

# Protest To Persona: How Mamata Banerjee's Stand Against SIR Is Now An Electoral Identity

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Summary of this article

*Mamata frames SIR as mass disenfranchisement and institutional harassment*

*TMC positions itself as defender of minorities and marginalised voters*

*SIR emerges as a core electoral narrative against the BJP and ECI*

“Though I know you won’t reply or clarify, but it is my duty to inform you (of) the details,” is etched in blue ink on the last page of the latest letter that Mamata Banerjee has fired to the chief election commissioner Gyanesh Kumar outlining her concerns about the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in West Bengal. This marks her fifth letter to Kumar where she has pointed out lapses, loopholes and the human cost that the exercise has brought with it.

Banerjee begins the letter by expressing her deep shock at the approach taken on by [the Election Commission of India](#) (ECI) and how the exercise appears to be a “relentless harassment of ordinary citizens.” She further goes on to point out how the exercise, aimed at inclusion and sanitising electoral rolls has turned out to be "mechanical, driven by technical data and largely devoid of human touch."

In the earlier letter penned by [the Bengal Chief Minister](#) this year, she shone a light on how the SIR being carried out in Bengal with undue haste and no preparation renders the process fundamentally flawed. “There has been no proper or uniform training of officials entrusted with this sensitive constitutional responsibility; the IT systems being used are defective, unstable, and unreliable; instructions issued from time to time are inconsistent and often contradictory; and there is a complete lack of clarity and planning,” she wrote.



Banerjee's relentless onslaught on the ECI and consistency in publicising her party, [Trinamool Congress](#) (TMC) apprehensions about the exercise has been evident in the way she has harnessed it as the core issue in most of her public addresses and speeches over the last few months. In her most recent missive, she hits a nerve by explicitly mentioning the names of public-figures who have been summoned for SIR hearings. These names which include economist and Nobel laureate

[Amartya Sen](#), actor Deepak Adhikari, poet Joy Goswami, and cricketer [Mohammed Shami](#), have triggered conversations on the reach of the exercise and as Banerjee points out in her letter, “the sheer audacity of the ECI.”

The latest letter also puts a number to the human cost where she mentions how the exercise has brought with it “77 deaths, 4 suicide attempts and 17 people falling sick necessitating hospitalisation”. TMC party leaders have also strategically targeted the SIR to make sure it remains on the headlines, highlighting the panic that it has triggered in poll-bound Bengal. Be it press messages following the Lionel Messi fiasco in early December or addresses following ED’s raids on I-PAC, the top brass has always attempted to pull the conversation towards the exercise at every conversational opportunity.



In a press conference on Tuesday which took place at Nabanna, the Bengal CM attributed the 58 lakh voter deletions in the state (after the first electoral drafts were published on December 16), to the software used by the ECI. “The EC, while sitting in Delhi, used AI tools devised by the [BJP](#) to delete names. These AI software accounted for the names mismatch in SIR data. They deleted names of women who changed surnames post marriage.”

Intensifying the party’s stand that the ECI has been weaponising electoral rolls to target minorities in West Bengal at the behest of the BJP-led Centre, the TMC has used SIR to substantiate the claim of the BJP utilising agencies and autonomous bodies to gain electoral advantages. However, this is not the first time she has claimed that the move is politically influenced by the BJP.

Last week, during her visit to the South 24 Parganas, she said, “The EC is resorting to all kinds of wrong moves for conducting the SIR. It is marking eligible voters as ‘dead’ and forcing the elderly, ill and indisposed to attend hearings. It is making use of mobile apps developed by the BJP’s IT cell

for the exercise. This is illegal, unconstitutional and undemocratic. This cannot go on."

TMC General Secretary Abhishek Banerjee who had led a party delegation to the EC on December 31, said CEC Gyanesh Kumar did not clear the apprehensions raised by the party concerning the exercise and was instead aggressive in responding to the question raised. He further challenged the poll panel to point at the number of Rohingyas and Bangladeshis among the deleted names, a claim that has been perpetually directed by BJP towards TMC government in the state. "There are nearly one crore Rohingya immigrants, Bangladeshi Muslim voters, deceased voters, duplicate entries, and fake voters in West Bengal. The Election Commission of India should remove these names to ensure the credibility of the voter list," Bengal BJP leader and leader of opposition in the state, Suvendu Adhikari had said last year. Adhikari and the BJP have directed multiple attacks at Muslim infiltration under TMC's watch. "If you travel across certain parts of North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Birbhum and Malda, you will be stunned to witness the rapid demographic change in vast areas of the state. If we don't act now, the state will have to be rechristened as West Bangladesh. BJP will not let that happen," Adhikari had mentioned.

However, with the series of letters and TMC's unified and consistent stand against the SIR exercise, experts have pointed out how Banerjee has been successful in weaponising their unflinching stand and persistence. By centering most of her criticism around unmitigated disenfranchisement, minorities, migrant workers, and married women voters being targeted, SIR-related deaths and growing concerns of the elderly, Banerjee's attacks on SIR have come in waves doused in a consistent sense of empathy - only growing in intensity and tenacity while establishing TMC as the strongest opposition voice against SIR in the country.

Beyond Muslim voter-base consolidation, which amount to almost 30 per cent of the state's population, experts are also of the opinion that by pushing the concerns of the two biggest SC groups Rajbanshi and Matuas to the fore, Banerjee's holistic takedown of SIR could help TMC in making significant inroads into constituencies with higher concentration of the groups, which had swayed towards the BJP in 2021. The SC vote share, which constitutes almost 24 per cent of the population, was majorly consolidated by the BJP during the 2021 assembly elections riding on the back of Citizenship (Amendment) Act's (2019) provision to grant citizenship to non-muslim Bangladeshi immigrants. However, with the SIR gaining momentum, anxiety among the lower-caste communities, a major percent of which trace their roots back to Bangladesh, continue to rise, with numerous deletions recorded in the communities.

Speaking to *Outlook*, Former MP and retired IAS officer Jawhar Sircar spoke of how the SIR has alienated BJP further in the state and helped Mamata up the ante. "SIR, quite obviously has targeted what the BJP calls ghuspetiyas in state, Muslims. SIR has not been able to locate any significant number (of Muslim infiltrators) anywhere in the state, not even in the traditional target of the BJP, i.e, the border districts of the state. Instead it has harassed the entire population and struck terror among the crore plus of Matuas many of whom are illegal immigrants. Advantage's gone to Mamata," he said.

Speaking of the general impact of the exercise and Mamata Banerjee's relentless public condemnation of the same, Sircar added, "By ordering the hounding of poorer classes of Bengali migrant workers all over India, Amit Shah has given Mamata Banerjee an unprecedented opportunity to recoup her sinking popularity in West Bengal and leap into her sub-nationalist role."

It is now evident how Banerjee's decision to install SIR smack dab at the heart of TMC's electoral strategy was conscious. In addition to tapping into general anxiety of minorities and [marginalised communities](#), political commentators believe her use of empathy, language, and unceasing denunciation of SIR attempt to place the party as the sole protector of the rights of people in Bengal, and could translate into significant political advantage in the coming days.

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