

Behind smokescreen, SIR 2.0 could be biggest exercise in voter exclusion

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It's worse than Bihar. With the ECI beginning to release the draft voters' list for the second phase of the SIR, it is clear that voter exclusion this time will be higher and more damaging. If we combine the official data for five states with news reports from the rest, as many as 11 crore names on the existing voters' list face potential erasure in the 12 states and UTs covered under the present round of the SIR. The final figure in this round will be much smaller. But by the time the SIR is completed in the entire country, we could be looking at nearly 10 crore deletions.

If this looming disaster has not yet made headlines, it is because the information is scattered, staggered and shrouded. After the Bihar election, the SIR disappeared from national headlines and was pushed to regional media or the local pages. The repeated and state-wise extensions of the deadline by the ECI ensured that the final figures would arrive in four instalments, thus masking the big picture.

The ECI has done its best to create a smokescreen by starting a new practice of releasing fantastic but meaningless figures about the percentage of data "digitised". This obfuscates the two sets of data we need: The number of those who did not fill the enumeration form and will face exclusion from the draft list, and the number of those whose names could not be connected to the older voters' list and will face potential deletion.

The release of draft electoral rolls for five states and UTs (Rajasthan, West Bengal, Goa, Lakshadweep and Puducherry) has begun the unveiling of the real picture. And for other states, we have “source-based” information in the news media. These reports seem to be fairly robust, since the official figures of Rajasthan and West Bengal have confirmed similar reports from these states. Statements by state election officials and political leaders have confirmed these reports. In UP, the CM has publicly confirmed the unofficial figures we draw upon.

The accompanying table brings out the extent of mass exclusion that we can expect. Adding data of exclusions from smaller states, Goa (1 lakh), Puducherry (1 lakh), Andaman and Nicobar (0.6 lakh), as many as 6.3 crore names that figured on the pre-SIR voters’ list face exclusion from the draft voters’ list, since their enumeration forms have not been received. Uttar Pradesh leads the pack with 2.93 crore persons whose forms were not returned by the original deadline, followed by Tamil Nadu at 80 lakh, Gujarat at 72 lakh, West Bengal at 58 lakh, Rajasthan at 43 lakh, Madhya Pradesh at just 30 lakh, Chhattisgarh at 28 lakh and Kerala at 21 lakh. The average exclusion from the draft list will be higher than it was in Bihar.

There is nothing natural about these exclusions. Except for Tamil Nadu (and marginally Kerala), there is no state where the pre-existing voter list was larger than the eligible population. Two columns in the table confirm this by comparing the number of persons on the pre-SIR voters’ list with the eligible adult population. The table also shows that each state is going to experience a decline in its elector-to-adult population ratio. The overall decline is as much as 12 percentage points, higher than the eight-point contraction caused by Bihar’s draft SIR list. The staggering 18-point decline in UP — from an already low 96 per cent to a shocking 78 per cent — may be corrected somewhat in the days to come. But the 13 to 14-point fall in TN, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh is no less shocking.

These figures could come down in the coming days, but are unlikely to change drastically, since the ECI has already recorded most of these under the category of “uncollectable” forms and assigned them reasons for exclusion: Absent, Shifted, Dead or Duplicate (ASDD, in ECI’s language). We don’t have official figures for these categories for most states. But the available information shows a clear pattern. While the proportion of names identified as “dead” or “duplicate” is fairly stable across these states, the proportion of “absent” or “shifted” is alarmingly high in Chhattisgarh (9 per cent), Gujarat (10 per cent) and Uttar Pradesh (13.7 per cent) and unusually low in West Bengal (1.6 per cent). The abnormally high proportion of “absent” and migrants in a high out-migration state like UP, as well as a high in-migration state like Gujarat, defies all logic. The SIR could be creating a new category of Indians — born in and residents of India, but voters neither in their place of origin nor in their place of work.

The ongoing SIR provides for another avenue of deletion of names — the “unmapped” voters. These are persons who have submitted their forms, but without providing proof that they themselves or their “relative” (a term still undefined) featured on the voters’ lists of 2002 or 2003. Their names will be included in the draft list, but only provisionally. They will be served a notice and asked to submit proof of their citizenship, failing which their names will be deleted from the final voters’ list.

How many “unmapped” names do we have currently? No state has released this data officially, and we don’t even have unofficial data from Kerala and Chhattisgarh. Yet the available data shows massive variations — from shockingly high “unmapped” voters (compared to received forms) in UP (27.1 per cent) and Gujarat (16 per cent) to moderate in Tamil Nadu (10 per cent) and oddly low in West Bengal (4 per cent), Rajasthan (3 per cent) and Madhya Pradesh (2.4 per cent). In all, we are looking at 5.25 crore persons — as many as 3.39 crore just in UP — who face potential deletion from the final voters’ list.

These two types of potential disenfranchisement — 6.3 crore for not submitting enumeration forms and 5.3 crore for not proving citizenship — add up to a whopping 11.6 crore, over one-fifth of the existing electors in these states. We should expect a significant reduction in this figure over the next few days, especially in UP, though there may be an addition to the figure of “unmapped” voters in West Bengal. True, only a small proportion of those who receive notice will eventually be deleted. Yet, assuming that the final figure of deletions is half of the provisional numbers presented here, this will still be the largest ever disenfranchisement in the history of democracy.

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