

# India voter register deletions spark outrage over AI use and poll fairness

Rohini Mohan

BENGALURU – Mr Faridul Islam’s name is among the 9.1 million [that have been deleted](#) ahead of India’s West Bengal state’s local election from April 23 to 29.

A fashion designer at a Kolkata garment company, he was struck off the rolls because the voter list recorded his name in a manner that was different from all his other documents.

“These are data-entry errors made by the officials. The voter list has me as Fa. Ridul, instead of Faridul. How is it my fault? I am being robbed of my constitutional right to vote over such silly reasons,” said the 40-year-old, adding that he has voted 15 times in local body, state and national elections, including one in 2025.

Mass voter deletions in several polls-bound states have called into question the legitimacy of these elections and sparked an uproar among voters and opposition parties.

Protests were reported in the opposition-governed states of West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, among the five that are due to hold local elections in 2026.

The Supreme Court criticised the exercise for using arbitrary conditions and opaque artificial intelligence software.

The voter list clean-up, called the Special Intensive Revision (SIR), is conducted by the Election Commission of India (ECI) and has been ongoing since July 2025, outside of its regular review.

The ECI said the exercise is necessary now to remove the names of duplicate and dead voters, and to record voter migration before assembly elections in several states. It claimed in the Supreme Court that the previous SIR was done 21 years ago in 2002-04, so voter lists from those years have been marked as the base list to compare against.

A larger anxiety is that with the voter list’s quasi-evidence of Indian citizenship, disenfranchisement could lead to the permanent loss of citizenship and possible deportation.

In the biggest voter list clean-up in India to date, more than 52 million names have been struck off the electoral rolls across 12 states and one Union Territory across the country, accounting for about 10 per cent of total voters.

While the majority of deletions are of voters who have died or migrated, thousands of people have complained about wrongful removals over minor inconsistencies flagged by questionable AI software. Many claim a targeted bias against certain communities.

Millions of deletions in West Bengal were based on inconsistencies flagged by an AI-based algorithm that the ECI used to detect differences between the voter list and their documents.

Voter details were verified against “logical discrepancies” flagged by the algorithm, which included spelling differences in names between the 2002 and 2025 rolls.

Other triggers were when there were more than six voters linked to a single ancestor; if the age gap between a voter and the parent fell beyond the 15 to 45 year range; if the difference between the grandparents’ age and the voter’s age was less than 40 years; and if the voter’s gender did not align with the name provided.

Hearing petitions against the SIR process in February 2026, the Supreme Court said the AI-driven software’s standards were “not based on ground realities” in India, such as assuming there was no underage marriage, that children could not be had late, or that a family would not have more than six children.

But eventually, the Court did not order a reversal of the deletions, and the ECI seems to have continued to use the software.

According to West Bengal’s election office, about six million of the 9.1 million deleted voters were placed under an adjudication process. Of these, 3.2 million were found eligible to vote and reinstated, while 2.7 million remained deleted, including Mr Islam.

Voters like him will then be unable to vote as the electoral list in West Bengal was cast in stone on April 11, before most aggrieved voters had a chance to appeal or demand a review.

Mr Islam can now approach judicial tribunals for reconsideration, but reportedly not all are functioning.

The Supreme Court has ordered the ECI to set up tribunals in Kolkata that can hear appeals from voters. On April 16, it ordered the ECI to complete the appeals process by April 21.

However, activists helping deleted voters and opposition parties have alleged that the tribunals are barely functioning, and that the tight deadline for such a crucial task, for which millions of people must travel from across West Bengal to the capital Kolkata, was unreasonable.

Mr Ashin Chakraborty, a researcher at Sabar Institute, a policy research organisation in Kolkata, analysed the deletion lists. He told ST that in the initial SIR phases, which removed absent, dead and duplicate voters, most names were from urban constituencies like Kolkata, and there was no trend across any communities.

But in late January, when the ECI introduced the new filter of “logical discrepancies”, which is not included in any law, “it disproportionately affected marginalised people like Muslims, women, Hindus of East Bengal descent, and transgenders”.

In constituencies such as Nandigram and Bhabanipur, after the logical discrepancy categories were applied, a majority of the deletions were of Muslim voters. Almost 62 per cent of all deletions in the state were of women voters, Sabar Institute has found.

Mrs Swapna Tripathy, the leader of a domestic workers’ union in the Sundarbans mangrove region, told ST that she is trying to help 222 deleted women voters in the South 24 Parganas district file online applications for appeal.

“Most of the deleted women are domestic workers, agricultural labourers and plastic recyclers, not Rohingya nor Bangladeshi, but Indians born and brought up in West Bengal. They had all voted before, but suddenly, they’re not Indian,” she said.

She added that they are daily-wage workers who were forced to skip work to establish their bona fides through dozens of photocopies and repeated visits to government offices.

Mrs Tripathy reeled off a string of cases – a woman named Sabera was deleted because the 2002 voter list had Chabera; several Khatun, Begum and Bibi surnames were interchanged; an Archana was spelled as Archhana; and someone’s father, Subol Chandra Das, in all IDs was truncated to Subol Das in the voter list.

Assistant Professor Darshana Mitra, who specialises in citizenship and immigration law at the National Law School of India University, said: “Given how common these discrepancies are in Indian documents, the fact that the government continues to use these errors in such high-stakes matters shows that it is either mindlessly done out of lack of care, or it is designed to exclude people.”

Mr Jawhar Sircar, a former chief electoral officer of West Bengal, did not mince his words, saying: “The SIR is a blatant attack on democracy. The ECI has lost all credibility. It says people can reinstate their names later. What is the point of fixing the mess after the (West Bengal) election? Disenfranchising millions of people this way is unconstitutional.”

Mr Sircar warned that “targeted and wrongful voter deletions will impact election results”, and have turned electoral calculations “topsy-turvy”.

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is the main opposition in West Bengal, has strongly backed the SIR, the ruling Trinamool Congress has accused the ECI of helping the BJP by trying to disenfranchise its loyal voters.

Surveys of previous elections, like those by think-tank CSDS-Lokniti, show that women voters tended to favour the Trinamool Congress, while Muslims tended to vote against the Hindu nationalist BJP for the more secular Trinamool.

Analysts say the SIR’s deletions could help the BJP win in West Bengal, a state it is keen to capture after significantly expanding its wins from three seats in 2016 to 77 of a total of 294 assembly seats in the 2021 polls.

Mr Sircar, however, thinks it might have the opposite effect.

“Those who may have voted against the Trinamool Congress, after it has ruled the state for 15 years and faces anti-incumbency, might end up choosing Mamata Banerjee out of anger against the BJP’s SIR,” said Mr Sircar, who was a Trinamool Congress member.



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who is also chairperson of the Trinamool Congress, greeting her supporters as she arrives to file her nomination papers for the upcoming legislative assembly elections in Kolkata on April 8.

PHOTO: AFP

West Bengal is not the only polls-bound state faced with this upheaval.

In Tamil Nadu, which goes to the polls on April 23, 7.4 million voters were deleted. In Bihar, which had elections in November 2025, the figure was 7.42 million, and more deletions are expected in Uttar Pradesh, which is currently undergoing the SIR.

It is not clear if the ECI used the AI algorithm in any state other than West Bengal. But the huge number of deletions, prompted by objections filed by BJP members in states such as Assam and Bihar, has also led to widespread distrust of the ECI as a pro-BJP actor.

But the loudest opposition to the SIR is emerging from West Bengal, where the consequences of disenfranchisement are most severe.

For decades, Bengali speakers in neighbouring Assam have been detained and harassed as foreigners, with an uptick in cases since 2015. The BJP-led government has also upped its ante against “illegal Bangladeshis” since 2025 by detaining thousands of Bengali-speaking Muslims nationwide and pushing them across the border to Bangladesh.

Afraid but angry, Mr Islam told ST he plans to file a petition and write to the President, saying: “I don’t want to be deported to Bangladesh – it is not my country. I would rather die in India.”