

Bihar SIR threatens the credibility of elections

Without any warning, on June 24, the Election Commission announced a month-long Special Intensive Revision (SIR). At the behest of SIR, 80 million Biharis are being asked to fill forms.

Many also have to produce documents to “prove” their citizenship within 30 days to be eligible to vote. The electoral rolls were cleaned just six months ago. So, what is the urgent need for this new revision? How can the onus be on existing voters to “prove” their citizenship?

Oddly, on the ground, district officials are invoking the Constitution to ramrod this draconian exercise. The EC also has an impossible deadline.

After an uproar, the Commission has clarified that in case of lack of documents “the ERO can take a decision on the basis of local investigation”. But this is an open invitation for corrupt officials, middlemen and petty gatekeepers to have a field day.

As of July 2025, Bihar has generated 114 million Aadhaar cards for its projected 130 million population; 83 million Biharis also have their names included on ration cards. But the EC is neither accepting Aadhaar nor ration cards as identity proofs.

The 11 documents enlisted by the EC, from passports to matriculation certificates, are hard to come by for most people. For example, the 2022 caste survey shows that only 15% of Biharis have graduated from Class 10. Nearly 40% of Bihar women of reproductive age have never been to school as per the 2019-21 National Family Health Survey (NFHS). Elderly women have even higher levels of illiteracy; 75% of eligible women voters above 45 years were illiterate in the 2011 Census. As a result, the largest exclusions are expected to be amongst the most downtrodden.

First, the unlettered; 29% of Bihar men

could not read a form in 2011. Even amongst the younger age group of 15-54 years, 24% of men were illiterate in the 2019-21; Bihar women are nearly twice as likely to be unschooled. So, a callous state which has for generations not bothered to invest in mass education in Bihar, now has glib civil servants and harried booth-level officers going door-to-door distributing forms to a largely semi-literate electorate.

Second, Bihar also has high levels of poverty and out-migration. More than half of Bihar households have at least one earning member who is a migrant, mostly within India. When they are working hard in the fields in Punjab and metro lines in Bengaluru, expecting them to rush back to their home villages in Bihar and produce citizenship documents at short notice is ludicrous. Most will now be deleted from electoral rolls, unless they can magically submit.

Third, Bihar also has a largely young population; 47% of Bihar voters are under the age of 40. Most of them will now be expected to provide not only proof of their own birth, but if below 38 years then of one and if below 21 then of both their parents.

How can rural Biharis, especially in flood-prone areas, be expected to preserve parchments of paper from half a century ago? Even in 2005-6, only 5.8% of births in Bihar were registered. Despite improvements, by 2019-21, at best 56% of children born were issued a birth certificate. After all, even now only 76% of deliveries (and 71% among Dalits) takes place in a health facility.

Fourth, caste discrimination in Bihar is rife. One of the acceptable documents for SIR is land records. But 86% of Dalit households do not own land. As per the 2022 caste survey, 43% of Dalits in Bihar are poor. Musahars are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and amongst the most discriminated. There are 2.7 million Musahars in Bihar, but in 2011 only 17% of Musahar women were literate.

Fifth, Bihar has a sizeable 18 million Muslims (17% of the population). They are the most excluded from public services, often even more than Dalits.

For example, only 26% of Muslim children attend an *anganwadi* compared to 34% of Dalits. Muslim children in Bihar are also less likely to be vaccinated, receive supplementary nutrition and be delivered in a public health facility.

The SIR exercise comes after the Congress and its allies alleged that electoral rolls were tampered with in Maharashtra before the assembly elections. The bogey of illegal immigrants has also been invoked to justify SIR. The previous Bihar assembly elections was decided by a wafer-thin margin: The NDA polled 37.26% votes and secured 125 seats while the Mahagathbandhan finished with 37.23% votes and 110 seats. Any arbitrary disenfranchisement of voters will cast a shadow over the sanctity of the elections.



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The views expressed are personal.