

SIR pause on way to a billion electorate

The SIR has trimmed India's electoral roll by removing absent, shifted, dead, and duplicate names, leading to record turnout percentages across States despite shrunken electorates; while the exercise strengthens the accuracy of the roll, the challenge now

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Tamil Nadu finished its singleday poll on April 23 with a record turnout of over 85%, surpassing the earlier best of 78.29% in 2011 and a huge 12% higher than the 73.63% turnout in the last Assembly election. The base for the turnout was a trimmeddown electorate of 5.67 crore. While factoring in the highoctane political contest and mobilisation, the turnout rate would arguably be lower if the State electoral roll had retained “ghost electors” — the dead, shifted, absent, and duplicate names — that existed as of October 2025, when the special intensive revision (SIR) kicked in. Similar trend is seen in West Bengal, with a turnout of 92.88% in the first phase. Assam, Puducherry, and Kerala also delivered record turnouts earlier this month, all following the pattern of shrunken electorates. Therein lies a story.



Before the turn

In the runup to its 75th Foundation Day on January 25 last year, also called the National Voters' Day, the Election Commission (EC) announced a grand celebration ‘in light of the fact that India's total electorate is approaching the 100crore mark.’ That was a wellmade observation by available arithmetic. The electoral database then stood at 99.1 crore, including 21.7 crore young voters aged 18-29. The steadily rising electoral gender ratio had further jumped from

948 in 2024 to 954. With an estimated population of 1.4 billion, India went into the last Lok Sabha elections with 96.88 crore registered voters. International observers have long watched in awe the elephantine Indian electorate, with the United States a distant second and countries such as Brazil and Indonesia trailing far behind. As the SIR completed its second phase earlier this month, India's grand list of electors appears poised to be significantly reversing its advance, though it may still be celebrated for other reasons.

India's electorate has been growing constantly, keeping pace with population growth. The logic is simple: all citizens above the age of 18, unless otherwise disqualified, are to be included in the electoral roll of their respective constituencies, where they are ordinarily resident. Broadly estimated at 75% of the population, a billion voters would look natural in the case of a wholesome registration. Interestingly, the electorate has often grown faster; during the 1951-2021 period, the population grew fourfold, from 36 crore to 138 crore, while the electorate grew more than fivefold, from 17 crore to 91 crore.

Starting with 17.32 crore electors in 1951, India's electoral roll has swelled steadily year after year, except for minor aberrations after accounting for births and deaths by lakhs of ground-level staff. Each January, the country releases updated and revised electoral rolls based on a summary revision with reference to 1st January.

The SIR twist

But then came SIR 2025. The revision, which has already covered 13 States and Union Territories, including Bihar in the first phase, has disrupted the usual elector count based on the logic of growing population. In the 12 States and Union Territories where SIR was ordered on October 27 last year — spanning 321

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districts and 1,843 Assembly constituencies — the number of electors has dropped to less than 46 crore from a base of 51 crore. All major States, such as Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Gujarat, and Chhattisgarh, have each reported a reduction of more than 10%. Much of the downsizing is due to the removal of ASDD names (absent, shifted, dead, or doubly enrolled), purification being a basic purpose of any electoral revision. States such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have a history of job-related migration, warranting the removal of names. The ASDD burden has also accumulated because the last SIR was conducted between 2002 and 2004.

In substantial consideration, SIR entails drafting a new roll, compared to annual revisions, which are corrections on the existing list. But notably, there are a sizable number of deletions on account of nonreturn of enumeration forms, nontraceability of persons, objections received through the designated Form 7, and, importantly, for failing the eligibility criteria stipulated for electors under the Constitution, determined through verification of documents. With the burden of proof shifting to the citizen, for a sizeable section of the population, the SIR has been like reearning the franchise.

Additions factored

During the SIR process, the trimming is most visible at the draft roll stage and is largely driven by ASDD factors. There is,

however, some recovery on the way to the final roll, thanks to fresh enrolments. In Uttar Pradesh, the initial roll of 15.44 crore slumped to a draft of 12.55 crore, before rising to a final tally of 13.39 crore following substantial additions. Tamil Nadu started with a list of 6.41 crore, which fell to 5.44 crore in the draft roll, but the net final roll was of 5.67 crore electors. In June last year, Bihar started the intensive revision with a base of 7.89 crore electors and ended up with a final roll of 7.42 crore, improving upon the published draft of 7.24 crore. West Bengal, however, has been a different case, with issues of logical discrepancies affecting the final roll and spilling over into politics and the streets.

Reverse journey

Close to 60 crore of India's electors have already gone through the SIR exercise. The aggregate number has declined by nearly six crores even after additions. The remaining 40 crore electors, spread across 23 States and U.T.s, are now preparing for the scrutiny. With standard extrapolation, by the time SIR is completed across the country, the size of India's electorate could fall to around 90 crore.

The stated goal of SIR is to ensure that all eligible citizens, including newly eligible youth and temporary migrants, are included in the electoral roll. The details of the postSIR final rolls, especially the addition of new electors, bear testimony to this effort. But the activity missed the profile, drowned in the overwhelming narrative of deletion.

In recent years, inclusivity has been a key focus in electoral roll management, addressing gender disparities, improving youth cohorts, and ensuring that persons with disabilities, the third gender community, and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) are fully enrolled in a campaign mode.

Crux of democracy

India has prided itself on both the scale and quality of its elections over the last 75 years. The starting manifestation of both these is in the country's electoral roll. The litmus test for a credible election begins with the accuracy and completeness of the electoral roll and culminates in the general acceptance of the electoral outcome. Despite the scepticism from Western powers at the dawn of India's independence, the country has stood firm in sustaining an electoral democracy through credible and respectful exercise of the franchise. This is an outstanding fact, irrespective of the recent disputes over the electoral process and management. All interventions, including SIR, have to strengthen the cause.

Renew focus on inclusion

The SIR is not the answer to the alleged adulteration of demography by noncitizens or infiltrators, nor is the EC in charge of policing this part. However, the SIR has cured the electoral roll of its obesity, giving it a new look. The quantitative expansion of India's electoral roll has received a discernible pause.

It is now for election managers to ensure and provide all stakeholders with the confidence that the new slim roll is accurate and free of disenfranchisement. Concerns that the SIR process, in its uncompromising pursuit, should not strip people and groups of their democratic rights on technical grounds must not be seen as hostile.

After the highprofile focus on removing ineligible names, the EC should now invest its energy in reaffirming its celebrated resolve that no eligible voter is left behind.