Special Intensive Revision of Electoral Rolls

This editorial is based on "India needs an SIR because of Manmohan Singh government's Aadhaar policies", which was published in The Indian Express on 29/09/2025. The article discusses how the dilution of citizenship criteria in Aadhaar enrolment and its linkage with electoral rolls has allowed illegal immigrants to infiltrate voter lists, undermining the integrity of Indian democracy and national security, thereby necessitating urgent and comprehensive revision of electoral rolls nationwide.

For Prelims: **Election Commission of India (ECI), Special Intensive Revision (SIR)**, **Electoral Rolls**, **Representation of the People Act, 1950**

For Mains: Need for Conducting a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of Electoral Rolls, Key Challenges Involved in Conducting a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of Electoral Rolls

The **Election Commission of India (ECI)** has launched a **Special Intensive Revision (SIR)** of electoral rolls in **Bihar**, covering **8 crore voters** through fresh enumeration forms. As part of a planned **national SIR**, all electors are required to resubmit forms and documents, especially those added after the last revision. This **challenging exercise**, given its massive scale and verification workload, will conclude with the publication of the **final electoral roll** ahead of the **Assembly elections**.

What is the Special Intensive Revision of Electoral Rolls?

- **About: SIR** is a **comprehensive**, **door-to-door verification** and **update of electoral rolls** undertaken by the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** to ensure **accurate** and **error-free voter lists**.
- **Legal Basis:** Conducted under **Section 21(3) of the Representation of the People Act, 1950**, and empowered by **Article 324 of the Constitution**, allowing the **ECI discretionary powers** to **revise rolls** as it deems fit.
- **Key Features:**
  - **Intensive house-to-house verification** by **Booth Level Officers (BLOs)**.
  - **Inclusion** of **eligible voters**, **deletion** of **duplicates**, **deceased**, and **ineligible names**.
  - Submission of **documents** for **residency** and **citizenship verification**.
- **Historical Precedent:** Previous **SIRs** have been conducted **intermittently (at least nine times) since the 1950s** in various states, reflecting **evolving priorities** like **migration** and **delimitation**.
  - The **last SIR in Bihar** prior to the ongoing 2025 exercise was conducted in **2003.**

What are Electoral Rolls?

- **About Electoral Rolls:** The electoral roll, also known as the voter's list, includes every person
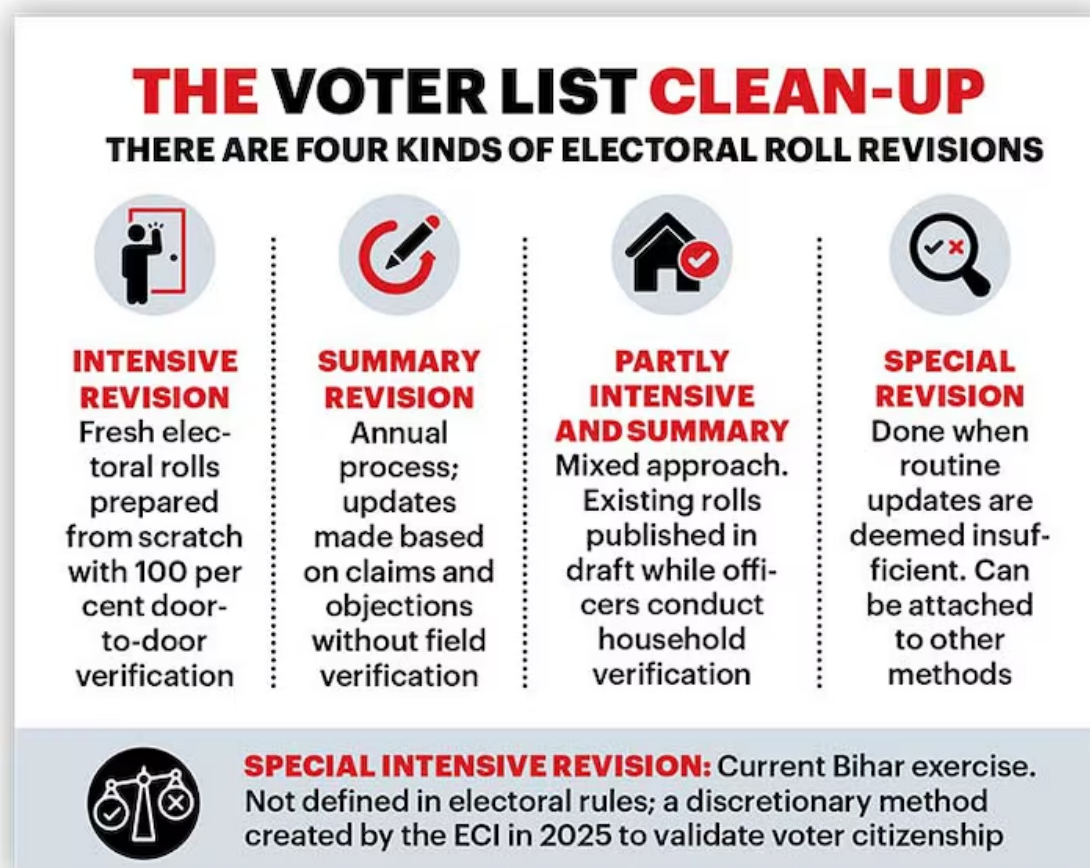
who is registered to vote in a designated area.

- It is **regularly updated** to **add new voters** (typically those who have reached the age of **18**) and **remove individuals** who are **no longer eligible**, such as the **deceased** or those **disqualified by law**.
- The **preparation, revision, and maintenance of electoral rolls** are **enshrined in the Constitution of India** (**Articles 324, 325, 326**) and **governed by the Representation of the People Act, 1950**.

- **Types of Electoral Roll:**
  - **General Electoral Roll:** Lists **ordinary voters** for **Lok Sabha, State Assembly, and local body elections**.
  - **Service Electoral Roll:** Covers **armed forces personnel and government employees** posted outside their **place of ordinary residence**.
  - **Overseas Electoral Roll:** For **Non-Resident Indians (NRIs)** who are **eligible and wish to vote**.
- **Electoral Roll Revision: Electoral roll revision** is the process of **updating and correcting the voter list** to ensure its **accuracy and completeness**.
  - It involves **adding new voters**, **removing names of deceased or disqualified persons**, and **correcting existing entries** before an election.

THE VOTER LIST CLEAN-UP
THERE ARE FOUR KINDS OF ELECTORAL ROLL REVISIONS

INTENSIVE REVISION
Fresh electoral rolls prepared from scratch with 100 per cent door-to-door verification

SUMMARY REVISION
Annual process; updates made based on claims and objections without field verification

PARTLY INTENSIVE AND SUMMARY
Mixed approach. Existing rolls published in draft while officers conduct household verification

SPECIAL REVISION
Done when routine updates are deemed insufficient. Can be attached to other methods

SPECIAL INTENSIVE REVISION: Current Bihar exercise. Not defined in electoral rules; a discretionary method created by the ECI in 2025 to validate voter citizenship

What is the Need for Conducting a Special Intensive Revision of Electoral Rolls?

- **Correction of Long-Standing Errors:** SIR addresses **accumulated errors and omissions** affecting election integrity.
  - Bihar's last SIR was in 2003; the 2025 SIR involves **re-verifying nearly 4.74 crore electors** (60% of the state's electorate) to remove inaccuracies and outdated entries.

- **Elimination of Duplicate and Bogus Voters:** It removes **fraudulent or duplicate entries**, including multiple registrations, preventing **electoral malpractice**.
  - By **eliminating ghost voters and duplicate entries**, the **Special Intensive Revision (SIR)** reinforces the principle of **"one person, one vote"**, thereby **strengthening public trust in democracy**.
- **Inclusion of Newly Eligible Voters:** Ensures **millions of first-time voters** who turned 18 since the last update are included, boosting **voter participation.**
  - Bihar's 2025 SIR targets **8 crore voters**, including many first-time voters.
- **Alignment with Electoral Boundaries & Population Shifts:** Post-delimitation updates ensure rolls **match official constituency boundaries**, critical for **fair representation**.
  - It updates **voter addresses** to reflect population shifts, maintaining **constituency accuracy** and reducing **disenfranchisement of migrants.**
- **Transparency and Public Participation:** SIR adheres to **constitutional provisions (Article 326)** and the **Representation of the People Act**, ensuring eligibility and disqualification rules are followed.
  - Publishing **draft rolls** and inviting **claims and objections** enhances **voter confidence**.
- **Addressing Technological & Policy Upgrades:** SIR supports **digital integration** of electoral rolls and facilitates **policy reforms** like **remote voting for migrants** to enhance accessibility and efficiency.
  - E.g., **Bihar** became the **first Indian state** to pilot **mobile e-voting** in municipal polls via the **E-SECBHR app**, using **blockchain**, **facial recognition**, **biometric scanning**, and **voter ID verification.**
- **Judicial Acceptance:** The Supreme Court in the *Mohinder Singh Gill v. The Chief Election Commissioner Case, 1977,* upheld the **ECI's broad powers** under **Article 324** to ensure **free and fair elections**, including ordering **re-polls** if needed, and emphasised that **judicial review** is restricted during elections as per **Article 329(b)**.
  - It clarified that **ECI can act independently** if laws under **Articles 327 and 328** are silent on any aspect.
    - **Article 327** deals with the power of **Parliament** to make provision with respect to **elections to the Legislature**.
    - **Article 328** deals with the power of the **Legislature of a State** to make provision with respect to **elections to such Legislature**.

What are the Key Challenges Involved in Conducting a Special Intensive Revision of Electoral Rolls?

- **Documentation Barriers for Marginalised Groups:** Vulnerable populations, including **internal migrants, the homeless, and tribal communities**, often lack **formal documents** for voter verification, risking **disenfranchisement**.
  - The **exclusion of widely used IDs** like **Aadhaar**, **ration cards**, or even **voter IDs** can disproportionately impact **underprivileged voters**.
  - Requiring documents such as **birth certificates or legacy records** during electoral roll revisions in India can function as a **de facto citizenship test**, raising serious concerns about the **systematic exclusion of marginalised and minority groups** who often lack such documentation due to **socio-economic and historical reasons**.
- **Inclusion of Illegal Immigrants:** Weak verification mechanisms have allowed **illegal immigrants** to be registered, raising **national security concerns**.
  - **As per CAG's Audit Report of 2021**, Aadhaar numbers stored in the UIDAI database were not supported with documents on the demographic information of the resident, **causing doubts about the correctness and completeness** of **resident's data** collected and stored by UIDAI prior to 2016.
- **Exclusion of Eligible Voters Due to Errors:** Conducting SIR involves **massive fieldwork** with thousands of **Booth Level Officers**; ensuring **adequate training, supervision, and resources**, especially in remote areas, is a major operational challenge.
  - **Human and system errors** during deletion or verification risk leaving out legitimate voters.
  - Past exercises saw **thousands filing claims** post-revision to restore unenrolled names, indicating procedural gaps.

- **Data quality and technological limitations, including** poor initial **data capture**, mismatched records, and **tech infrastructure gaps,** hinder smooth verification.
  - UIDAI admitted in 2021 that **Aadhaar data quality** was insufficient for ensuring voter uniqueness.
- **Political Manipulation Risks:** SIR processes can be **politicised**, with allegations of parties influencing the **inclusion or exclusion of voters** for electoral gains.
  - It may lead to accusations of **gerrymandering and voter suppression** in sensitive states.
- **Lack of Adequate Public Consultation:** In Bihar's **2025 Special Intensive Revision (SIR)** of electoral rolls, a key criticism was the **lack of adequate public consultation**.
  - While the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** allowed political parties to appoint **Booth Level Agents** and invited **claims and objections** on draft rolls, many activists and civil society groups argued that the process was **rushed**, limiting **meaningful public engagement**.
  - This raised concerns about the **transparency, inclusiveness, and legitimacy** of the SIR, especially given Bihar's **complex socio-economic conditions, floods, and high migration rates**.
- **Balancing Security with Democratic Rights:** Ensuring **tight enrollment** is critical for **national security**, but it must be balanced with **citizens' voting rights**.
  - The **Supreme Court mandates inclusive processes** while expecting rigorous prevention of fraudulent enrolment, creating a **delicate legal and ethical challenge**.

What Measures can be Adopted to Enhance the Effectiveness and Inclusiveness of the Special Intensive Revision of Electoral Rolls?

- **Simplify Documentation Requirements:** Accept a range of documents like **Aadhaar, voter ID, and ration cards**, reducing **disenfranchisement** of migrants and marginalised groups.
  - The **Supreme Court of India** recommended that the ECI should consider widely accepted documents like **Aadhaar, voter ID, and ration cards** for updating the rolls.
- **Strengthen Verification Mechanisms:** Strengthen verification by deploying **biometric authentication, facial recognition, and AI cross-checks** to ensure accuracy.
  - Lessons can be drawn from **Bihar's mobile e-voting pilot using blockchain** to curb illegal entries.
- **Enhance Public Awareness and Outreach:** Conduct **awareness campaigns** and provide **accessible grievance redressal mechanisms** to inform citizens about SIR procedures, deadlines, and documentation needs, effective in states like Kerala and Goa.
  - In **Canada**, Elections Canada runs **targeted outreach** to Indigenous populations to ensure high participation in electoral roll updates.
- **Improve Training and Resources for Field Officers:** Equip **Booth Level Officers (BLOs)** with thorough **training, technological tools, and supervision** for accurate door-to-door verification, reducing errors and exclusion.
- **Encourage Political Party Participation: Political neutrality** of the roll process is paramount.
  - Involving **recognised parties** and their **Booth Level Agents (BLAs)** in monitoring **verification, claims, and objections** ensures that deletions and additions are **not seen as politically motivated**.
  - Conduct **public consultations** with civil society and citizens to **prevent partisan manipulation, enhance transparency, and ensure inclusive participation**.
  - **Germany** allows political parties and independent observers to monitor electoral rolls for transparency.
- **Leverage Legal and Judicial Oversight:** Ensure adherence to **constitutional provisions (Article 326)** and the **Representation of the People Act**, supported by **Supreme Court and Election Commission reviews**, safeguarding democratic rights.
  - Conduct SIR in **phases**, starting with **high-risk areas** with maximum migration or discrepancies, refining methods based on feedback before full-scale rollout, as in Bihar's 2025 phased launch.

Conclusion:

As political experts note, electoral roll inaccuracies **"inflate the denominator and lead to a downward bias for turnout estimates,"** highlighting the need for **regular and thorough revisions**. To tackle challenges like **documentation gaps, duplicate entries, and political manipulation**, the Election Commission should implement **simplified verification, biometric authentication, public awareness campaigns, and phased rollouts** of a **credible SIR process** for participatory elections.

> **Drishti Mains Que:**
>
> Accurate voter lists are vital for free and fair elections. Examine how the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) can improve electoral accuracy and inclusiveness in India.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. **What is the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls?**
   A door-to-door verification by the ECI to ensure accurate, updated electoral rolls, under Section 21(3) of the RPA, 1950 and Article 324.
2. **Why is SIR needed in India?**
   To correct errors, remove duplicates, include new voters, align with migration and delimitation, and uphold "one person, one vote".
3. **What are the key challenges of SIR?**
   Documentation gaps, illegal entries, operational errors, political manipulation, limited public consultation, and tech limitations.
4. **How can SIR be made effective and inclusive?**
   Simplify documents, use biometrics/AI, public awareness, train BLOs, involve parties, hold consultations, phased rollout, legal oversight.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Consider the following statements: (2021)

1. In India, there is no law restricting the candidates from contesting in one Lok Sabha election from three constituencies.
2. In the 1991 Lok Sabha Election, Shri Devi Lal contested from three Lok Sabha constituencies.
3. As per the existing rules, if a candidate contests in one Lok Sabha election from many constituencies, his/her party should bear the cost of bye-elections to the constituencies vacated by him/her winning in all the constituencies.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 only

(b) 2 only

(c) 1 and 3

(d) 2 and 3

Ans: (b)

Mains

Q.Discuss the procedures to decide the disputes arising out of the election of a Member of the Parliament or State Legislature under The Representation of the People Act, 1951. What are the grounds on which the election of any returned candidate may be declared void? What remedy is available to the aggrieved party against the decision? Refer to the case laws. (2022)

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