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EC

AND THE WEB OF DECEIT



Cover Story

THE UNMAKING OF THE INDIAN CITIZEN

The preparing of the rolls is when Indians experience a collective sense of national identity. It is this idea of citizenship that the SIR has upended with its explicitly exclusionary stance. **YAMINI AIYAR**



▶ **Voters** queue up to cast their ballot at Gashbari village in Darrang district, Assam, on April 26, 2024. BIJU BORO/AFP

On the afternoon of May 25, 2024, beneath the blazing Delhi sun, I joined the long queue at my polling booth to cast my vote in India's 18th general election. We were a diverse group: young and old, in burkhas, saris, and jeans, posh South Delhi types and women from the local basti, bound together by the constitutional guarantee of an equal right to vote.

As we waited, a local politician arrived, dripping with power; his security guard began pushing people so that his boss could get ahead. An argument broke out in the men's queue. People who had been waiting in the queue demanded that this man wait his turn; after all, someone said, without us he is nobody. Watching the commotion, women in my line, too, joined in. Eventually, the politician had to join the queue. We all knew, in that moment, that the emperor had no clothes. We held the power in our vote.

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In our deeply unequal society, the act of voting is the one moment when all Indians are placed on an equal footing. The polling booth, as the political anthropologist Mukulika Banerjee's masterful work *Why India Votes* illustrates, is the one setting where the everyday reality of inequality and injustice gives way to a sense of shared solidarity and equal moral standing among all Indians. Voting is the one act where all Indians, regardless of class, caste, or gender, have a shared sense of power and agency. It is the only real moment in our democracy when the constitutional promise of equal citizenship is actively realised.

This sense of citizenship, however, is premised on the expectation that the process of voting will be free and fair.

The dark shadow of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR), as implemented by the Election Commission of India headed by Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, has cast doubt on the credibility and sense of fairness in our elections. In the process, the vote has been weaponised. Rather than serving as an instrument for furthering equal citizenship, the vote is being deployed through the SIR to create categories of citizens—"absent", "shifted", "dead", "deleted", or "doubtful"—with differing citizenship regimes.

The intricate relationship between citizenship and voting is best understood when we look back at the making of India's first electoral roll. In her book *How India Became Democratic* (2018), the political scientist Ornit Shani's painstaking archival research unearths the remarkable effort made by India's Constituent Assembly Secretariat (CAS) to prepare the draft electoral roll. Against the backdrop of Partition, in a largely undocumented society, the CAS adopted a widely inclusive approach, working with refugee associations and local administrators to ensure that the right to vote was extended to all citizens.

Amongst the many innovations documented in this work is the story of Mumbai officials who worried that an estimated 1,00,000 pavement dwellers would lose their right to vote because they did not have a "fixed sleeping

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place". The CAS recognised that lacking a permanent home must not strip rightful citizens of their right to vote and found an innovative way of bringing these voters onto the rolls. This is one of several instances where the CAS adopted an expansive, inclusive approach to documentation with the goal of ensuring that rights guaranteed under India's emergent Constitution were extended to all.

ON THE EVE of India's first election, Election Commissioner Sukumar Sen declared in a radio broadcast: "Every citizen counts equally with every other citizen... and each one must have an equal voice in the election." This sentiment was realised through the process of making the electoral rolls. Indeed, as Shani argues, this process of preparing the rolls was the first tangible means through which Indians experienced a collective sense of national identity, bound together as equal citizens for the purpose of authorising their government. Indians, Shani notes, were "voters before they became citizens".

It is this idea of equal citizenship through the vote that the SIR has now upended. It has done so by moving away from its inclusionary stance to adopting an explicitly exclusionary one. All citizens have been cast into doubt. The onus now lies on them to "prove" their eligibility through an endless production of documents and forms. In the process, rather than creating a collective sense of equality through the vote, the SIR has created a hierarchy of citizenship. Those with documents, recognised and approved by the state, versus those who have been deleted and must prove their "authenticity". This very act of producing documents and proving eligibility is shaped by religion, caste, and gender. The right to vote is slowly becoming an instrument for creating a differentiated hierarchy of citizenship in India.

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A Booth Level Officer checks documents during a Special Intensive Revision drive at Kamalpur village, Jalalgarh block, in Purnia district, Bihar, on July 8, 2025. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

"A person will die just furnishing proof of their existence through documents; in death, too, we will have to furnish documents"—this was the exasperated outburst from a woman I met in the slums of Titagarh in West Bengal. Her daughter's name had been struck off the electoral rolls, and she was now scrambling to assemble all the documents demanded to satisfy the state. The woman's frustration captures how far the SIR has taken us from the inclusionary imagination of its founding moment to its current exclusionary one.

To be a voter under the SIR regime, one must prove one's eligibility through verification forms and documents that the state demands. The process of dialogue and discretion

that was the modus operandi of the first electoral roll, wherein rules were bent to ensure that no rightful citizen was denied the right to vote, has given way to a centralised software, leaving voters at the mercy of an algorithm.

This is not new. Indeed, the demand for documents and verification by the state is the mode of governance of the modern Indian state, the means through which it exercises its power over citizens. After Partition, the newly formed governments in India and Pakistan adjudicated citizenship claims by evaluating documents like passports and later ration/voter cards to verify citizenship claims. This, as the political scientist Niraja Gopal Jayal has argued in her seminal work on citizenship, *Citizenship and its Discontents: An Indian History*, inverted the standard relationship between citizenship and documents. In most contexts, the possession of citizenship is the means to acquiring identity documents like passports. In the Indian case, documents became the means for determining citizenship. Over time, this penchant for relying on documents to mediate citizen-state relations soon extended to routine administrative tasks, particularly in the domain of distribution of socio-economic rights.

The state has routinely deployed the documents it dispenses–ration cards, BPL cards, Aadhaar cards–as a tool to categorise citizens as eligible and ineligible for the rights it chooses to dispense. To weed out the ineligible, the bureaucracy has appropriated the power to "verify" its own documents, casting suspicion on the citizenry. Words like "verification", "authentication", "deleted", and, in more recent times, "doubtful" are routinely deployed in administrative parlance. In this framing, the citizen is always constructed as a suspicious actor, in need of verification. And their rights depend on the state's willingness to "verify" its own documents.

Digitisation has further entrenched this power of documents. The algorithm is often presented as a value-neutral, efficient instrument to weed out the ineligible. Yet its powers are overwhelming. It is both opaque and centralising. We have seen this in how the controversial ECINET has been deployed through the SIR. A new field in a digital form; a change or minor difference in spelling or a "logical discrepancy", and rightful voters are knocked out of the database, leaving them to scramble from one government desk to the next in the struggle to "verify" their documents.

After all, who can object to the goal of routinely updating and revising electoral rolls? Only, this time the process has been placed in the service of Hindutva's cause.

Being a "verified" citizen today is thus dependent not just on possession of documents but on the willingness of the algorithm to authenticate your document. Under the SIR regime, verified citizens who have satisfied the algorithm enjoy full voting rights. Documented but "logically" discrepant citizens are "deleted" and cast as "doubtful" citizens who must wait their turn for the state to deem them "verified".

HOW YOU EXPERIENCE being "deleted" or cast as "doubtful" varies by income, gender, caste, and religion. For the poor, being disenfranchised comes with the risk of losing access to critical welfare benefits. The recently elected BJP government in West Bengal issued orders cutting welfare benefits for those whose names were deleted from voter lists. According to reports, 2.6 million applications for the Annapurna Yojana in West Bengal have been rejected on this ground. In Karnataka and Punjab, as the SIR was being rolled out, Chief Ministers warned voters that deletion from the voter rolls would put their welfare benefits at risk. The right to vote is thus being explicitly linked to socio-economic rights.

For a Hindu, to be deleted places welfare benefits at risk. For Muslims, being deleted slips quickly into being cast as doubtful, the potential *ghuspetiya* (infiltrator), their standing as citizens now at risk. In this way, the SIR has effectively weaponised a routine bureaucratic process. After all, who can object to the goal of updating and revising electoral rolls? Only, this time the process has been placed in the service of Hindutva's cause. Recent reports about pre-filled bulk forms being filled for the removal of Muslim names from voter lists in Karnataka are an illustration of this.

The Constitution adopted a religion-neutral idea of citizenship. India belonged equally to all. Hindutva is ideologically opposed to this universalistic conception of citizenship. In V.D. Savarkar's words in *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, India is the land of the Hindus. Those who have a right to a territorial claim to India are those who "recognized our common

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Mamta, whose name was removed from the electoral roll and who was categorised as "Permanently Shifted" in the SIR list, stands in her home in New Delhi, on October 15.
PRIYANSHU SINGH /REUTERS

mother not only as fatherland but even as a holy land... would be most welcome to the Hindu fold". Muslims in this imagination are to be tolerated only as second-class citizens. Over the years, the Hindutva idea of citizenship has been carefully tested, and through changes in citizenship law, particularly the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, religion is slowly being introduced as a marker of citizenship. The SIR is yet another experiment in the service of this goal.

WHILE WALKING THROUGH the villages of West Bengal, talking to deleted voters, one saw this vividly. Hindu voters were visibly angry about being deleted and placed at the mercy of the algorithm. But many justified this harassment as a price to be paid for weeding out the "infiltrator". The narrative around the SIR had been effectively deployed to categorise one class of citizens as "doubtful" in the eyes of the majority. For Muslims, deletion means being left in purgatory–to constantly prove citizenship or risk being rendered stateless. Anger and frustration are a luxury they can ill afford. All they have is a quiet desperation to find their way back on the lists, to be visible and deemed legitimate by the state. It is through these differentiated experiences with and differing responses to the SIR that the constitutional promise of equal citizenship is slowly but surely being eroded.

From our founding moment, when the electoral roll was central, as Shani wrote, to "turning the idea of India's democracy into something meaningful and credible for India's people", to the present where the electoral roll is being placed in the service of a project of differentiated, unequal citizenship, the SIR illustrates how speedily India is moving from a deeply inclusive democratic imagination to one that seeks to entrench a singularly exclusionary imagination. It has achieved this goal not through visible constitutional changes but through routine bureaucratic procedures that carry with them the veneer of legitimacy. This is what makes it so deeply insidious.

The challenge for the republic today lies not just in scrapping the SIR and restoring all wrongfully deleted names onto the voter roll but in wresting India's inclusionary democratic imagination back into routine bureaucratic procedures and reclaiming the constitutional promise of equal citizenship. It is this idea that is now at stake as the struggle to restore the foundations of our democracy takes to the streets. ■

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