SIR in Bengal – Issues and Concerns

Mains: *GS II – Polity*

Why in News?

The controversy surrounding the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in West Bengal and the subsequent Supreme Court order raises fundamental questions about the integrity of the electoral process, the role of constitutional institutions, and the protection of citizens' democratic rights.

What are the issues in the process of SIR in Bengal?

- **SIR** – The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) is an extraordinary process undertaken by the Election Commission of India (ECI) to update electoral rolls through rigorous verification.
- **SIR in Bengal** – While periodic revisions are a routine feature of electoral management, the SIR in West Bengal stands out for its timing, scale, and procedural deviations.
- Despite there being no substantial evidence of inflated voter lists—West Bengal's electoral roll closely mirrored its adult population—the ECI initiated an extensive verification drive.
- This involved identifying "logical discrepancies" through software-generated flags, deploying external observers, and instituting multiple layers of scrutiny.
- **Recent issue** - The deletion of over 27 lakh voters from the electoral rolls, coupled with limited immediate remedies, has triggered concerns about disenfranchisement and judicial accountability.
- As a result, lakhs of names were first flagged, then reviewed, and eventually deleted through a process that many argue lacked transparency and consistency.
- **The Supreme Court's Intervention –** The Supreme Court's order dated April 6 directed the ECI to publish a supplementary list of voters, which effectively confirmed the deletion of approximately 27 lakh names.
- However, the order notably refrained from explicitly acknowledging the scale or implications of this disenfranchisement.
- Instead, the Court emphasized the availability of appellate mechanisms through newly constituted tribunals.
- While this provides a formal remedy, the practical limitations are evident.
- Electoral rolls are typically frozen shortly before elections, leaving insufficient time for appeals to be heard and resolved.
- Consequently, affected individuals are unlikely to regain their voting rights in the upcoming election cycle.

What are the procedural concerns?

- **Inadequate Adjudication Standards –** Adjudicators were reportedly not required to examine all documents submitted by individuals, leading to arbitrary exclusions.
- **Questionable Deletions –** Instances have been cited where individuals with valid identification—including government officials, decorated soldiers, and passport holders—were removed from the rolls.
- **Absence of Machine-Readable Data –** The ECI did not provide accessible, verifiable lists of deletions, limiting public scrutiny and accountability.
- **Patterns of Exclusion and Allegations of Bias –** Statistical patterns in the deletions have further intensified concerns.
- A disproportionate number of exclusions reportedly occurred in specific districts, particularly those with significant minority populations.
    - **For instance,** in certain constituencies, an overwhelming percentage of deleted voters belonged to a single community.
- These patterns have led to allegations that the exercise may have been influenced by political considerations.
- While such claims require rigorous investigation, their mere plausibility underscores the need for heightened institutional vigilance.

What are the implications for electoral outcomes?

- **Deleted voters** – The deletion of 27 lakh voters—approximately 5% of the electorate—has significant electoral implications.
- **Alteration of outcomes** – In a competitive political landscape where many constituencies are decided by narrow margins, such a shift could alter outcomes in multiple seats.
- Beyond immediate electoral arithmetic, the issue strikes at the core of democratic legitimacy.
- **Erosion of trust** – Elections derive their authority from universal adult suffrage.
- Any large-scale exclusion, especially if perceived as unjust, risks eroding public trust in the electoral system.
- **Role of SC & Article 142** – The Supreme Court's role in this episode warrants careful examination.
- Invoking its extraordinary powers under Article 142, the Court facilitated an alternative adjudicatory mechanism, bypassing the standard statutory framework.
- While intended to expedite resolution, this intervention appears to have compounded procedural complexities.

What are the long-term implications?

- **Issues with citizenship** – Electoral rolls often serve as foundational documents for accessing welfare schemes, establishing identity, and asserting citizenship.
- Arbitrary deletions, therefore, may have cascading effects on individuals' socio-economic entitlements.
- The Court's observation that the right to vote is not permanently extinguished does little to address these broader consequences.
- Temporary disenfranchisement, especially on a large scale, can still inflict lasting

harm on democratic participation and social inclusion.

What should be done?

- **Ensuring Procedural Fairness –** The ECI must adopt transparent, uniform, and verifiable procedures for voter verification.
- **Strengthening Appellate Mechanisms –** Appeals should be time-bound and accessible, with provisions to ensure that genuine voters are not excluded during elections.
- **Judicial Oversight –** The Supreme Court must provide clear guidelines on the limits of electoral revisions, particularly close to election schedules.
- **Data Transparency –** Publication of detailed, machine-readable data on additions and deletions can enhance accountability.
- **Institutional Independence –** Safeguarding the autonomy of the ECI is essential to prevent perceptions of political bias.

What lies ahead?

- The SIR episode in West Bengal represents more than a localized administrative exercise; it is a test case for the resilience of India's electoral democracy.
- The interplay between the Election Commission and the judiciary in this context will shape the contours of democratic governance in the years to come.
- At stake is not merely the outcome of an election, but the foundational principle of equal participation.
- The credibility of democratic institutions depends on their ability to uphold this principle without compromise.
- As India navigates this challenge, the need for constitutional fidelity, institutional integrity, and public trust has never been more pressing.

Reference

[The Indian Express| SIR and Electoral Democracy]

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