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West Bengal Electoral Rolls: SIR Controversy and Supreme Court Intervention

12 April 2026 ·

POLITY**SOCIAL ISSUES**

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West Bengal Electoral Rolls: SIR Controversy and Supreme Court Intervention

12 April 2026 · 4 min read

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WHY IN NEWS

The Election Commission of India's **Special Intensive Revision (SIR)** exercise removed approximately **91 lakh voters** from West Bengal's electoral rolls ahead of Assembly elections. The Supreme Court of India intervened, deploying judicial officers from three states to oversee adjudication of disputed deletions and establishing 19 appellate tribunals — one of the most significant judicial interventions in electoral roll management in recent years.

WHAT HAPPENED: THE SCALE OF DELETIONS

The SIR exercise, conducted by the ECI ahead of the West Bengal Assembly elections, produced results that triggered widespread controversy:

METRIC	FIGURE
West Bengal electorate (pre-SIR)	7.66 crore (76.6 million)
West Bengal electorate (post-SIR)	6.77 crore (67.7 million)
Voters removed	~91 lakh (~9.1 million)
Percentage reduction	~11.9% of total electorate

For context: ~91 lakh is a number larger than the total electorate of several smaller Indian states.

WHAT IS SPECIAL INTENSIVE REVISION (SIR)?

Special Intensive Revision (SIR) is an electoral roll revision exercise conducted by the Election Commission of India (ECI) under the **Representation of the People Act, 1950**, and the **Registration of Electors Rules, 1960**.

How SIR Works

- Booth-level officers (BLOs)** visit every household in their assigned area

- 2 They verify whether each registered voter actually resides at the listed address
- 3 Voters who cannot be verified (dead, shifted, duplicate, non-existent) are proposed for deletion
- 4 Proposed deletions are displayed publicly; objections can be filed
- 5 **Final deletions** are made after adjudication of objections

Purpose (As Stated by ECI)

- Remove ghost voters (deceased, shifted)
- Clean up duplicate registrations
- Ensure rolls reflect actual current residents

Why SIR Is Controversial

Critics argue that SIR exercises — particularly intensive ones conducted close to elections — disproportionately delete **genuine voters** who:

- Are migrant workers temporarily absent
- Do not respond to BLO visits due to work/displacement
- Live in informal settlements without permanent documentation
- Belong to communities with lower administrative literacy

THE CONTROVERSY: ALLEGED TARGETED DELETIONS

The controversy in West Bengal centred on the **geographic distribution** of deletions:

- Deletions were allegedly disproportionately high in **Muslim-majority districts: Murshidabad, Malda, and Uttar Dinajpur**
- Opposition parties (TMC, Congress, Left) alleged the deletions were targeted to affect communities likely to vote against the ruling party at the Centre
- The ECI maintained that the deletions were based purely on verification outcomes

The Supreme Court did not rule on whether the deletions were politically motivated. It intervened to ensure a fair adjudication process for disputed deletions — recognising that regardless of intent, 91 lakh voters losing their franchise before adjudication was a constitutional concern.

SUPREME COURT INTERVENTION

The Supreme Court's intervention was significant both procedurally and constitutionally:

Orders Passed

- 1 **Deployment of judicial officers:** District and Sessions judges from **West Bengal, Odisha, and Jharkhand** (neutral officers, not West Bengal cadre alone) were deployed to adjudicate disputes
- 2 **19 appellate tribunals** established across West Bengal to hear objections from deleted voters
- 3 **Deadline set:** All objections to be adjudicated before polling
- 4 **Transparency requirement:** ECI directed to publish district-wise deletion data

Constitutional Basis for SC Intervention

- **Article 32** (Right to Constitutional Remedies) – petitions filed by voters and political parties
- **Article 326** – Right to vote; franchise is a constitutional right even if not a fundamental right
- Deletion from electoral rolls without due process = denial of franchise = constitutional grievance

WEST BENGAL ELECTION 2026 — KEY DATES

EVENT	DATE
Phase 1 voting	April 23, 2026
Phase 2 voting	April 29, 2026
Vote counting	May 4, 2026

West Bengal's 294 Assembly constituencies are divided across two phases.

NATIONAL SIR — BROADER CONTEXT

The West Bengal SIR was part of a **national SIR exercise** across multiple states:

- **National total removed:** ~6.08 crore voters across **9 states + 3 Union Territories**
- West Bengal accounted for approximately 15% of all national deletions despite being one of several states covered

This scale made the West Bengal case the most prominent and legally contested.

UPSC LENS: ELECTORAL ROLL MANAGEMENT

Legal Framework

LAW/RULE	RELEVANCE
Representation of the People Act, 1950	Electoral roll preparation; eligibility for voting
Registration of Electors Rules, 1960	Procedure for additions, deletions, corrections
Representation of the People Act, 1951	Conduct of elections; role of ECI
Constitution Article 324	ECI's plenary power over elections
Constitution Article 326	Universal adult franchise; basis for SIR scrutiny

Booth Level Officer (BLO) System

- BLOs are designated government officials at booth level (typically revenue or school officials)
- Responsible for field verification of electoral rolls
- Point of contact for voter registration, deletion objections, corrections

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — Polity	Electoral roll management; ECI powers; franchise rights
GS2 — Polity	Supreme Court's role in electoral oversight; Article 324 vs judicial review
GS4 — Ethics	Ethics of large-scale voter deletions near elections; procedural fairness vs efficiency
Prelims	SIR definition; West Bengal electorate size; election dates
Mains	"Discuss the constitutional implications of large-scale electoral roll revisions close to elections"

Electorate before: 7.66 crore | After: 6.77 crore | Removed: ~91 lakh (~11.9%) | Controversy: disproportionate deletions in Murshidabad, Malda, Uttar Dinajpur (Muslim-majority) | SC orders: judicial officers from WB + Odisha + Jharkhand; 19 appellate tribunals | WB Election: Phase 1: April 23 | Phase 2: April 29 | Counting: May 4, 2026 | National SIR: 6.08 crore removed across 9 states + 3 UTs | Legal basis: RP Act 1950; Registration of Electors Rules 1960; Article 326 | GS2: Polity & Governance

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