Digitalizing the SIR Process

Mains: *GS II – Salient Features of the Representation of People's Act*

Why in News?

Recently, the Election Commission is facing criticism for its Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls as reliance on outdated data threatens voter inclusion and the integrity of upcoming elections.

What is the problem with SIR?

- **Entirely paper process** – This is precisely the problem with the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR), which relies on the legacy rolls of 2002 to 2004 which were created entirely on paper through manual, error-prone processes when India was entering its digital era.
- **Depending on outdated record** – It is astonishing that the Election Commission of India (EC) still relies on these outdated records today.
- This regression has erased decades of digital progress, forcing SIR 2.0 to operate on outdated methods and unreliable, unverifiable data.
- An exercise meant to produce clean and updated voter rolls has instead pushed the country into a prolonged crisis lasting months.
- **Legacy of SIR** – The past SIRs functioned mainly as routine summary revisions, focusing on deletions such as removing voters who had shifted, died, or become ineligible, and adding those who had moved or reached voting age.
- It was executed casually, with little effort to update or correct records.
- Therefore, the resulting rolls contain incomplete, ambiguous, and missing information, with standards varying across States and constituencies.
- **Common errors** – These include entries showing only first and middle names without last names, missing EPIC or house numbers, and widespread spelling errors.
    - **For example,** Agarwal/Agraval, Rakesh/Rakeash, Sangal/Sahgal, and Veer/Vir.
- **Anomalies** – Random inspections of the rolls reveal alarming anomalies, such as entries implying polygamy.
    - **For instance**, some people after days of manually scanning hundreds of thousands of entries in Hindi, English, and Bengali, could not find their own record — despite having voted in every general election.
- **Difficulties in verification** – Moreover, as the rolls exist only in paper form, a database of more than 600 million entries cannot undergo verification or consistency checks.
- The EC's search interface is essentially non-functional, typically returning "no details found" or "error" when queries are made.

- The search page also includes a disclaimer that the rolls are published exactly as received from State Chief Electoral Officers (CEOs).
- These incomplete, non-searchable legacy records form the foundation of today's SIR —leaving countless genuine voters unable to find their names anywhere.
- **Underutilisation of resources** – ECINet allows voters to search the current one-billion–record database using mobile numbers, EPIC numbers, names, dates of birth, addresses, and family relations.
- **Detection of errors** – It detects duplicate or missing entries and supports services such as registration, deletion, corrections, Aadhaar linking, locating constituencies and polling booths, contacting BLOs, downloading EPIC cards, filing complaints, and tracking their status.
- These functions are comprehensive and typically work flawlessly, enabling even online submission of Enumeration Forms (EFs) through Aadhaar-based verification.
- **Issues with the BLOs** – Most function mainly as distributors and collectors of paper EFs.
- Lacking past polling records, many demand birth certificates and extra address proofs despite EC rules requiring none.
- Many also lack data-entry skills, resulting in piles of undigitised EFs.
    - **For instance**, over half of Uttar Pradesh's EFs remain undigitised as per an EC press release on November 27.
- Paper EFs double the workload: forms are filled by hand and then digitised, and photo-pasting forces poor voters to pay for photographs while BLOs re-digitise them.
- This digital-to-paper-to-digital loop is inefficient and error-prone.

How ECINet could help?

- **ECINet** – It enables fast, error-free online EF submission with no digitisation, paper-photos, signatures, or documents.
- Forms 6, 7, and 8 facilitate online insertion, deletion, correction, and Aadhaar linking — separate from BLOs.
- Aadhaar verification makes the process smooth and reliable.
- **Accessibility and inclusion –** For non-tech-savvy citizens, the EC could have deployed mobile digital kiosks with handheld devices and trained staff to help them file EFs online, thereby easing pressure on BLOs and eliminating the need for paper forms.

How to make the SIR fully digital?

- **Searchability through digitisation** – Convert all State/UT rolls into a fully searchable digital format, using English as the standard for searchable data and metadata, with regional languages retained as non-searchable fields.
- **Data integration** – Fuse old records with reliable datasets — Aadhaar, PAN/Income Tax, driving licence, and local body records — using robust APIs and consistency checks. Aadhaar must be strengthened as the anchor for identity verification.
- **Differentiate voter categories** – Classify voters into three groups:
    - Stable-address voters,
    - Frequent movers,

    - Those with immigration/nationality issues.
- **Submission of EFs online** – Ensure EFs are submitted entirely online, supported by mobile digital kiosks operated by trained personnel.
- India has an ample supply of tech-savvy workers who can assist efficiently, while electoral officials handle ground verification.
- **Digitise all steps** – Complete document verification, uploads, and post-validation checks entirely online, with transparent workflows.
- With these reforms, SIR 2026 can transition from its dependence on outdated paper records to a modern, trusted, technology-driven national exercise.

What lies ahead?

- A fully digital system, as outlined above, would eliminate the long-standing flaws of legacy SIR and enable seamless integration of all processes through ECINet.
- These reforms are straightforward, feasible, and implementable within the extended timelines of the ongoing SIR.
- Most steps require minimal effort; only data integration may be deferred beyond SIR 2.0.
- Once adopted, every component of the SIR will become simpler, faster, and more reliable, with grievances addressed in real time preventing panic, confusion, and unnecessary stress.
- A digital SIR is not optional; it is indispensable — there is no alternative.
- SIR 2026 must become a trust revolution powered by technology, transparency, verification, and integrity.

Reference

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