

# For a Few Documents More

A rapid survey of migrant  
workers from Bihar  
on the SIR

July 25, 2025

**Stranded Workers  
Action Network**

**Cover Photo:** Kuldeep Rohilla

(This photograph was taken at the Yamuna Sport Complex in 2020 when migrant workers were trying to return to their villages by buses arranged by the Delhi government during the COVID-19 lockdown)

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## About SWAN

**Stranded Workers Action Network** is a volunteer driven initiative that started on March 27, 2020 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a national lockdown in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic. SWAN first came together in response to a number of distress calls from migrant workers stranded in Karnataka. After a small tranche of money was sent to this group of workers and the lockdown was also extended beyond the initial 21 days, many more began to reach out for food and cash assistance. As the frequency of such distress calls and messages rapidly increased, the informal network of friends engaged in relief work started a helpline platform.

With mounting distress calls, zonal volunteer teams were formed and each zonal team worked in shifts. Soon, SWAN started proactively picking up distress messages from various WhatsApp groups and other social media platforms. Very basic information such as the name and contact details of a stranded worker obtained from these channels were logged in a spreadsheet. The respective zonal teams then picked these up, followed up with a call to the concerned worker and assessed the needs of the stranded workers based on a standardised form. Assessment of needs meant collecting the following information from workers: the group size, number of women and children, precise location of where they were stranded, home state, number of days of rations left, amount of money left, if they received rations or cooked food from the government, if they were paid during the lockdown and a comments section where volunteers noted other relevant details. Relief work primarily consisted of connecting stranded workers with civil society organisations (CSO) and attempts to have government rations reach them. The volunteer making the call then consulted a list of responsive government representatives and CSOs and notified them about the need for food supplies of the stranded worker group. While government response in most places was patchy, many CSOs rose to the occasion and arranged for food supplies to reach the stranded. However, it became clear that it was easier for both the government and CSOs to cater to large stranded worker groups. For smaller groups therefore, SWAN facilitated small direct cash transfers into their accounts to buy rations and essentials for a week at a time.

SWAN released three reports between March and June 2020 and disbursed a total of around **Rs 60 lakhs** which was transferred directly to the workers' accounts through crowdsourced funds. SWAN interacted with over 3,900 groups adding to more than **36,000 workers**. With the second wave of COVID in 2021, SWAN revived its volunteer network and helpline and extended relief again.



In light of the **Special Intensive Revision (SIR)** exercise and given that there are a large number of migrant workers from Bihar, a few members of SWAN decided to get in touch with the migrant workers that had reached out to us during the lockdown to assess what their experience had been with the Special Intensive Revision of the voter list in Bihar has been. This report presents the **experience and challenges of 338 migrant workers** from Bihar in dealing with the SIR drive based on a rapid survey conducted by student volunteers between July 19th and 21st. We first present a brief on the timeline of the SIR, followed by the methodology used in the survey, the survey findings and then a brief discussion. We do not claim that this is a statistically representative survey. However, we underscore that the findings provide strong evidence of the challenges faced by migrant workers. In particular, the poor and marginalised sections who migrate away from home in search of employment are most susceptible to documentation deficits. This report highlights the situation among a sample of such workers. It is highly likely that the situation among millions of other migrants would be similar to those that we have interviewed. It should be seen as a signal of the potential threat of disenfranchising millions of people in the country.

# SWAN Team

All the names are in the alphabetical order of last name.

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The views expressed in this report are personal and do not reflect the views of the respective institutions.

# Timeline of the SIR exercise in Bihar

On 24th June, 2025 and only four months before the assembly elections in Bihar, the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced a month-long Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in Bihar. The stated purpose of the exercise was to 'ensure that no eligible citizen is left out while no ineligible person is included in the Electoral Roll'. The ECI invoked Article 324 of the Constitution and the Representation of People Act, 1950, to direct a revision of electoral rolls in Bihar. The exercise will take place over multiple phases, from a physical verification of Bihar's eligible voters, restructuring of polling stations to updating and preparing revised electoral rolls, decision on claims and final publication of electoral rolls.

The SIR order stated that any person whose name was not in the 2003 electoral roll (when the last such exercise was carried out) was required to submit documents from a list of eleven eligible document proofs "as probative evidence of eligibility, including presumption of citizenship"<sup>1</sup>. This implied that Biharis below the age of 40 years, would have to fill forms and produce documents to "prove" their citizenship to be eligible to vote. Aadhaar, ration cards, voter identity cards issued by the ECI (the Elector Photo Identity Card, or EPIC), and PAN cards- which are most commonly available- are not among the 11 documents.

The verification exercise which is being carried out by Booth Level Officers (BLOs) and other government officials, including teachers commenced after the 25th of June. On 4th July, the Association of Democratic Reform filed a petition in the Supreme Court calling for setting aside the ECI's order and halting the SIR exercise. The petition was filed on grounds that "the documentation requirements of the directive, lack of due process as well as the unreasonably short timeline for the said Special Intensive Revision of Electoral Roll in Bihar further make this exercise bound to result in removal of names of lakhs of genuine voters from electoral rolls leading to their disenfranchisement"<sup>2</sup> ADR's petition was followed by 10 others as well as press conferences by opposition parties.<sup>3</sup>

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1. SIR order dated 24.6.2025. These 11 documents include passport, matriculation/educational certificate, Permanent Residence Certificate issued by the competent State authority, Forest Rights Certificate, SC/ST certificate, National Register of Citizens (or NRC, wherever it exists), Family Register, pension payment order issued to any regular government employee or pensioner, any certificate issued by local authorities, banks, post offices, etc. prior to July 1, 1987, birth certificate, and any land/house allotment certificate issued by the government.

2. Writ Petition ADR vs Election Commission of India, 4th July 2025, page B

3. Over 10 petitions have been filed in the Supreme Court challenging the Election Commission's order, including by several political leaders such as RJD MP Manoj Jha, Trinamool Congress MP Mahua Moitra, Congress's K C Venugopal, NCP (SP) leader Supriya Sule, CPI's D Raja, Samajwadi Party's Harinder Singh Malik, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Arvind Sawant, JMM's Sarfraz Ahmed, and CPI (ML)'s Dipankar Bhattacharya.

Compelled to take note of the concerns in the petitions and media reports, the Election Commission has been floundering in some of its responses causing much confusion with its contradictory announcements. For instance, when it became evident Aadhaar, ration cards and EPIC were the most widely available identity documents not the 11 documents specified by the ECI, clarifications were announced that people may submit forms even if they did not possess the 11 eligibility documents. On July 6th, the Chief Election Commissioner of Bihar issued an advertisement in prominent newspapers in Patna urging people to submit filled electoral forms for the SIR even if they do not have the requisite supporting documents, leaving it to the Electoral Registration Officer to process the forms on the basis of local investigation or other documentary evidence.<sup>4</sup>

**06-07-2025**

**सुबह दैनिक**

**दैनिक भास्कर**

**SUNDAY**

आज का दिन है एक नया दिन... (आज का दिन है एक नया दिन...)

**आगत निर्वाचन आयोग द्वारा**

**बिहार में मतदाता सूची विशेष गहन पुनरीक्षण**

**कृपया ध्यान दें..**

**कोई भी योग्य मतदाता ना छोटे**

**मतदाता सूची में नाम बनाए रखने हेतु आज ही गणना प्रपत्र भरें। यदि वोटर कार्ड (EPIC) बना हुआ है तो भी गणना प्रपत्र भरना जरूरी है।**

**ऑफलाइन आवेदन**

**निर्वाचकों से अपील**

- गणना प्रपत्र वीरलको से प्राप्त होते ही तत्काल भर कर आवश्यक दस्तावेज तथा फोटो के साथ वीरलको को उपलब्ध करा दें।
- यदि आवश्यक दस्तावेज तथा फोटो उपलब्ध नहीं हो सके हैं तो गणना प्रपत्र स्वकार वीरलको को उपलब्ध करा दें।

**महत्वपूर्ण तारीख**

- गणना प्रपत्र भरने की अवधि: 28 जुलै - 29 जुलाई 2025
- गणना सूची का प्रारंभ (ड्राफ्ट) प्रकाशन: 1 अगस्त 2025
- वोट और अवधि की अवधि: 1 अगस्त - 1 सितम्बर 2025
- अंतिम मतदाता सूची का प्रकाशन: 30 सितम्बर 2025

**ऑफलाइन वेबसाइट: [www.bihar.gov.in](https://www.bihar.gov.in)**

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**Website: [www.bihar.gov.in](https://www.bihar.gov.in)**

Bihar Chief Electoral Office announced through this advertisement in Dainik Bhaskar that voters can get verified in the electoral rolls even without submitting the mandatory documents. Source: [The Hindu](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bihar/major-relief-to-voters-ec-makes-big-decision-on-documents/article69779542.ece)

4. Bhelari and Nair (6th July 2025) ECI allows more time for Bihar voters to provide documents under SIR. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bihar/major-relief-to-voters-ec-makes-big-decision-on-documents/article69779542.ece>

On July 10th, the Supreme Court also instructed the ECI to consider Aadhaar, EPIC and ration cards as eligible ID proof but allowed the SIR exercise to proceed.

It quickly became clear that a large and significant segment of the population of Bihar- migrant workers- who are working outside of the state will be unable to fill the form and submit their documents putting them at risk of disenfranchisement. The 2011 census put the figure of migrant workers from Bihar at 75 lakh or a little over 7% of the population, but these figures are likely to be much higher. Taking note of the plight of migrant workers and other developments, on July 15, Bihar's Chief Electoral Officer issued a front-page advertisement in Delhi newspapers asking Bihar's migrant voters to submit enumeration forms online through mobile phones. However, as this report will show, a fraction of migrant workers are aware of this portal.

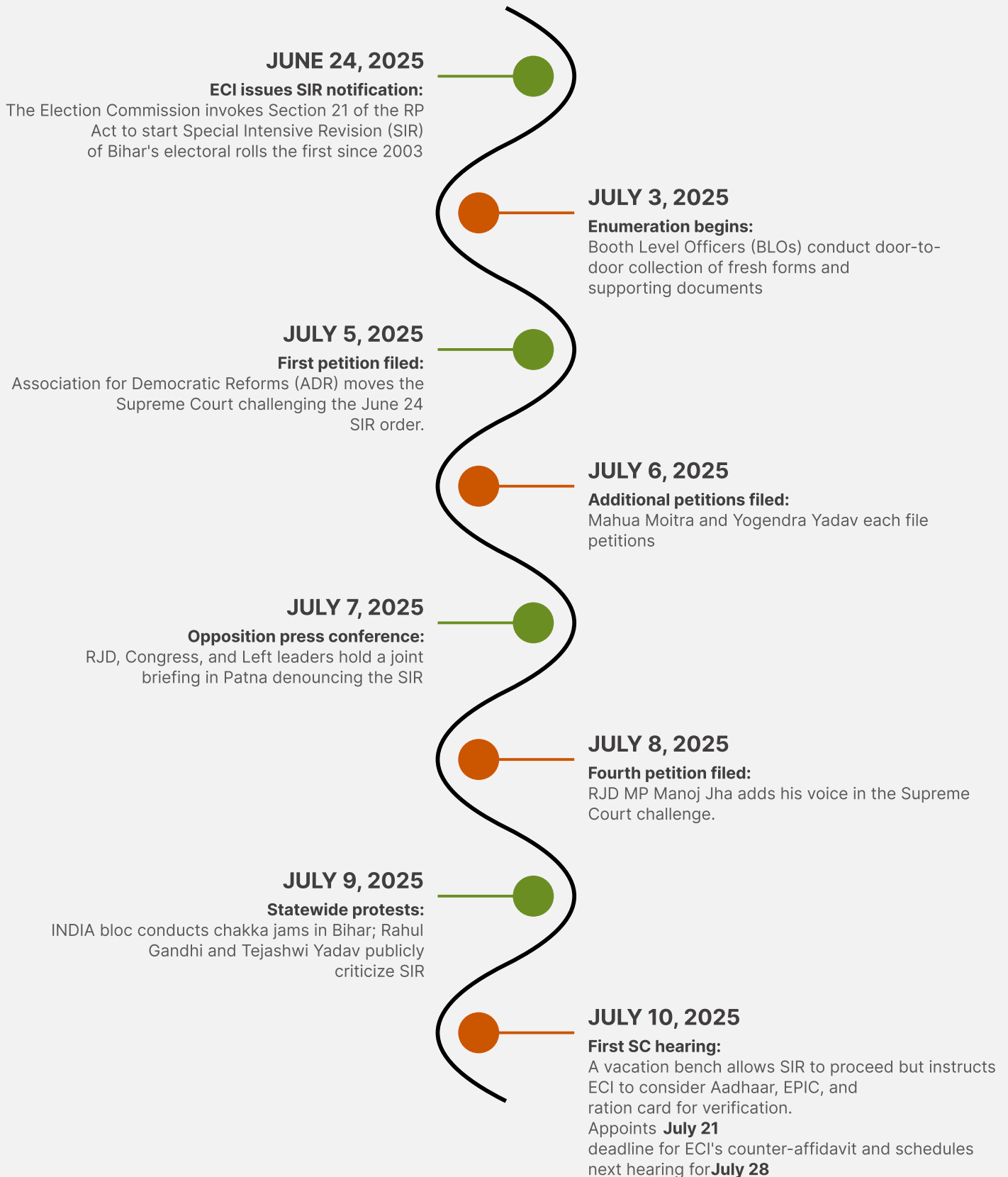


The SIR exercise has continued over the month of July with the ECI periodically releasing figures of percentage of enumeration forms collected vis-a-vis the number of eligible voters as per the 2003 list. Barring media reports and a sample survey of 700 people conducted by civil society groups<sup>5</sup>, there has been no large-scale independent verification of these figures. As testimonies presented at a public hearing on the SIR exercise in Patna on 21st July illustrated, the chaos on the ground is widespread and the process laid out by the ECI is not being followed, simply because it cannot be followed in the unrealistic timelines set by the ECI. According to Swami, Shastri and Yadav (2024)<sup>6</sup>, “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, voters discovered on the ECI website that they could not fill their form as it had already been submitted.”

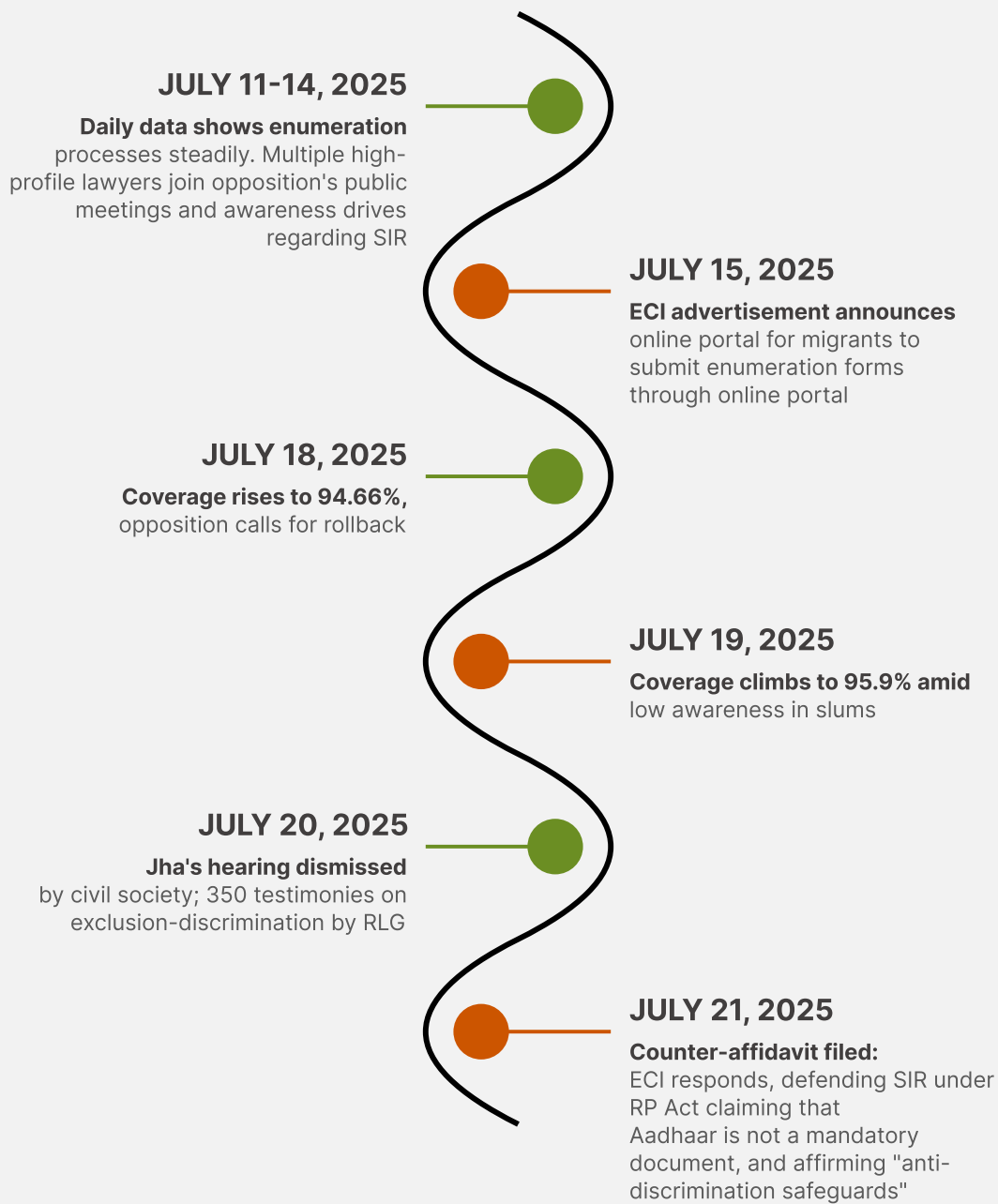
5. Swami, Shastri and Yadav (9th July 2025) In Bihar, it's not just about a voter list [https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/in-bihar-its-not-just-about-a-voter-list-10114638/lite/?fbclid=IwY2xjawLv5\\_NleHRuA2FlbQixMQABHiISlou7obi-daztRzqrPbBtaf6awoKTJkiJVJIODHf-DXfw8cazwOJn1D0c\\_aem\\_2sUjIw9J8lZT62tqzCgJXg](https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/in-bihar-its-not-just-about-a-voter-list-10114638/lite/?fbclid=IwY2xjawLv5_NleHRuA2FlbQixMQABHiISlou7obi-daztRzqrPbBtaf6awoKTJkiJVJIODHf-DXfw8cazwOJn1D0c_aem_2sUjIw9J8lZT62tqzCgJXg)

6. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/yogendra-yadav-writes-on-ground-in-bihar-election-commission-of-india-writes-a-dystopian-fiction-10145438/>

Finally, a 789 page counter affidavit was filed by the ECI on 21st July 2025. This report is being released to provide some insight into the experience of migrant workers prior to the next hearing of petitions in the Supreme Court on July 28th, in the hope that it provides further evidence of how a hasty and poorly conceived exercise can cause much havoc and put an unfair burden on workers who already face high levels of precarity and marginalisation.









## Methodology of the rapid survey

From the database of all the migrant workers that SWAN had interacted with during the national lockdown, we selected those workers whose home state was Bihar. This gave us a total of 1,943 phone numbers and we additionally got 76 phone numbers of migrant workers from the activist Sanjay Sahni who is based in Muzaffarpur, Bihar. This gave us a total of 2,019 phone numbers. We sent out a call for volunteers and a total of 29 student volunteers participated as enumerators in this phone survey. After a training session, followed by a pilot, the survey questionnaire was revised and the phone survey was conducted on July 19th, 20th and 21st. Calls were attempted to 1,411 workers. Of which, we finally managed to conduct the survey of 338 workers yielding a call success rate of 24 percent.

The questionnaire was divided into 4 sections. In the first section we asked basic demographic information such as age, gender, which district the respondents are from in Bihar, where the respondents are now and for how long they have been in the location where they are now. The next section dealt with assessing their awareness of the ongoing SIR process in Bihar; whether they have heard of the SIR process, whether they are aware of the documents needed for this and whether they have heard or used the online portal to submit the required forms and documents for SIR. The next section was just stock taking of what common documents such as Aadhaar card, Voter id card, Ration card etc they have and which of the 11 documents specified by the Election Commission do they possess. This was followed by asking whether any official had visited their house in Bihar for the SIR exercise and what kind of information and documents such officials collected. The survey ended by asking their feedback on the SIR exercise, and if they wished to disclose their caste, religion, income and any other comments they had.

## 3. Findings

Out of a total of 338 workers who were surveyed, 72 were in Bihar at the time of the survey, while 262 were away from Bihar at the time of the survey. We could not ascertain the location of four workers. For those questions, where there is no evident difference between those in Bihar and those not in Bihar, we present the results for the overall sample. When there is a discernible difference, we present the results separately. Unless explicitly needed, all the percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number for the ease of readability.

### 3.1 Demographics & Wages

- Among those who were not in Bihar, the top five states where the workers were: Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.
- The respondents were predominantly male (95%) and the average age of the respondents was 34 years.
- In our sample, roughly 80 percent of the workers identify themselves as Hindus and 19 percent identified themselves as Muslims. As per Census 2011, there are roughly 82.6 percent Hindus and 16.8 percent Muslims. So, our sample is more or less in synchrony with the religious distribution of people in Bihar.
- Table 1 shows the caste composition in our sample and the caste composition as per the 2022 Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC).

**Table 1:**

**Caste composition in our sample versus 2022 Bihar's SECC**

	Caste composition in our sample	Caste composition as per Bihar's 2022 SECC
OBC	28.4	27.1
General	24.6	15.5
SC	16.3	19.6
ST	1.5	1.6

As can be observed in [Table 1](#), those in the ‘General’ category are over-represented in our sample compared to the Bihar caste census while the number of SCs are three percentage points lower in our sample compared to the Bihar caste census. But the proportion of OBCs in our sample is very similar to that obtained in the caste census. While Bihar’s 2022 caste census explicitly counted the Economically Backward Class (EBC) category, we did not do so in our survey.<sup>7</sup>

- [Table 2](#) provides the type of employment that the workers in our sample have engaged in.

**Table 2:**

**Type of employment in Bihar and those not in Bihar**

	Respondents in Bihar (%)	Respondents away from Bihar (in %)
Factory/Construction	33	62
Self Employed	25	20
Other	36	11

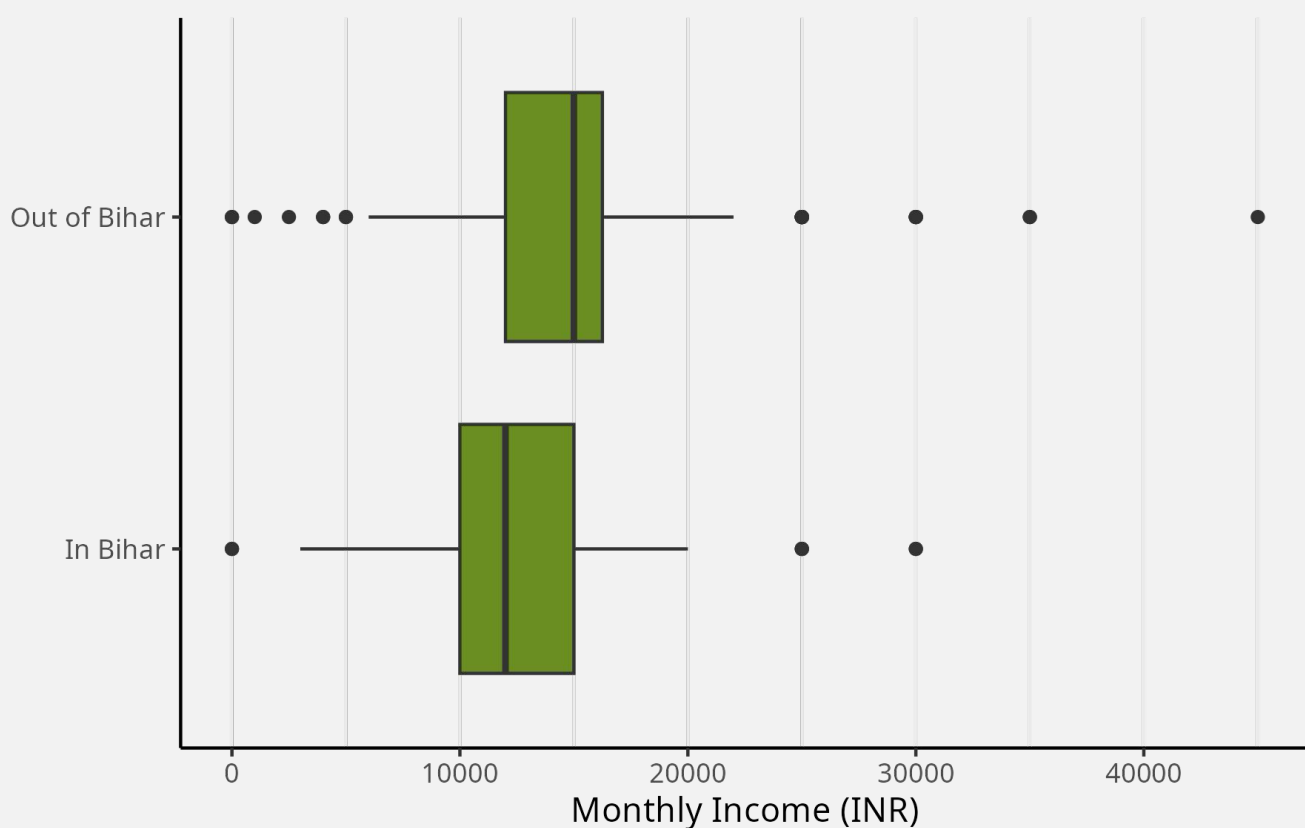
- Similarly, in terms of earnings frequency, there is a disparity between those in Bihar and those working outside. While 44 percent of those interviewed in Bihar were getting their wages monthly, this was 64 percent among those working outside Bihar. And, while 42 percent of those in Bihar were daily wage workers, this was just 23 percent among those working outside Bihar. Nearly 15 percent among those in Bihar and outside got their wages weekly or fortnightly. It must be noted that monthly frequency of getting wages does not imply that the workers were regular salaried workers. For instance, there were a lot of workers working on a piece rate basis and the wages depended on the number of tasks completed within a specific period but their wages were paid each month.

7. As we have indicated in previous Stranded Worker Action Network Reports published in 2020 and 2021, the database of migrant workers was not created with an intent to conduct a study or a survey and was not designed to be a representative sample in any way. It was a database that was put together as workers reached out to SWAN for relief during the national lockdown.

- **Figure 1** (known as a boxplot) shows the distribution of income among the respondents. The bold vertical line in the middle of the box is the median. The average income among all the respondents is Rs 14,735 per month. The median income is Rs 14,500 and 75 percent of the respondents earned less than Rs 17,000 per month. From Figure 1, it can be seen that those not in Bihar tend to earn more than those in Bihar as the income distribution of those not in Bihar is shifted to the right. In fact, in our sample, 75 percent of those in Bihar earn less than Rs 17,000 per month, which is what 50 percent of those not in Bihar earn. For all the migrant workers, the cost of essentials such as food, housing and healthcare in cities is high and they have to save from these earnings for remittance to home as well. As such, the amount is barely sufficient to make ends meet.

**Figure 1:**

Income distribution among the surveyed workers



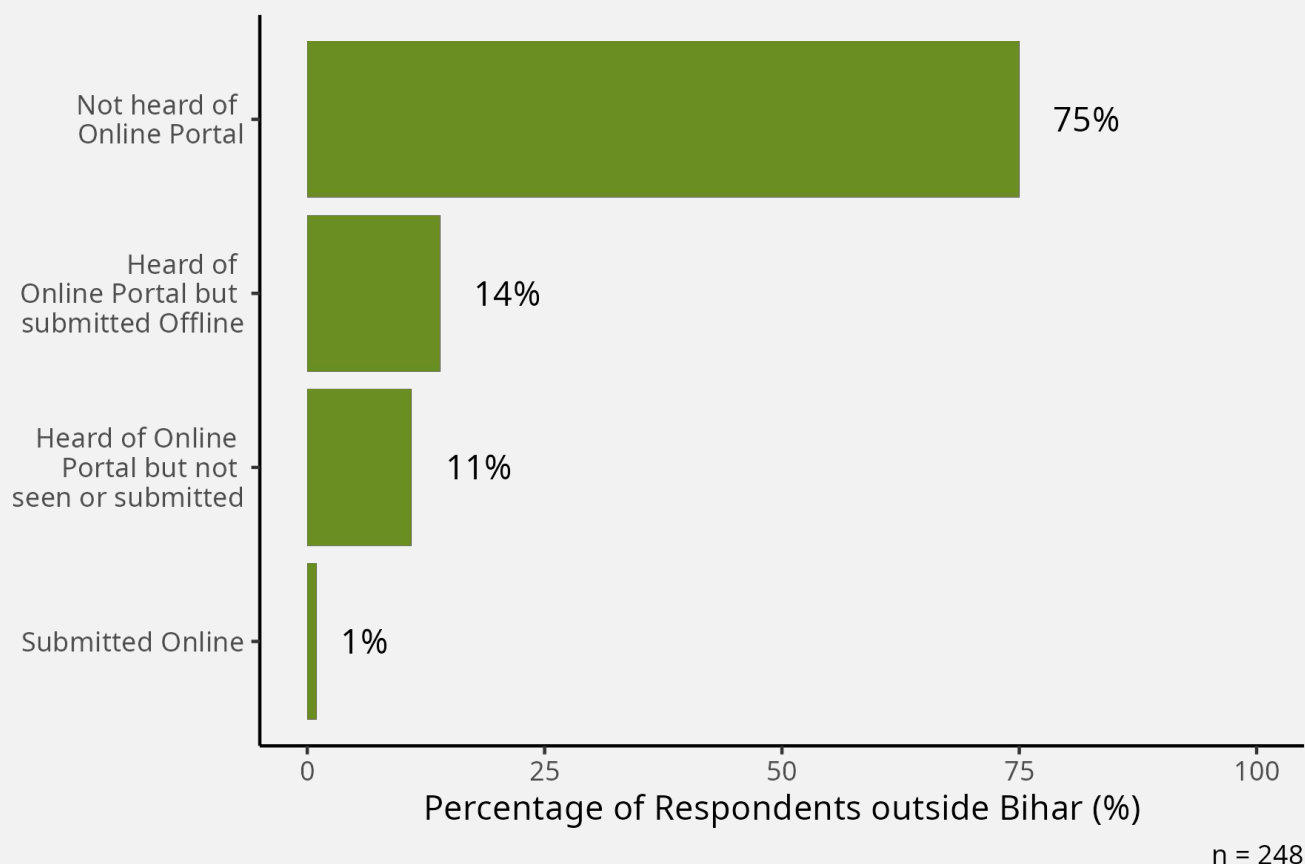
n = 332

## 3.2 Voting: Past & Intent

- Overall, 54 percent had voted in the 2020 Assembly Elections in Bihar. There was a sharp difference among those in Bihar and those away. Nearly 71 percent among those in Bihar had voted in the 2020 Bihar Assembly elections in comparison to just 49 percent among those outside Bihar.
- There was a similar marked difference in the voting patterns in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections as well. Whereas nearly three out of four in Bihar had voted in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, this was just 53 percent among those not in Bihar.
- The difference is relatively less stark among those who intend to vote in the forthcoming Assembly elections in Bihar. Nearly 84 percent of the workers in Bihar said that they intend voting in the forthcoming elections 70 percent who are not in Bihar said that they intend voting in the forthcoming elections.

## 3.3 Regarding SIR

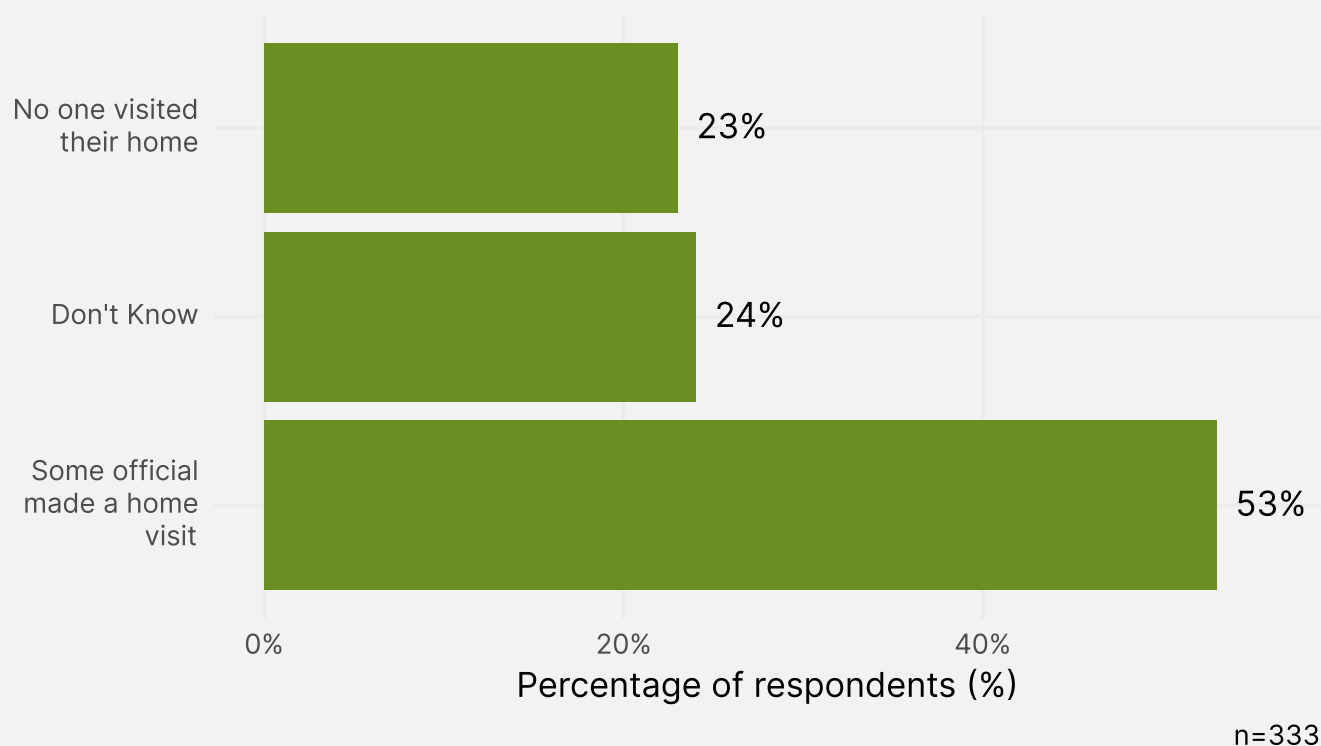
- For the question on whether people had heard about SIR, there were a significant number of missing entries. The numbers for this in Bihar are very low. However, among those not in Bihar who responded to this question (out of 83), 90 percent had not even heard of the SIR exercise.
- On the question of whether workers were aware of what documents to provide for the SIR process, out of a total of 219 respondents, 68 percent did not have the correct information on what documents are required for SIR.
- Figure 2 shows the awareness and usage of the online portal created for SIR verification exercise. The numbers are concerning. Three out of four workers who are not in Bihar at the moment, had not even heard of the online portal to submit the enumeration form for SIR, 14 percent had heard about it but submitted offline, 11 percent had just heard but not seen or submitted online, while only 2 people, i.e., less than 1 percent had submitted online. (overall n=248).

**Figure 2:****Awareness and usage of the online portal for SIR**

- 47 out of 72 workers we spoke with in Bihar right now said that some official had visited their house regarding the SIR exercise. Even among those in Bihar, 21 out of 47 said that no official visited their house. In contrast, out of 258 workers not in Bihar now for whom we received this information, half of them said that some official had visited their house in Bihar, roughly 21 percent said nobody visited their house while about 29 percent did not know whether somebody visited or not. Since there is no discernible difference for this between those in Bihar and those not in Bihar, Figure 3 shows the situation among all the workers surveyed in our sample of 333 workers.

## Figure 3:

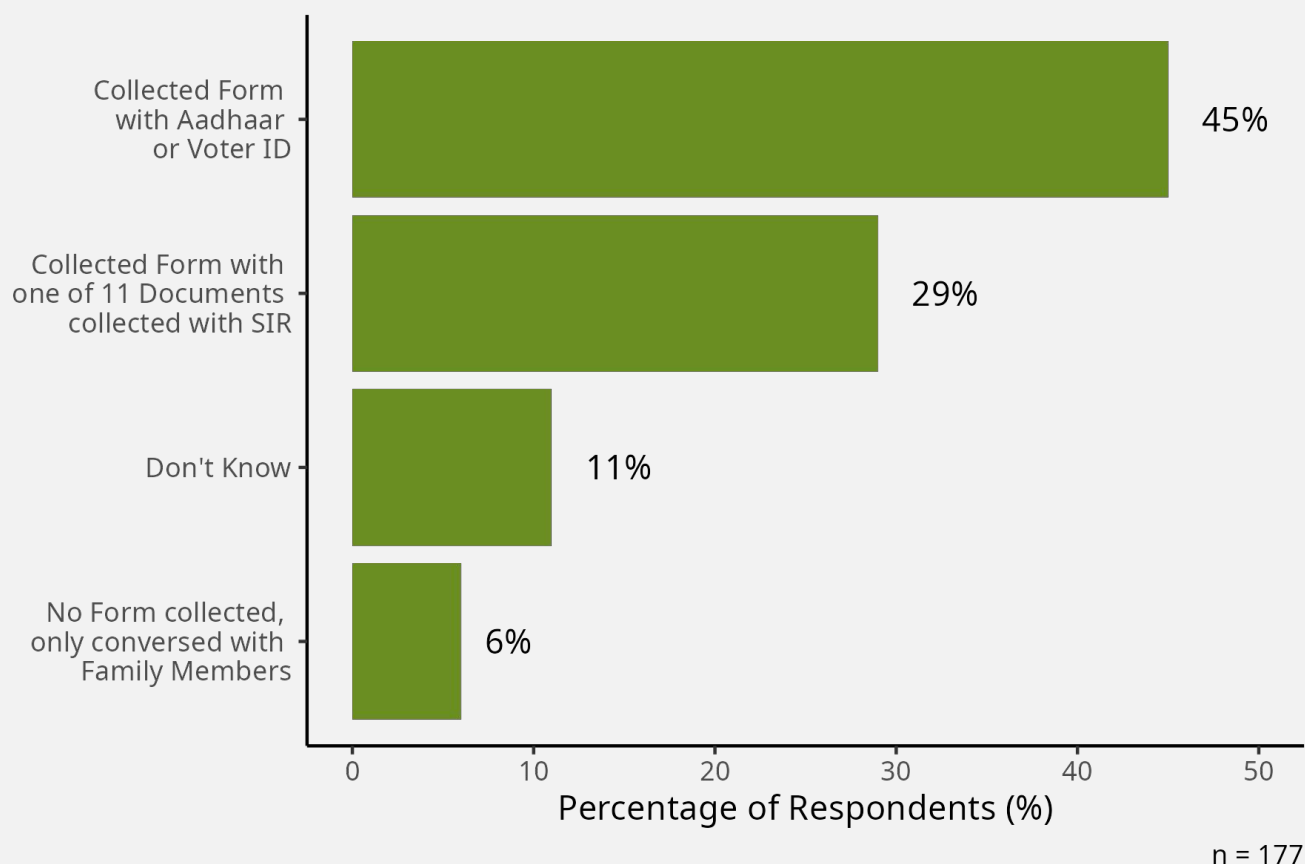
### Reported incidence of home visits by Officials:



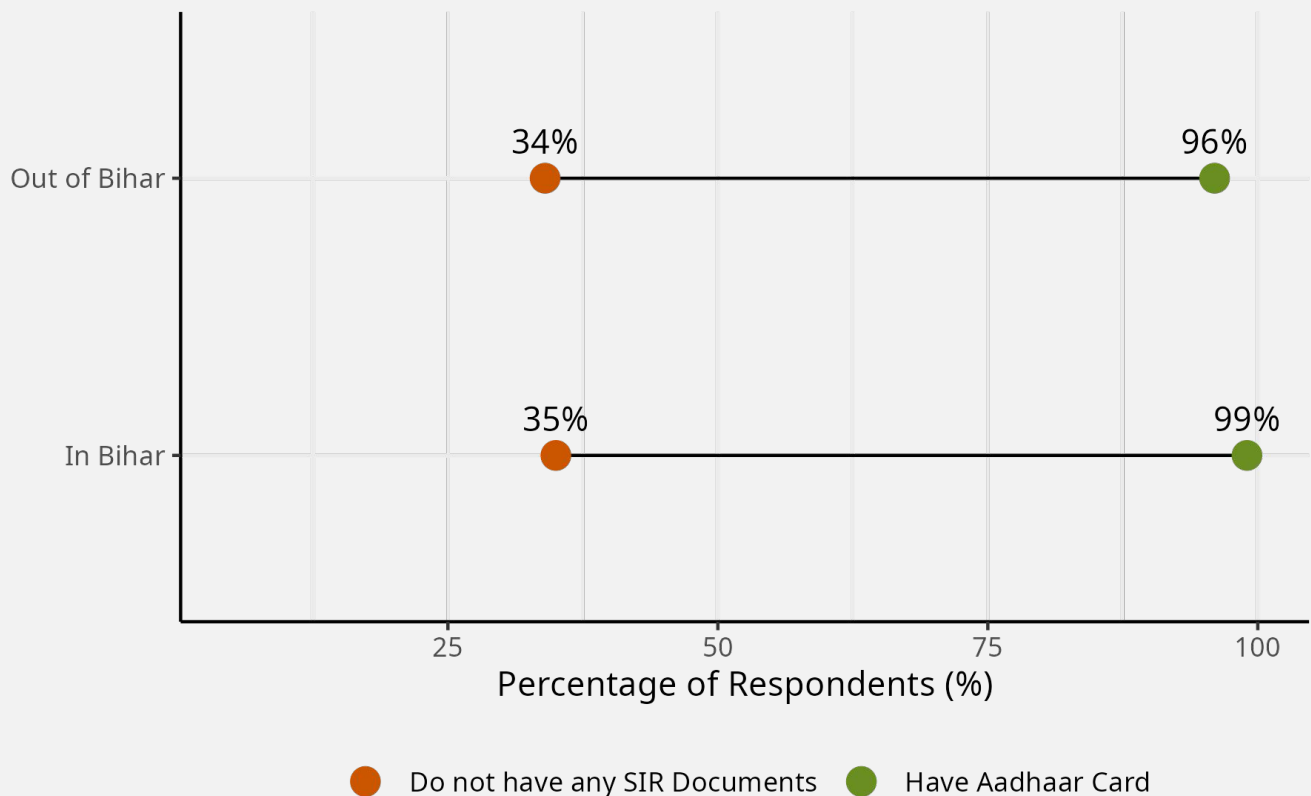


## Figure 4:

### Documents collected from home by Officials

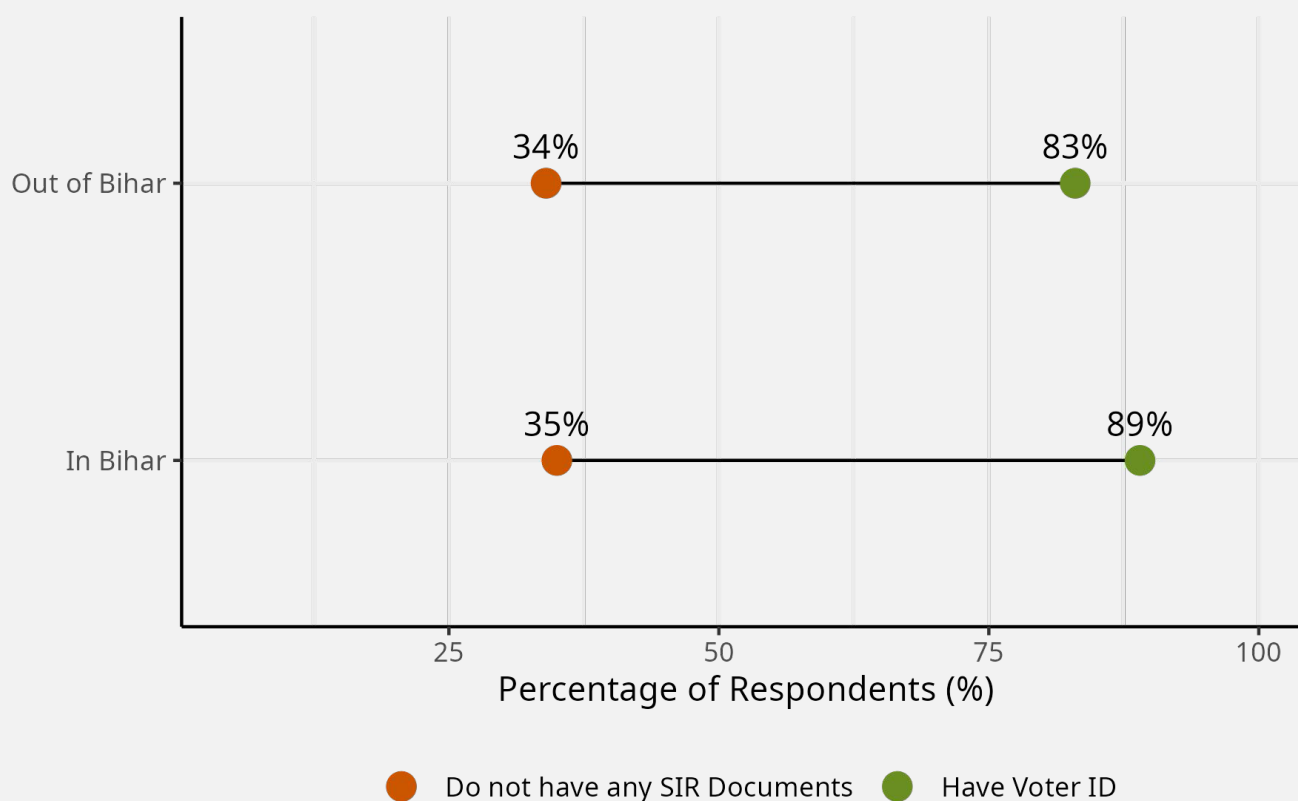


- Figure 4 shows that among those who said that some official visited their house for enumeration (n = 177), about 45 percent said that the enumerator collected either Aadhaar or voter id with the form. In 29 percent of the cases, the official collected the form along with one of the 11 documents. Nearly 11 percent did not know. For roughly one in ten, the official only took the form without any documents. For about 6 percent, the official didn't even take the form but only conversed with the members in the household.

**Figure 5:****Prevalence of Aadhaar vs lack of prevalence of SIR**

n = 332

- Figure 5 demonstrates the sharp contrast between the documents required through SIR and prevalence of Aadhaar cards among the migrant workers. Nearly 35 percent of the workers – in Bihar and out of Bihar – do not have any of the 11 documents but 99 percent of those in Bihar have their Aadhaar card and 96 percent of those not in Bihar have their Aadhaar card.

**Figure 6:****Prevalence of Voter ID vs lack of prevalence of SIR**

n = 332

- Figure 6 once again demonstrates the sharp contrast between the documents required through SIR and prevalence of voter id cards among the migrant workers. Where a little over one in three workers do not have any of the SIR documents, more than one in eight have voter id cards. Nearly 83 percent of those not in Bihar and 89 percent of those in Bihar had their voter id cards. Overall, almost 69 percent had pan cards and 64 percent had ration cards. Only one in six who are away from Bihar had a NREGA job card while one in five in Bihar had a NREGA job card.

- Among those who have at least one of the 11 documents mandated in the SIR, 46% have a matriculation or university approved certificate, half have a caste certificate, 30% have a domicile certificate and about 39% have a birth certificate. One sees that those who have one of these documents tend to have a few other documents too.
- As per the ECI's guidelines, anyone whose name was not recorded in the 2003 electoral rolls must establish their eligibility to be an elector and submit proof of the indicative list of the SIR documents. We find that 81 percent of all those in our sample that turned 18 after 2003 have a voter id. And, among them, one in three do not have any of the SIR documents.
- When asked if the new SIR process was required, 45 percent of all the workers said that the older process using Aadhaar or existing voter id is better about 29 percent did not know. About 26 percent felt that the new SIR process was alright.

## 3.4 Qualitative insights<sup>8</sup>

### Fear of disenfranchisement

As noted above, most migrant workers, especially those who were in Bihar at the time of the interview, are keen to participate in the upcoming assembly elections and expressed a mix of anger and wariness around an exercise that could potentially deprive them of their right to vote.

"aise kaise ho sakta hai hi ek form nahi bharne se vote nahi de payenge. Jo insan murkh hai, bahar kamata khata hai, wo kaise bharega form. Yeh koi baat hua?"

Rumours and stories of officials telling people during the SIR exercise that names would be deleted from voter lists if the required identity proofs were not provided in time, had travelled quickly. The counter affidavit filed by the ECI seeks to allay the assumption being made by many migrant workers and their families in Bihar that they will be disenfranchised arguing that a petition cannot be entertained on "mere suspicion of infringement of rights"<sup>9</sup>. However, this rapid survey reveals that the fear remains real. Several referred to family members and neighbours whose names had been cut from the voter list with common refrains such as "jiska naam hai who bhi kat raha hai".

Some workers who were able to afford the journey, had travelled back to their homes in panic. Saleem, a migrant worker who was based in Mumbai explained, "A teacher came to my neighbour's house, filled the form and submitted documents at the middle school. I heard in the news that people's forms were getting thrown away. My family and I cannot afford to have our names deleted from the list. That is why I came home to Bihar from Mumbai."

8. Names of the workers have been changed to ensure anonymity.

9. Counter affidavit filed by ECI, page 13

While some subscribed to rumours and false narratives about the verification exercise being targeted at identifying and eliminating ineligible voters from neighbouring Bangladesh, others were more discerning. As Imran, from Saran district, currently working in Haryana in a factory noted, “Bihar mein Bangladeshi nahi hai. Yeh ek saajish hai” (There are no Bangladeshi’s here, this is a conspiracy).

### **Vulnerability and unaffordability**

Migrant workers pointed to the already precarious position they are in and its further intensification by this exercise. Sujeet Ram, a 40 year old worker from Vaishali district who is currently in Tirupur, Tamil Nadu working in a factory highlighted the double bind workers like him have been put in

“Bihar se hum 3000 kms door aaye hain. Bihar mein rozgar nahi hai toh majboori mein aate hai aur bahut cheez se vanchit ho jaate hain. Iske baare mein bhi sarkar ko sochna chahiye. Itna hadbadi mein sab maangenge to kaise chalega”

Vikram Giri, a migrant worker from Samastipur district, currently based in Mumbai also expressed anguish at the compulsion that has been placed on migrant workers like him,

“Agar vote ki baat hai toh jaana hi padega . Dihadi majdoor hai kitna hi kamate hai? Pardesi aadmi kaise dega itna paisa aur kaise banvayega kaagaz”.

Mohan Kumar from Buxar district in Bihar is currently working in Ludhiana expressed his frustration in a sharper tone,

“yeh sab gareeb aadmi ko pareshaan karne ke liye kiya ja raha hai. Agar kisi ke paas document nahi hai, toh kahaan jaayega? Gardan kaat ke leke aaye kya?”

The absence of women’s voices from this report is notable. Very few women answered the phone and of those who did answer, most did not provide much information. One woman had moved from Bihar to Goa with her husband for work. Despite being away from the state for years, their identity documents tied them to Bihar and she said that they intended to return to vote. However, she expressed difficulties in procuring new documents as the government’s requirements keep changing.

### **Minorities**

Migrant workers from religious minorities were particularly apprehensive of the exercise. One worker expressed this in stark terms, comparing the repeated demands to prove one’s identity to refreshing one’s phone screen,

“Dekhiye kaisa mahaul chal raha hai, hum Muslim hai. Baar baar pehchaan banani padti hai. Phone jaise refresh karte hai, vaise karna padta hai, kisi ki death hui ho, ya kuch. Par humaara haq hai, abhi sarkaar kya chahti hai kya pata. humaare saath galat nahi hona chahiye, Humaara haq humse cheena nahi jaaye. Baaki sarkaar ko karne do.”

**Cautionary support for the exercise**

Some expressed support for the exercise, with caveats that those who are genuine and eligible should not be left out. According to Kishore, a migrant worker from Vaishali district currently based in Tirupur, Tamil Nadu lauded the exercise for removing “duplicates” but simultaneously pointed out the possibilities of exclusion.

“Jaise sarkar chalegi, humein karna padhega. Jo duplicate hai us par karyawahi honi chahiye. Joh original hai woh theek hai. Joh vanchhit hai unke liye yeh prakriya theek hai, jinke paas certificate nahi hai, woh ab vanchhit ho jayenge.”

## 4. Discussion

The 789 page “counter affidavit” filed by the ECI to the Supreme Court of India on July 21st, 2025 says Bihar is where such an SIR process will be tested and the exercise would be extended to the whole country. As per the affidavit, the enumeration form to be collected by the Booth Level Officers (BLOs) includes details of the applicant such as “data of birth, Aadhaar number (optional), mobile number, name of parents/legal guardian/spouse along with their EPIC numbers, if available.” In addition, it says that “the applicant is required to declare that they are 18 years of age and a citizen of India by birth/registration or naturalization.” And, depending on the date of birth, “the applicant is required to support the enumeration form from a wide ranging indicative list of government issued documents to demonstrate fulfilment of the conditions as set out in Article 326 read with the RP Act, 1950.” In addition, the BLOs are required to visit each house three times at least in case the house is found to be locked. Clause 41 of the counter affidavit says “That people who have temporarily migrated outside Bihar can also fill the Enumeration form online using their mobiles through the ECINet app” or through an online portal. Additionally, it says “the ECI is using all possible means of communication to ensure that the migrant work-force of Bihar is duly informed about the SIR.” Outlining other modes of submitting enumeration forms for migrants such as sending it by WhatsApp to BLOs or their family members, the affidavit says that “therefore it is not likely that the migrants would be deprived of an opportunity to get enrolled in the electoral roll which is being prepared through the SIR.”

Despite these procedures being put in place and clarifications and safeguards from exclusions being hastily announced, the testimonies of migrant workers illustrate low levels of confidence in the process. Initiatives which have sought to directly reach out to migrant workers and facilitate their access to the process through a web portal also appear to be little more than an eyewash with most migrant workers in this study unaware of such a provision.

The survey has also highlighted the poor availability of “eligible” documents, in contrast to the claims in the ECI’s affidavit. For instance, according to the recently concluded caste census in Bihar, the total population of Bihar is around 13.7 crores. Page 39 of the affidavit says that “13.89 crores residence certificates have been issued from 2011 to 2025.” This implies that there are more residence certificates than the number of residents. And, in our sample, a mere 32 out 338 have any residence certificate. According to the General Administration Department, Bihar dated 21st July, 2025 (as claimed in the affidavit), more than 8.72 crore caste certificates have been issued. That is, roughly 63 percent of all residents of Bihar have a caste certificate. According to the Education Department, Government of Bihar (as claimed in the affidavit), more than 2.86 crores matriculation/educational certificates have been issued from 1980 to 2025. According to our sample, more than one in three workers have none of the SIR documents, let alone caste certificates.



Unsurprisingly then, a large fraction of the workers we spoke to questioned the necessity of the SIR and expressed a strong preference for the older process of using Aadhaar or existing voter ids. As several migrant workers indicated, the process laid out by the ECI is scarcely being followed in any case, bringing the veracity and credibility of the entire exercise into question and rendering it largely futile.

While the affidavit claims that more than 90 percent of the enumeration forms have been collected, the experience of migrants SWAN spoke with seems to present a differing picture. This report has attempted to document the awareness and experiences of migrant workers and the struggles faced by them in complying with the stringent requirements imposed by the ECI to ensure that their names are not struck off the electoral rolls. Notwithstanding the practical challenges in conducting the SIR drive, as many commentators have said, for the first time in the history of independent India this whole process appears to invert the presumption of citizenship by transferring the burden of proof from the state to the citizen. Article 326 of the Constitution of India stipulates that “every person who is a citizen of India and who is not less than twenty-one years of age ... shall be entitled to be registered as a voter”. Through the 61st Amendment in 1988, the voting age in India changed from 21 to 18. Further, a reading together of Articles 5 and 10 shows that citizenship in India must be based on birth and residence and provides protective clauses against loss of citizenship.

As Bihar and other states face the polls in a few months from today, the purpose, benefits and exclusions produced by such a verification exercise must be put to vigorous public debate, not once the exercise is fait accompli. In the case of Bihar, once the verified voter lists based on the SIR are published, a systematic public verification must be undertaken with due attention to the inclusion and experiences of marginalised groups. Of these migrant workers are amongst those who are most likely to be excluded and the current safeguards are simply not enough. Notwithstanding the impracticality of such a hasty exercise, the interaction with the migrant workers leads us to believe that SIR exercise will disenfranchise millions of people in Bihar. This further pushes us to suggest that the SIR exercise must be revoked without further delay.