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Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

A Strategy of Political Marginalization to Structural Disenfranchisement

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India's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has emerged as one of the country's most consequential electoral exercises since the introduction of universal adult franchise. But the exercise cannot be viewed simply as an administrative effort to update voter lists. It needs to be seen against the backdrop of a much longer political effort by Hindu nationalist organizations to overcome what they have historically regarded as the electoral influence of India's Muslim population.

For decades after Independence, the Hindu nationalist political stream, represented first by the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and later by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), struggled to gain power at the national level. One recurring grievance was that Muslims, who constitute 14.2 percent of India's population, often voted strategically against Hindu nationalist candidates. Their votes consequently helped Congress and, later, various secular and regional parties defeat the BJP and its predecessors.

The Muslim vote, however, was never a single, uniform bloc. Voting patterns differed across Kerala, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam, Maharashtra and the disputed territory of Kashmir. Yet where the BJP emerged as the principal challenger, Muslim voters often rallied behind the candidate they considered most capable of defeating it.

This mattered particularly under India's first-past-the-post electoral system. Muslims constitute more than 14 percent of the population in roughly 138 of the 543 Lok Sabha constituencies, while an earlier Lokniti study found that they exceeded 20 percent in 87 constituencies. In some constituencies, especially in the disputed territory of Kashmir, Assam, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Kerala, their share is between 30 and 60 percent. Their electoral influence was therefore greater than their representation in Parliament would suggest.

The BJP's transformation from a marginal party into India's dominant political force involved three broad strategies: **consolidating Hindu voters; dividing the anti-BJP vote, including the Muslim vote; and, increasingly, changing the composition of the electorate** itself through SIR.

The Hindu nationalist electoral strategy

The roots of the present controversy go well beyond SIR. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh was established in 1951 as the principal electoral vehicle of the Hindu nationalist movement. Its successor, the BJP, was formed in 1980 and initially performed poorly, winning only two Lok Sabha seats in the 1984 general election.

The basic electoral problem for Hindu nationalism was straightforward. India was

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overwhelmingly Hindu, but Hindus did not necessarily vote as Hindus. Caste, region, language, class, local leadership and party loyalties divided the majority community. Muslims, meanwhile, had a strong incentive to prevent openly Hindu nationalist parties from coming to power and therefore generally supported whichever secular or regional party appeared best placed to defeat the BJP in a particular constituency.

The answer was to turn the Hindu majority into a political majority. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement provided the vehicle.

The BJP's rise as a major political force in the late 1980s was closely linked to the campaign to build a Ram temple at the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The campaign turned a religious dispute into a vehicle for creating a Hindu political identity that could cut across caste divisions. L.K. Advani's 1990 Rath Yatra accelerated the mobilization, while the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, sharply intensified Hindu-Muslim polarization.

The BJP's electoral rise thereafter was dramatic. Yet even when it headed governments under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, it remained dependent on a broad National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Its regional partners did not necessarily share the BJP's full ideological agenda and consequently placed limits on how far the party could go. Narendra Modi changed that equation.

Modi and the consolidation of the Hindu vote

The 2014 election was a watershed. The campaign publicly emphasized development, governance and the Gujarat model. At the constituency level, however, particularly in Uttar Pradesh following the 2013 Muzaffarnagar communal violence, communal polarization also became an important element of the BJP's mobilization.

The results demonstrated the effectiveness of the strategy. The BJP won 282 Lok Sabha seats and secured a parliamentary majority on its own. More significantly, of the 87 constituencies where Muslims accounted for more than 20 percent of the population, the BJP won 43, compared with only 15 in 2009.

The Modi-Amit Shah formula did not depend on winning Muslim voters. It depended on bringing enough of everyone else together. By consolidating Hindu voters and allowing competing opposition parties to divide the anti-BJP vote, the BJP could win even in constituencies with sizeable Muslim populations.

The 2019 election provided another means of achieving much the same result. Following the Pulwama attack in February and India's subsequent air strikes at Balakot, national security, Pakistan and terrorism became central campaign themes. The BJP returned with an increased majority, winning 303 Lok Sabha seats.

2024: The formula begins to fail

The 2024 election was different. Pakistan factor could no longer mobilize voters in quite the same way, and the campaign increasingly turned inward. Narendra Modi's speeches repeatedly referred to Muslims, "infiltrators", demographic fears, the alleged redistribution of Hindu wealth and claims that Congress intended to favor Muslims. The strategy was less successful. The BJP fell from 303 seats to 240, losing its parliamentary majority and becoming dependent on NDA allies to remain in power. Opposition allegations about electoral rolls and polling in several closely contested constituencies later developed into Rahul Gandhi's charge of "vote theft".

The broader political lesson, however, was difficult to ignore. **Hindu consolidation alone could no longer be assumed to deliver an overwhelming parliamentary majority.** It was against this background that SIR emerged.

SIR: Changing the electorate

The Election Commission said the exercise was necessary due to migration, urbanization, deaths, and other demographic changes. Its stated objective was to ensure that "no eligible citizen is left out while no ineligible person is included".

The implications went beyond routine updating. Existing voters effectively had to

establish their entitlement to remain on the electoral roll, as the burden shifted from the state, demonstrating that a voter was ineligible, to the citizen proving eligibility. The implications of this shift become clearer when examined through the experience of individual states, as presented in Part II.

II

Bihar: The laboratory

On June 24, 2025, the Election Commission ordered a SIR of Bihar's electoral rolls. Before the exercise, the state had approximately 78.9 million registered voters. Around 6.5 million names disappeared during the initial draft process. After claims, corrections, additions and restorations, the final electorate stood at approximately 74.2 million, a net reduction of roughly 4.7 million voters.

The Election Commission maintained that most of the removed names belonged to dead voters, permanently migrated, duplicate entries, or individuals who could not be traced. Yet the exercise did not produce a comparable discovery of millions of proven foreign citizens.

The BJP-led NDA subsequently won Bihar, securing about 46.6 percent of the vote against approximately 37.9 percent for the RJD-led Mahagathbandhan.

The expansion of SIR

After Bihar, SIR was expanded to 12 states and Union Territories. The scale was far greater. Approximate reductions during Phase II included about 20.4 million voters in Uttar Pradesh, 8.4-9.1 million in West Bengal at different stages, 7.4 million in Tamil Nadu, 6.8 million in Gujarat, 3.4 million in Madhya Pradesh, 3.1 million in Rajasthan and 2.5 million in Chhattisgarh. Across Phase II, the net reduction exceeded 50 million voters.

The deletion of around 20 million names in Uttar Pradesh therefore has implications beyond state politics. Even if only a fraction of excluded voters ultimately fail to have their names restored, the effect in closely contested constituencies could be substantial. A Muslim electorate constituting 35 percent of a constituency does not

need to lose 35 percent of its members to cease being decisive. If Hindu voters are simultaneously consolidated behind the BJP, reducing the effective Muslim vote by only a few percentage points should be enough to change the result.

This is what makes SIR politically different from straightforward mass disenfranchisement.

The case of West Bengal: From experiment to breakthrough

For decades, West Bengal remained resistant to the BJP. Muslims account for considerably higher proportions in districts such as Murshidabad and Malda. The BJP therefore made "infiltration" from Bangladesh one of its principal political themes in Bengal. In contemporary BJP rhetoric, the expression "Bangladeshi infiltrator" increasingly acquired a clear religious connotation.

The Citizenship Amendment Act reinforces the distinction by providing a potential route to accelerated citizenship for specified non-Muslim communities from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, while Muslims do not have the same religion-based route.

Consequently, more than 9 million names were removed at various stages before the 2026 Assembly election, amounting to more than one-tenth of the earlier electorate. Reporting from Muslim-majority areas pointed to particularly serious exclusions, while millions of affected people were pursuing claims or appeals.

Then came the election. The BJP won 207 of 294 seats, while the Trinamool Congress was reduced to 80. It was the BJP's first conquest of West Bengal.

Phase III: SIR becomes effectively national

On May 14, 2026, shortly after the Bengal election, the Election Commission ordered Phase III of SIR across 16 states and three Union Territories.

The first Phase III drafts have brought further large reductions, including approximately 4.49 million exclusions in Andhra Pradesh and 3.38 million in Haryana, with additional

reductions reported in Odisha, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and elsewhere. Several large states, including Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, Punjab and Delhi, have yet to complete or publish comparable final figures. A cautious assessment is that several tens of millions of Indians have disappeared from electoral rolls at some stage of SIR, with final net deletions already running into many millions.

The exercise has consequently moved well beyond the territory of an ordinary electoral-roll correction. It represents one of the largest changes to the composition of India's electorate since universal adult franchise was introduced.

III

From electoral deletion to citizenship

The Supreme Court's principal SIR judgment of May 27, 2026, upheld the Election Commission's constitutional and statutory authority to undertake the Bihar exercise. It also accepted that the Commission could conduct a limited inquiry into citizenship for determining electoral eligibility. But the court drew an important distinction: deletion from an electoral roll does not determine a person's citizenship. The Election Commission can decide whether someone qualifies as a voter; it cannot revoke Indian citizenship.

The concern is that this distinction may increasingly become blurred in administrative practice.

In West Bengal, SIR data is reportedly being used to review welfare eligibility. Officials announced that names removed from electoral rolls would be used to scrutinize welfare databases. There have also been cases of Indian citizens holding passports, Aadhaar cards and other government documents encountering difficulties after their names disappeared from electoral rolls.

The danger is not necessarily a formal rule stating that a deleted voter has ceased to be a citizen. It is the possibility of a chain reaction of administrative suspicion. A person loses electoral registration, officials

question his documentation, welfare eligibility or passport verification becomes difficult, and the individual is repeatedly required to prove his identity and status.

This is how a form of second-class citizenship can emerge without a constitutional amendment. Nobody needs to formally declare that Muslims have fewer rights. One section of the population simply finds itself subjected to documentary tests that others do not routinely face.

Why Muslims are particularly vulnerable

Muslims are not the only people affected by SIR. Poor Hindus, Dalits, migrant laborers, tribal communities, women, homeless citizens and people without adequate documentation are also vulnerable. Muslims, however, are the community most consistently portrayed in BJP political rhetoric through the language of "infiltration", demographic threat and questionable loyalty. Bangladesh-related infiltration rhetoric overwhelmingly affects Bengali-speaking Muslims. Unlike non-Muslim migrants covered by the Citizenship Amendment Act, Muslims from Bangladesh, Pakistan or Afghanistan have no comparable religion-based route to citizenship.

Muslims parliamentary representation is already dramatically below their demographic share. The 18th Lok Sabha has only 24 Muslim MPs out of 543, or about 4.4 percent, although they account for more than three times that proportion of the population.

IV

Conclusion

For decades, the BJP and the wider Sangh Parivar accused secular parties of engaging in "Muslim appeasement" and "vote-bank politics". The political objective of Hindu consolidation was to destroy the effectiveness of that supposed Muslim vote bank. Much of that objective has already been achieved.

The next stage is potentially more consequential: ensuring that Muslim numerical strength no longer threatens BJP

candidates even in constituencies where Muslims remain electorally significant.

SIR has introduced a qualitatively different instrument into the Indian electoral arena. Instead of merely persuading voters, it allows the electoral system to determine afresh who remains a voter.

Officially, SIR removes the dead, relocated, duplicated, and ineligible. In practice, tens of millions of names have disappeared from India's electoral rolls at some stage of the exercise. The Election Commission has not demonstrated that these people were foreigners, nor has it released sufficient religion-wise information to dispel concerns that Muslim-dominated constituencies may have been disproportionately affected.

The implications extend beyond elections. The central question is no longer simply whether a deleted voter remains legally an

Indian citizen. It is whether a citizen can retain citizenship in constitutional terms while progressively losing the practical political and civic benefits associated with it.

In that sense, SIR can be seen as the latest stage in the evolution of Hindu nationalist **electoral strategy: first polarize the Hindu vote, then consolidate it, divide the opposition vote, and ultimately reduce the electoral weight of those who remain structurally opposed to the BJP.**

It could institutionalize a political order in which India's Muslims remain citizens in constitutional terms but have progressively less capacity to determine who governs them. That would mark a transition from political marginalization to structural disenfranchisement, with an unsettling resemblance to ideas articulated by RSS leader M.S. Golwalkar nearly nine decades ago.

