

## Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls: An attack on the right to vote

Yogendra Yadav



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Welcome to the most audacious attempt at mass disenfranchisement of Indian citizens. The nationwide Special Intensive Revision (SIR) announced by the Election Commission of India (ECI) — to be rolled out first in Bihar and then in the rest of the country — is exactly that. In effect this is, as critics have alleged, a move at votebandi, following notebandi (demonetisation) and deshbandi (lockdown). Dumb at best and diabolic at worst, this draconian policy shift could end up taking away the only right that crores of ordinary Indians have had — the right to vote.

**Sounds alarmist? Over-the-top political rhetoric? Just take these three steps with me and then judge for yourself.**

**Step one:** Let us set aside the common impression that the SIR ordered by the ECI is just an overdue and thorough re-examination of the existing electoral rolls (ER, commonly called “voters’ list”). Such an exercise was carried out in Bihar just six months ago. Lakhs of names were added and deleted, with no significant complaints from any quarter. What the ECI has just ordered is a de novo, fresh writing of the voters’ list, first in Bihar, then in other poll-bound states, to be followed by the rest of the country.

This step is unprecedented. In the garb of an older exercise called Intensive Revision, which was discontinued after 2003 following the computerisation of the ER, the ECI has unleashed something altogether new and disruptive. For the first time, the onus of being on the voters' list has been shifted from the state to the citizen. Those who fail to submit fresh enumeration forms by July 25 will automatically be left out of the draft rolls. Worse, for the first time, every person would be required to provide documentary proof of their citizenship to qualify to be on the voters' list. This is indeed the National Register of Citizens (NRC) through the back door.

**Step two:** Let us cut through a smokescreen created by ECI, namely that documentary proof will be required from a very small number. The ECI's order is quite clear: Every voter will have to fill out the enumeration form with a current photograph, signatures, some basic details, plus proof of citizenship. Those who had their names on the ER of 2003 (presuming the exact name and residence have not changed) have a shortcut. They can attach a copy of the page carrying their name in the ER-2003. That will be accepted as proof of their citizenship. The ECI has claimed that 4.96 crore people (63 per cent of those currently on the ER) will be able to take this shortcut, leaving less than 3 crore to prove their eligibility. Rahul Shastri ('Voter verification drive in Bihar: too little time, too many hurdles', Data Point, The Hindu, July 1, 2025) debunks this bizarre claim as the ECI did not take into account the number of deaths, migration and shifting of residence since 2003. He demonstrates that the correct figure is closer to 3.16 crore.

That leaves an overwhelming majority (about 4.74 crore out of 7.9 crore on the current ER) who carry a high burden of proving their citizenship with the help of proofs of date and place of birth. They fall into three categories. Those above 38 years of age (born before July 1, 1987) who were too young then or for any other reason (mismatched names, shifting of residence due to marriage or otherwise) do not find their names in the ER-2003 will have to attach proof of their own date and place of birth. Those between 20 and 38 years of age (born between July 1, 1987, and December 2, 2004) will have to attach two proofs: Their own and that of their mother or father. Finally, those between 18 and 20 years of age (born after December 2, 2004) will have to attach three proofs: Their own and that of both their mother and father. While the parents' name on ER-2003 would serve as a proof for them, the applicant will still have to attach his/her own proof of date and place of birth.

**Step three:** Let us face a stark truth — the kind of proof the ECI is demanding for this exercise simply does not exist with a majority of the people. And it is not their fault. The state never supplied them the papers it demands of them today. If you ask any ordinary household for identity papers, they would offer one of the following: Aadhaar, the ECI's photo identity card, ration card or MGNREGS job card. None of these would be accepted by the ECI to enrol someone as a voter.

Instead, the ECI has come up with an "indicative (though not exhaustive) list" of 11 documents that would be required. Shastri has investigated the availability of each of these documents in Bihar for the relevant period. Of these, six either do not apply in Bihar or are negligible in numbers. Four of those remaining have very little coverage: Birth certificate: 2.8 per cent; passport: 2.4 per cent; government service/pension ID: Less than 5 per cent; and caste certificate: About 16 per cent. That leaves the matriculation/education certificate (around 35 per cent for all adults and around 45 per cent for the relevant group of those aged between 20 and 40 years) as the only widely available and acceptable document from this list, which is also a requirement for most other documents. For all practical purposes, therefore, matriculation has become an informal requirement for being a citizen and a voter.

Shastri estimates that around 2.5 crore people (nearly one-third of the current adult population in Bihar) who are required to prove citizenship may not have any of these documents. In reality, the number could be larger if you take routine operational failures (temporary absence, inability to do paperwork, failure to locate certificates, official goof-ups etc.) into account. Even if these are overestimates, and if the actual exclusion is around 1 crore, less than half of the robust empirical estimates, we are still looking at the largest exercise in denial of voting rights.

Now you decide: How is this not an exercise in mass disenfranchisement?

Creating discriminatory, though indirect, barriers of wealth and education is exactly how disenfranchisement of African Americans was practised in the southern US. In Bihar, as in the rest of India, the burden of exclusion based on educational qualifications would fall disproportionately on women, the poor and Dalit-Adivasi and Bahujan communities. This is against the letter and spirit of the Indian Constitution.

**Now ask a further question:** Why did the ECI suddenly announce this ridiculous timeline for SIR in Bihar? In the 30 days between June 25 and July 25, the Bihar government is to contact about 1 lakh booth-level officers (more than 20,000 are yet to be appointed), train them for SIR, get them to connect to lakhs of booth-level agents of all political parties, educate the public about this exercise, distribute enumeration forms to each household and help them with a copy of ER-2003. Not just that, they are also supposed to collect the completed form from each house (visit thrice if necessary), upload these to the internet, verify the certificates and give their recommendations. All within the month (of which a week has passed) when Bihar is in the midst of the monsoon and floods! So, unless the ECI has a magic wand, we should expect a withdrawal of this order, drastic changes in the list of documents allowed (as announced on June 30) or a postponement of the Bihar assembly elections.

Finally, you may ask: If such a drastic change was needed, why did the Special Intensive Revision not feature among the 21 initiatives listed by the new CEC just last month and reported in the media on May 30? Why did the ECI not mention this grand proposal in its meeting with heads of various national parties held last month and over 4,000 consultations held all over the country just before that?

What changed the ECI's mind in just 25 days? A sudden phone call? Or chai pe charcha? In other words, who is the "sir" behind this SIR?

An attack on the right to vote": <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/yogendra-yadav-writes-on-special-intensive-revision-of-electoral-rolls-an-attack-on-the-right-to-vote-10100595/>

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