreme Court challenging the SIR.

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