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The need to safeguard the right to vote

What did the Supreme Court say about electoral rolls revision in Bihar? Is the right to vote a fundamental right in India? Can electoral roll errors invalidate an election? How can India balance electoral vigilance with the inclusion of genuine voters?

LETTER & SPIRIT

Kartik Singh

The story so far:

In July 10, the Supreme Court directed the Election Commission (EC) to consider Aadhaar cards, voter ID cards, and ration cards as acceptable documents for the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar. It has listed the batch of petitions challenging the EC's decision for further hearing on July 28. The court's remark – that the question of 'right to vote' goes to the very root of the functioning of our republic – has cast a spotlight on the foundational processes of India's electoral machinery and the genesis of India's 'universal adult suffrage' (UAS). India's constitutional promise of the 'right to vote' differs significantly from that of many Western democracies. Reflecting the flawed belief, espoused by thinkers like J.S. Mill, that voting should be reserved for the "enlightened" and denied to the "ignorant," countries like the U.K. initially restricted the franchise to male property owners. Universal male suffrage emerged only in 1918, and women were granted the right to vote a decade later in 1928. In the U.S., although the 15th and 19th Amendments extended voting rights to African Americans (1870) and women (1920), systemic barriers such as poll taxes and literacy tests continued to disenfranchise many for decades thereafter.

How was universal adult suffrage made real in India?

In sharp contrast, far from gradualism and the 'privileged class' criteria, India's choice of immediate, universal inclusion ensured 'democratic equality' from the outset, bypassing the prolonged and often violent struggles seen elsewhere. Article 326 of the Constitution granted every adult citizen the right to vote, regardless of gender, caste, religion, education, or property, at a time when most of the world moved cautiously. Initially set at 21 years of age, this threshold was lowered to 18 by the 61st Constitutional Amendment in 1989. This commitment to a robust, inclusive democracy found further constitutional reinforcement in a series of Supreme Court judgments, notably starting with *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973), which established democracy as part of the 'basic structure' doctrine. For this ideal to function meaningfully, people should be able to freely decide the fate of their government, an unassailable right that shapes governance and must never be compromised.

This inclusive vision was operationalised through two key laws: the Representation of the People Act, 1950, which governs the preparation and revision of electoral rolls; and the 1951 Act, which regulates election conduct, candidature, and electoral offences. The EC has repeatedly introduced administrative innovations to realise this 'constitutional promise'. Notably, the then Chief Election Commissioner Sukumar Sen, faced with the task of enrolling 173 million largely illiterate voters, turned a logistical hurdle into a democratic breakthrough by introducing election symbols, making UAS practically accessible.

In India, EC has a great responsibility to reach the last citizen, wherever they may be, to actualise their 'right to elect'. As Winston Churchill once said, "At the bottom of all tributes paid to democracy is the little man, walking into a little booth, with a little pencil, making a little cross on a little bit of paper..." His words



A Booth Level Officer checks documents during special investigation revision of electoral rolls, in Kamalpur Village, in Bihar. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

remain a timeless reminder that the health of any democracy ultimately rests on the sanctity of the 'right to vote'.

Is voting a fundamental right in India?

The legal status of the 'right to vote' in India has long been debated. Although Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and K.T. Shah proposed including it in the Constitution's fundamental rights part, the Constituent Assembly's Advisory Committee ultimately rejected the idea. Importantly, a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court in *Kuldip Nayyar v. Union of India* (2006) held that the 'right to elect' is a statutory right under Section 62 of the RPA, 1950, and not a fundamental or constitutional right.

Later in 2016, through a two-judge bench in *Rajbala v. State of Haryana*, the court described the 'right to vote' as a constitutional right, the larger bench ruling in *Kuldip Nayyar* prevails. Again, in *Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India* (2023), the top court declined to pronounce on the issue, noting that it had already been settled by the five-judge bench in the *Kuldip Nayyar* judgment. However, in his dissent, Justice Jayant Rastogi asserted that the 'right to vote' is an expression of Article 19(1)(a) and reflects the essence of Article 21. Yet, as this view remains a minority opinion, the 'right to elect' continues to be recognised as a statutory right under prevailing law.

Nevertheless, even though it is not a fundamental right, courts have regarded the right to vote as an inseparable part of democracy, anchoring their reasoning in the idea that it enables citizens to shape governance, making it a "democratic imperative" vital to the Indian republic's survival. As philosopher John Dewey said, democracy is not just a form of government, but a social and personal ideal.

Why does electoral roll accuracy matter?

Free and fair elections rest on accurate electoral rolls, under the RPA, 1950. Inaccuracies – such as mass omissions, ineligible inclusions, duplicates, or incorrect entries – undermine the "one person, one vote" principle by enabling impersonation, disenfranchisement, or dilution of votes, ultimately distorting the people's mandate. Therefore, the EC is empowered under Section 21 of the 1950 Act to prepare and revise these rolls to ensure integrity.

While discrepancies may arise, courts have consistently held that only

substantial and systemic errors that demonstrably "materially affected" the election outcome can compromise the sanctity of the electoral roll. Minor mistakes or isolated disenfranchisement are insufficient. Allegations like those in Bihar warrant scrutiny, but it must also be noted that purification of rolls is necessary because just as the exclusion of an eligible voter undermines democracy, so does the inclusion of an ineligible name. Therefore, rather than disrupting or delaying the exercise, efforts should focus on helping improve the process.

The Supreme Court's suggestion to include more accepted documents helps safeguard every genuine elector's right to be represented.

While the right to inclusion or objection in electoral rolls is conferred on individuals, not political parties, the court in *Lakshmi Chauran Sen v. A.K.M. Hassan Usman* (1985) observed that in a largely illiterate and politically unaware electorate, parties should take steps to ensure eligible voters are included and ineligible ones are removed. Given India's party-based Parliamentary system, such vigilance will help to preserve 'electoral integrity'.

Who qualifies as an ordinary resident?

The EC under Article 324 serves as the constitutional guardian of elections, with powers of superintendence, direction, and control. A key duty is preparing accurate electoral rolls, guided by Section 19 of the RPA, 1950, which mandates that any citizen aged 18 or above, "ordinarily resident" in a constituency and not disqualified, is entitled to be registered. "Ordinary resident" implies a genuine, continuous presence, not a temporary stay. For example, a student living in a hostel may not qualify if their permanent home and intent to return lie elsewhere. Mere temporary absence from one's place of ordinary residence does not negate one's status as an ordinary resident of that location. This criterion prevents fraudulent registrations and ensures voters maintain real ties to their constituencies, preserving representative accountability.

Interestingly, the Manmohan Singh case (1990) exemplifies judicial scrutiny on this front. His election from Assam was challenged for lack of "ordinary residence," leading the court to clarify that ordinary residence means habitual, regular, and genuine presence, not a temporary or casual stay or a nominal address. Beyond ordinary voters, India's

electoral system accommodates those unable to vote conventionally. Under Rule 18 of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, 'postal ballots' are available to service voters like armed forces personnel, paramilitary, armed State police posted outside, and government staff abroad, and voters on election duty. Overseas electors – Indian citizens living abroad without foreign citizenship – can register under Section 20A of the RPA, 1950. However, they must vote in person, as they are currently ineligible for postal or proxy voting.

One of the most contentious issues regarding the SIR exercise in Bihar is the debate on 'citizenship verification'. In *Lal Babu Hussein v. ERO* (1995), the court quashed two EC directives (1992 and 1994) allowing District Collectors and Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to identify and delete alleged foreigners from voter rolls. The Supreme Court noted that the poll body guidelines put the "onus of proof of citizenship" on the person involved, even disregarding that several persons were voters in previous elections.

The court ruled that EROs must give due weight to past electoral rolls, conduct full inquiries, and follow quasi-judicial procedures, ensuring natural justice and adherence to the Citizenship Act and Constitution. These safeguards must guide the current exercise as well. Moreover, allegations or vague suspicions cannot justify the exclusion of individuals from citizenship or voter lists without credible evidence and due process, according to the judgments in *Lal Babu* and *Md. Rahim Ali* (2024).

What is next?

The Bihar SIR controversy and broader electoral reform debates highlight a core democratic truth: India's democracy depends on electoral rolls that are accurate, inclusive, and accessible. As the Supreme Court prepares to resume hearings on July 28, the EC must complete the exercise with a careful balance between genuine vigilance and inclusion to uphold the fairness of the process.

Public awareness should empower voters to verify and update their entries, making them active custodians of electoral integrity. Safeguarding the vote is not merely a statutory obligation; it is a shared democratic responsibility, requiring vigilant institutions, informed citizens, and forward-looking legal reforms.

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THE GIST

▼ The Supreme Court, while hearing challenges to the special intensive revision in Bihar, suggested that the Election Commission consider Aadhaar, voter ID, and ration card as acceptable documents, a move aimed at improving access and reducing wrongful exclusions.

▼ The Election Commission, under Article 324, is empowered to revise electoral rolls under Section 21 of the RPA, 1950 – but this process must balance vigilance with inclusion, and follow due process to avoid wrongful disenfranchisement.

▼ The right to vote in India is a statutory right, not a fundamental one, but it is treated as a 'democratic imperative' essential to the survival of the Indian republic.

Are existing mechanisms effective in preventing custodial violence?



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PARLEY

The gruesome death of security guard Ajith Kumar, 27, while in police custody in Tamil Nadu's Sivaganga district last month, is yet another grim addition to the long and growing list of custodial deaths in India. In response, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has ordered a CBI probe to ensure a transparent investigation, and the Madras High Court has directed the agency to complete its inquiry and submit a report by August 20. Are the existing institutional mechanisms effective in preventing custodial violence? M. Srinivasan and Anup Surendranath discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Aaratrika Bhaumik. Edited excerpts:

Why does custodial violence persist despite statutory safeguards and Supreme Court guidelines?

Anup Surendranath: India has signed but not ratified the United Nations Convention Against Torture, and lacks a stand-alone domestic law criminalising torture. This reflects a lack of political will to implement international human rights obligations. However, the more pressing concern lies in the entrenched institutional culture that normalises and even justifies custodial violence. Police personnel often perceive such violence as a necessary means to achieve justice, especially when the formal legal process is seen as slow and ineffective. Public reaction to custodial violence is similarly inconsistent and often shaped by the nature of the case. For instance, while the recent incident has sparked widespread outrage, the 2019 alleged encounter killing of four men accused of raping and murdering a veterinarian near Hyderabad was met with public celebration. There is also a glaring absence of authoritative data on custodial violence. As a result, accountability mechanisms remain weak.

What factors contribute to the institutional culture that condones police brutality?

M. Srinivasan: The rigid hierarchical structure of police forces, combined with a high-pressure working environment, fosters a culture in which aggression is often valorised. Mainstream films frequently glorify vigilante justice. In many cases of custodial violence, instead of facing disciplinary action, offending officers are rewarded with promotions.

AS: Custodial violence should not be dismissed as the actions of a few 'bad apples' within the system. Such behaviour is perpetuated by



B. Ajith Kumar's family mourns his death in Sivaganga district. L. BHAKHARIBABU

entrenched social hierarchies and an enduring colonial mindset within the police, where the public, particularly marginalised communities, is viewed not as citizens to be protected, but as subjects to be controlled. Certain bodies are routinely viewed with suspicion and subjected to heightened surveillance and force. Policing, in this framework, is not about serving the population but about exerting authority over it.

What reforms are required to change such prevailing attitudes?

MS: It is crucial to implement robust training programmes that not only equip police personnel with modern policing methods, but also sensitise them to their own implicit biases. Third-degree torture is often disproportionately inflicted on petty offenders, while white-collar criminals are rarely subjected to such treatment. There is also an urgent need to adopt scientific interrogation techniques. Most police officers lack adequate training in contemporary investigative methods and forensic tools, and there is often a reluctance to collaborate with external experts such as forensic specialists and mental health professionals. Another important reform, supported by many stakeholders, is the decriminalisation of petty offences, particularly minor property-related crimes. This would limit the arbitrary use of arrest powers and help ensure that custodial detention is reserved for exceptional cases.

In 2020, the Supreme Court mandated the installation of CCTV cameras in police stations and affirmed victims' right to access the footage. How effectively have these directions been implemented?

AS: The *Paramvir Singh Saini v. Rajat Singh* (2020) judgment is a classic example of the Supreme Court prescribing technocratic



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ANUP SURENDRANATH

solutions to deeply entrenched institutional problems. In reality, compliance with its directions is minimal. More importantly, as seen in the Ajith Kumar case, acts of torture often occur outside police stations. Even where cameras are installed, a common complaint is that they are conveniently non-functional when victims' families seek access to the footage. This contributes to the continued prevalence of illegal detentions, with arrest dates and times frequently manipulated in police records. Ultimately, the effectiveness of any reform rests on political will and the institutional capacity to enforce it.

The Law Commission has recommended introducing a provision that reverses the burden of proof in such cases. Do you think this could enhance accountability?

AS: Introducing a rebuttable presumption in evidence law would be a significant step towards accountability. However, those most often subjected to such violence typically belong to vulnerable communities. The real question, then, is how we are enabling them to access the legal and constitutional remedies available to them. It is unrealistic to expect victims or their families to navigate the labyrinth of legal procedures on their own. Our justice system often tests the resilience of the very people it should be protecting. So, while legal reforms are important, without parallel efforts to empower vulnerable communities and reduce systemic barriers, the pursuit of justice will remain an uphill battle.

Are judicial magistrates, as the first line of defence against police excesses, discharging their duty to prevent such abuses?

AS: The statutory requirement to produce an accused before a magistrate within 24 hours of arrest is a critical safeguard against police excesses. However, it is deeply concerning how perfunctory this process has become. Magistrates often fail to fulfil their intended role,

which includes scrutinising the grounds for arrest, physically examining the accused for signs of torture, and engaging meaningfully with them to uncover any evidence of mistreatment. Even medico-legal examinations are often reduced to a mere formality. The higher judiciary has fallen short in addressing lapses in magisterial oversight. This systemic failure contributes to the abysmally low conviction rates in cases of custodial torture and deaths.

A further concern is the routine admission of torture-based evidence in the legal process. Section 27 of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, is particularly problematic. While the law excludes confessions made to the police from admissibility, it permits the use of material recovered as a result of such confessions. This loophole enables the continued use of custodial torture, as coerced confessions can still produce evidence that is admissible in court.

In *Prakash Singh v. Union of India* (2006), the Supreme Court mandated the creation of police complaints authorities, led by retired judges, at the State and district levels to address complaints against police misconduct. How effective have these institutional watchdogs been?

AS: Most States have failed to establish these authorities. Where they do exist, their credibility is compromised by the inclusion of serving police officers as members. This reflects a broader pattern in which judicial directives receive little meaningful compliance from State governments. It also raises serious questions about the judiciary's ability to enforce its orders.

Can community policing or greater civil society involvement help curb such practices?

MS: Absolutely. Awareness campaigns led by the media, educational institutions, and civil society organisations can play a vital role in informing people about their constitutional rights and the mechanisms available for redress. Increased public scrutiny of custodial practices can also generate pressure for systemic reforms. At the same time, for community policing to be effective, it is essential to clearly define the role of community representatives and ensure they are properly trained to engage with law enforcement constructively.



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Population decline and an ill-informed chorus

Demographic thinking has always been intertwined with public discourse and, at times, poorly interpreted. With every passing 'Population Day', we see a shifting discourse: from a Malthusian cry about runaway growth and ecological strain to an animated fear of fast-falling fertility rates.

The two sides

A rising chorus of voices is warning the world of population decline and civilisation "dwindling to nothing". Yet, much of this alarmism is premature, analytically flawed, and ethically troubling. While there is no ambiguity that the fertility rate is falling, the implications drawn are often ill-informed. Pro-natalist movements are gaining currency among nation-states with varying degrees of urgency. For the last few years, the self-identified 'demographer' Elon Musk has been 'concerned' about falling birth rates and predicted a 'population collapse' within the next 20 years. The Musk Foundation even made its biggest donation to a higher education institution – about \$10 million, to the University of Texas – to establish the 'Population Wellbeing Initiative'.

Juxtaposed with Mr. Musk's claims are the data by the United Nations World Population Prospects (WPP), released every two years. The world's population is predicted to increase during the next 50 years, from 8.2 billion in 2024 to a peak of about 10.3 billion in the mid-2080s, according to WPP 2024. The world's population is expected to steadily decline after a peak of 10.2 billion by the end of the century; 10.2 billion people is proof that the population collapse is a hoax, even though it is predicted that the world's population in 2100 will be 6% smaller, or roughly 700 million fewer people than it was predicted 10 years ago.

A large portion of the alarmism misses two points. First, projections are not predictions. The underlying assumptions regarding future vital



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rates drive these projections – the farther the projection, the less accurate it is. Second, there is a lag effect in demographic change, in other words, the time lag between changes in vital rates (survival and reproduction) and their apparent implication on the age distribution and population size. When a population reaches below-replacement fertility (total fertility rate or TFR value of less than 2.1), it can continue to have increments for decades. This phenomenon is known as population momentum. In other words, growth is maintained because a significant portion of the reproductive-age population continues to produce children, albeit fewer than in the past. No population shrinks overnight or reaches stationarity (zero growth) linearly.

The 'real fertility crisis'

In the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report, 'The Real Fertility Crisis: The Pursuit of Reproductive Agency in a Changing World' (2025), around 14,000 people from 14 countries were asked whether they 'feel able' to have children, to which one in five responded that they would not be able to have the number of children they desire. Nearly 23% of respondents desired having a child, which went unfulfilled at the preferred time.

And, 40% of these respondents ultimately had to forgo their desire to have a child. Irrespective of whether the surveyed country had higher or lower fertility rates, people are either over-/under-realising their desired fertility, indicating ubiquitous barriers to achieving their ideal family size. When asked about the factors that influenced people to have fewer children than they desire, unsurprisingly, infertility (13%), financial limitations (38%), housing limitations (22%), lack of quality childcare (18%) and

unemployment (21%) stood out for the Indian respondents. The Republic of Korea spent more than \$200 billion to boost its population over the last 20 years. Ending a nine-year declining trend, for the first time births in South Korea are showing a slight rebound of 7.3% in the first quarter of 2025 when compared to the same period last year. This uptick in births seems to be

backed by a rise in marriages and a positive outlook on marriage and children. Despite this optimistic trend, respondents in the Republic of Korea cite financial (58%) and housing limitations (31%) as factors leading them to have fewer children.

Need for societal changes

The panic over falling births and an ageing population has unjustly targeted women who have opted out

of childbearing, curbing their rights to abortion and other means of contraception. The homogenisation of women as a single entity, shedding the idea of childbearing, is absurd. Most people want to have children, on average, around two, yet they are shut out of parenthood. It is a reminder that the focus should shift to those women who want to have children and are unable to do so – not to the ones who are voluntarily childless. Be that as it may, target-driven pronatalism, such as baby bonuses and one-off benefits, often reinstates traditional gender roles and ignores men's contribution, and does more harm than good.

Countries facing declining fertility need to let go of their ethno-nationalist discourse and support significant societal changes in favour of women and families. The associated fear of a shrinking workforce should not be addressed through forcing women to have more babies, but through hiring them in the paid workforce and not penalising them for motherhood.



Widen the net

The ECI must heed Court's view on including more accessible documents

The Supreme Court of India's pointed observations on Thursday regarding Bihar's ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls are a crucial course correction for the Election Commission of India (ECI), which it must heed immediately. By urging the ECI to consider including the Aadhaar, the Elector Photo Identity Card, and the ration card among the acceptable documents for identity verification, the Court has acknowledged the critique of the SIR that the 11 documents listed for verification are a restrictive and unnecessary barrier to voter registration. The Court has nudged the ECI toward inclusivity in a way that could help resolve the core issues with the SIR. The Court rightly observed that "the entire exercise of SIR is about identity only", that none of the 11 documents currently listed are "telltale ones for citizenship", and that they are all meant to prove identity. It also rightly went on to question why Aadhaar, which is "considered basic for getting other documents", is excluded while dependent documents such as caste certificates are accepted, exposing the inconsistency in the ECI's position. The ECI's objection to Aadhaar as merely proving residence rather than citizenship reveals a misunderstanding of the practical realities of Bihar, besides legal precedents. For example, data show that while 87% of Bihar's population have an Aadhaar card, only 45%-50% are matriculates and close to just 2% have passports.

The Court's earlier judgments remain relevant too, having decisively rejected putting the "onus of proof of citizenship" on voters already enrolled in previous elections. This precedent contradicts the SIR's approach of treating every voter as a potential non-citizen unless proven otherwise and which risks significant disenfranchisement of electors despite their having valid identification. While not staying the SIR, the Court also listed the judicial review of the whole process, including its timing and nature, which "goes to the very roots of our democracy [and] is about the right to vote". The Court has reminded the ECI that its mandate, under Article 324, is to facilitate democratic participation, and not to create obstacles. There has been enough confusion on the ground following a more liberal reading of the ECI's SIR rules on document submission and verification by the Chief Electoral Officer, which was overruled by the Chief Election Commissioner. With its suggestion on expanding the list of verifiable documents, the Court has provided the ECI an opportunity to transform the SIR from a dangerously exclusionary exercise – one that could affect marginalised citizens – into a genuinely inclusive process.



Aiding India's progress with choice, control and capital

With the world's population having crossed the eight billion mark, looking at the macros is all but natural. However, there has to be an equal focus on the micro-vulnerable groups, key populations and individuals on the fringes. We must endeavour to ensure that the promise of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICDP) is kept, and that every person gets the right to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health, free from coercion, discrimination and violence.

This year, the United Nations has announced its theme for World Population Day as "Empowering young people to create the families they want in a fair and hopeful world". It highlights the ICDP's special focus on youth, by affirming their right to accurate information, education and services in order to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. It also reflects a simple but pressing need: of bringing youth to the centre when envisioning the future, ensuring their freedom of choice and opportunities.

Home to the largest youth population

UNICEF reports there being 371 million youth in the age group of 15 to 29 years in India, making it the world's largest youth population. This is a number that stretches existing resources and systems. But with the right investments in education, skills and also access to health, nutrition, and family planning services, it can become a powerful driver of national progress. Unleashing this youth potential in India could boost its GDP by up to \$1 trillion by 2030, unlocking a demographic divide as projected by the World Bank and NITI Aayog, while significantly reducing unemployment and improving social outcomes.

India has made significant strides with initiatives such as 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' and the National Adolescent Health Programme, reducing child marriage and adolescent fertility rates. Yet, there is still room to do more as a nation in order to address persistent challenges such as limited reproductive autonomy, socio-cultural barriers and gender inequality. These continue to restrict many young people (especially young women) from realising their true potential.

For instance, the prevalence of child marriages in India has reduced by half since 2006, but is still reported at 23.3% (National Family Health Survey-5, 2019-21). Further, teenage childbearing among women in the age group of 15 to 19 years was pegged at 7% nationally. But in some States, the rate was reported to be more than double, highlighting stark regional disparities (National Family Health Survey-5). In addition, the recently published State of World Population Report 2025 by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) underscores the lack of reproductive autonomy

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and the crisis of fertility aspirations, particularly among women. More than a third of Indian adults (36%) face unintended pregnancies, while another 30% reported unmet reproductive goals, i.e., an inability to exercise their choice about the number of children they have. Almost 23% of Indian adults faced both.

Issue of child marriage

The need is for a comprehensive, multi-pronged strategy which includes education, contraception access, nutrition, mental health support and community empowerment to tackle the root causes rather than addressing symptoms.

UNICEF reports that each additional year of secondary education can reduce the likelihood of child marriage by up to 6%. Project Udaan (implemented by IPE Global in Rajasthan between 2017 and 2022), used this as its basis; it became an example of how a streamlined, 360° approach can drive meaningful change for young people.

The initiative addressed the challenge of early marriages and teenage pregnancies by keeping girls in secondary school through the strategic use of government scholarship schemes, improving their awareness of sexual and reproductive health, and improving access to modern contraceptives for young women, which helped bolster the voice and reproductive agency of girls and women. The initiative led to almost 30,000 child marriages being prevented and nearly 15,000 teenage pregnancies being averted, while also ensuring an education and a bright future for these girls.

Similarly, the Advika programme, launched by the Government of Odisha in partnership with UNICEF-UNFPA in 2019-20, has made strides in preventing child marriage through strategies which include strengthening state systems, fostering awareness about child protection issues, and empowering adolescents through education, skill development and leadership training. Its youth-focused approach has enabled about 11,000 villages to be declared child marriage-free; in 2022, nearly 950 child marriages were stopped.

Addressing child marriage and early pregnancy is essential, but true empowerment means going further – equipping adolescents, especially girls, with the skills, the education and the opportunities they need to lead independent and meaningful lives, while also fostering enabling environments that support their agency, voice and participation in decisions that affect them. This includes the timing of their marriage, reproductive freedom (whether or not to have children, the age at which they have the first child, the number of children they wish to have), or how they choose to live meaningful lives on

their own terms. At the heart of this empowerment lies economic independence. When economically empowered, women gain the resources, the confidence and the voice to shape their futures and contribute meaningfully to society.

To address the issues surrounding women's economic empowerment and the low female labour force participation, Project Manzil is being implemented by IPE Global in collaboration with

the Government of Rajasthan in six selected districts (2019-25). The programme which utilises a human-centred design approach, understands the aspirations of young women, then aligns skill training with these aspirations, and enables them to have unhindered access to dignified employment opportunities at gender-friendly workplaces. As with all effective programmes, this

has been complemented with addressing harmful social norms through consistent behaviour change communication strategies. The project has made families prosperous and has also transformed communities. For instance, it helped 28,000 young women (ages 18 to 21 years) to complete skill training at government skill training centres – 16,000 were employed, making them the first generation of women from their communities to enter skilled professions. Empowered by financial stability, these young women exude better negotiation power to delay or get married.

Accelerating progress

The State of World Population 2025 report aptly focuses on rights-based, multi-sector investments and underscores that progress hinges on expanding universal access to contraception, safe abortion, maternal health and infertility care, and also in removing structural barriers such as education, housing, childcare and workplace flexibility. It also emphasises that investing in girls' education, life-skills development, conditional cash transfers, community mobilisation and health services delivers measurable gains. Programmes such as Udaan, Advika and Manzil showcase how these investments can be brought to life and improve the future of youth everywhere.

The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has rightly called for this World Population Day to celebrate the potential and the promise the largest-ever generation of youth holds. It is important to remember that they are entitled to shape their futures by making informed choices about their health, families, careers and lives. India stands at a defining moment on its development journey, and its success will depend on how well it can understand the aspirations of its youth, amplifying the voices of young women, and helping unlock opportunities for them.



With the right investments in education, skills and access to health, nutrition and family planning services, India's youth population can boost national progress



Axiom-4 mission likely to undock on July 14: NASA

Hemanth C.S.

BENGALURU

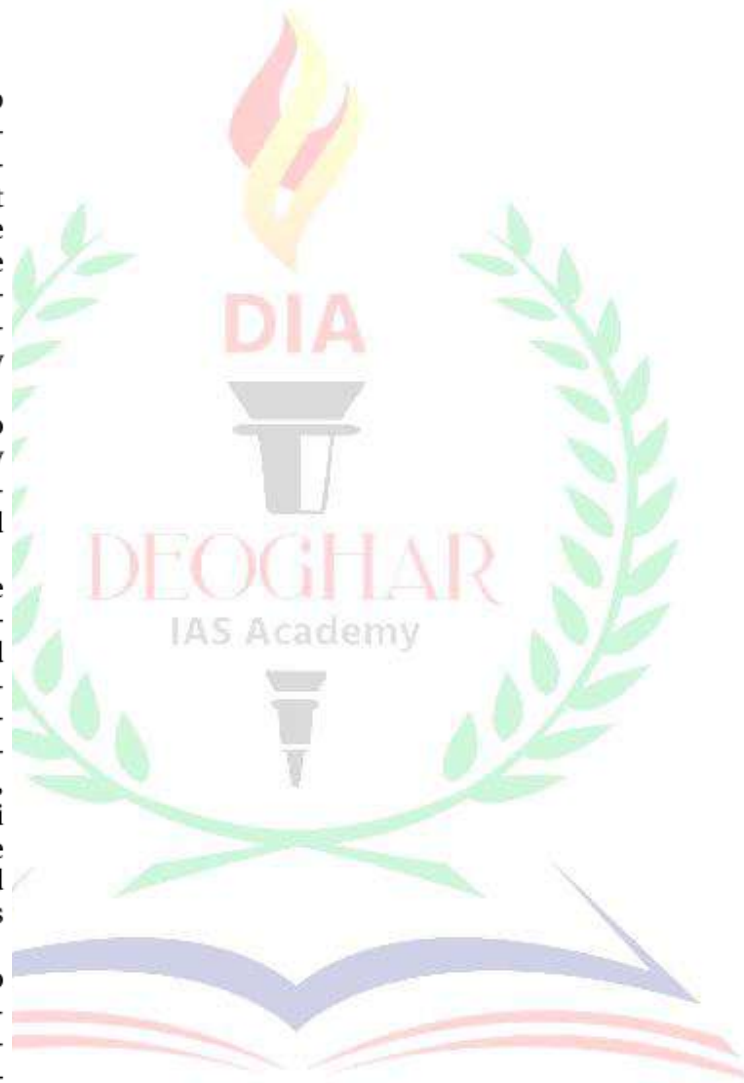
Indian astronaut Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla, who is part of the Axiom-4 (Ax-04) mission at the International Space Station (ISS), and his three crew members are expected to undock from the orbiting laboratory on July 14.

“...the targeted time to undock the mission is July 14,” said Steve Stich, manager, NASA Commercial Crew Program.

During their stay at the ISS, the Ax-4 research complement included around 60 scientific studies, experiments and activities representing 31 countries, including the U.S., India, Poland, Hungary, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Nigeria, the United Arab Emirates, and several nations across Europe.

Besides, ISRO had also shortlisted seven microgravity research experiments from various national R&D laboratories and academic institutions, which Group Captain Shukla conducted during his stay at the ISS.

Group Captain Shukla's Ax-4 to the ISS was launched on June 25, 2025, from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida.



Zonal Councils now 'engines of cooperation' and not just discussion forums, says Shah

Press Trust of India

RANCHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday said zonal councils have transformed from being mere discussion forums into "engines of cooperation", noting that 83% of issues taken up in their meetings have been resolved.

Mr. Shah made the remark at the 27th Eastern Zonal Council meeting, attended by representatives from the four eastern States – Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal – including Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren and his Odisha counterpart Mohan Charan Majhi.

'Long-pending issues'

"In today's meeting, long-pending complex issues related to Masanjore Dam, Taiyabpur Barrage, and Indrapuri Reservoir were dis-



Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren with Odisha CM Mohan Charan Majhi as Home Minister Amit Shah looks on, in Ranchi on Thursday. ANI

cussed in detail in addition to the issues related to division of assets and liabilities of many Public Sector Undertakings between Bihar and Jharkhand, which were pending since the time of division of Bihar, and decisive steps were taken with mutual consent towards their resolution," Mr. Shah said.

The Home Minister said the number of zonal coun-

cil meetings rose to 63 between 2014 and 2025 as compared with 25 between 2004 and 2014. He said the Centre was committed to advancing the development of States with renewed focus and direction, calling for collective efforts to achieve this goal.

Mr. Shah said Bihar, Jharkhand, and Odisha have become free from Naxalism to a large extent.



New Carnac Bridge in Mumbai renamed as Sindoor Bridge

The new Carnac Bridge, now renamed as Sindoor Bridge after Operation Sindoor, was inaugurated by Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis in Mumbai on Thursday. The old bridge was razed in 2022 after a structural audit deemed it 'unsafe'. The bridge was earlier named after former Governor of Bombay James Rivett-Carnac, who held the office from 1839 to 1841. At the inauguration, Mr. Fadnavis said history "shows the kind of atrocities Carnac had committed against Indians", referring to a historical account by Prabodhankar Thackeray, grandfather of Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray. "This renaming is a tribute to our armed forces," the Chief Minister added.

Indian team for U.S. again to seek clarity on tariffs and negotiate trade deal further

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

An Indian team of trade negotiators will soon be travelling to the U.S. once again, to seek clarity on several recent announcements from Washington, including a proposed 10% tariff on imports from BRICS countries, as well as to continue negotiations for a “mini” trade deal and a wider bilateral investment treaty.

According to sources and trade experts, the prospect of an added tax on all BRICS members – apart from the tariffs mentioned in U.S. President Donald Trump’s letters already sent to several BRICS countries – calls into question the sanctity of any trade deal with the U.S.

Mr. Trump first raised the spectre of a tariff on BRICS countries last Sunday, and then doubled down on it during a Cabinet briefing on Tuesday. “Anybody that’s in BRICS is getting a 10% charge pretty soon... If they’re a member of BRICS, they’re going to have to pay a 10% tariff.”

Tariff letters

His announcement came a day after he sent letters to 14 countries reimposing higher tariffs on them effective from August 1. Then, on Wednesday, he sent similar letters to eight more countries.

The recipients of these letters include three BRICS countries – Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia. Mr. Trump’s threat of a BRICS tariff is, therefore, causing

On the table

Indian negotiators are going to the U.S. for the third time in the past few months. A U.S. team visited India twice during this time

What New Delhi wants:

- Clarity on several recent announcements from Washington, including a proposed 10% tariff on imports from BRICS countries
- Assurance on how a BRICS tariff will affect India and the deal that is being negotiated
- Negotiations for a “mini” trade deal and a wider bilateral investment treaty



A file photo of PM Narendra Modi with President Trump

some confusion among Indian policymakers.

In its letters, the U.S. threatened to impose import tariffs of 50% on Brazil, 30% on South Africa, and 32% on Indonesia.

As per a trade deal agreed with China towards the end of June, the U.S. will impose 30% tariffs on Chinese imports.

“More clarity has to come from the U.S. side,” an official told *The Hindu*. “They have already sent letters to some countries, and have entered into an agreement with China, and now are saying they will impose additional tariffs on BRICS countries. Do the tariffs in the letters include this 10% additional tariff or not? How will a BRICS tariff affect India and the current proposed deal that is being negotiated?”

Apart from the letters to specific countries, Mr. Trump also announced a 50% tariff on all copper imports coming into the U.S.

Another government official confirmed to *The Hindu* that India plans to seek additional clarity on this.

“We are engaged with

the U.S. team virtually, and an Indian team will be heading to the U.S. soon,” the second official said. “Along with clarity on this, negotiations will continue on the mini deal as well as the overall bilateral trade agreement (BTA).”

Trump’s warning

This would be the third time that an Indian team of negotiators has travelled to the U.S. in the past few months to discuss the trade deal. A U.S. team has also travelled to India twice during this time.

According to trade experts, these latest announcements call into question existing deals with the U.S.

“Trump’s unpredictability raises concerns that even signed deals may be revisited,” said Ajay Srivastava, former Director-General of Foreign Trade and founder of the think-tank Global Trade Research Initiative.

“Trump’s warning makes it clear: any country seen as aligning with BRICS positions may face new tariffs, regardless of previous deals.”

'Consider Aadhaar, EPIC, ration card as proof'

The Supreme Court was hearing pleas against the special intensive revision of the voter list in Bihar | It says issue goes to very roots of democracy, and list of 11 documents for voter verification is not exhaustive | Court notes that the revision in Bihar appeared nebulous – neither 'summary' nor 'special'

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday asked the Election Commission (EC) to consider Aadhaar, elector photo identity card (EPIC), and ration card as proof for voter registration in the ongoing special intensive revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls in Bihar.

The court referred to the EC's submission that its list of 11 documents for verification of voters was not "exhaustive". "Therefore, in our *prima facie* view, since the list [of documents] is not exhaustive, it would be in the interest of justice if the EC would also consider the following documents, Aadhaar, EPIC, issued by the EC itself, and ration card," the court dictated in its order.

No stay

A Bench of Justices Sudhanshu Dhulia and Joydip Bagchi allowed the SIR in Bihar to "go on". It did not pass any interim order

of stay. The court listed the case for further hearing on July 28, prior to the publication of the draft electoral rolls in August.

The court said its judicial review of the SIR would focus on the EC's power to undertake the exercise, the manner in which it was conducted, and the chosen timing, which, it described as "very short". It noted that the revision in Bihar appeared nebulous – neither "summary" nor "special" as defined under Section 21 of the Representation of the People Act, 1950.

"This issue is very important. It goes to the very roots of our democracy. It is about the right to vote," Justice Dhulia observed.

The EC objected to Aadhaar, stating it was a document for identity verification and not proof of citizenship. Aadhaar, it said, was also issued to non-citizens who were ordinarily resident at a place.

"The Aadhaar Act

SIR in top court

The Supreme Court will take up for further hearing on July 28 the case against the special intensive revision of the electoral rolls in Bihar



clearly says it is not proof of citizenship. The EC cannot exalt the status of the Aadhaar," senior advocate Rakesh Dwivedi, appearing for the commission, submitted.

Justice Dhulia, however, remarked that Aadhaar was one of the primary identity documents, and the SIR was about establishing identity. "If I want a caste certificate, I

1 What the court will focus on: Election Commission's power to undertake the exercise, the manner in which it is conducted, and the chosen timing just months ahead of the Assembly election

2 Court finds the revision nebulous – neither 'summary' nor 'special' as defined under Section 21 of the Representation of the People Act, 1950

3 Petitioners call it 'citizenship screening' of vulnerable groups under the guise of voter registration; Election Commission has no jurisdiction to ascertain citizenship

The Aadhaar Act clearly says it is not proof of citizenship. The EC cannot exalt the status of the Aadhaar. – EC

If I want a caste certificate, I show my Aadhaar. A document like Aadhaar, considered basic for getting other documents, is not part of the 11 documents? The entire exercise of SIR is about identity only.

JUSTICE SUDHANSHU DHULIA

show my Aadhaar. A document like Aadhaar, considered basic for getting other documents, is not part of the 11 documents? Caste certificate is one of the documents among the 11, but not Aadhaar? The entire exercise of SIR is about identity only. You want to know whether this person is A or B," he said.

Justice Bagchi con-

curring, stating that none of the 11 documents listed in the EC's June 24 notification established citizenship. "The statute, Representation of the People Act, allows Aadhaar," Justice Bagchi said.

The EC was also represented by senior advocate K.K. Venugopal.

Mr. Dwivedi urged the court to clarify that it would be at the commis-

sion's "discretion" to accept Aadhaar, EPIC or ration cards. Justice Dhulia responded that the court's order was "clear".

Mr. Dwivedi said the revision was necessary, as the last intensive revision in Bihar was in 2003. He said 60% of enumerations – around 5.5 crore – had already been completed, with half uploaded on the EC's new digital platform, ECI Net. "For the first time, we have created ECI Net where the documents would be uploaded. This drive need not be repeated, except for adding names," he said.

'Citizenship screening'

The petitioners, represented by senior advocates Kapil Sibal, A.M. Singhvi, Gopal Sankaranarayanan, Shadan Farasat and Vrinda Grover, described the SIR as "citizenship screening" of vulnerable groups under the guise of voter registration. They argued that the EC had no jurisdiction to ascertain citizenship, which

was the responsibility of the Union Home Ministry.

Citing a Bihar government survey, Mr. Sibal submitted that 87% of the population had Aadhaar, while only 14% had matriculation certificates and 2% had passports. "This means a substantial portion of the population risk disenfranchisement despite having an Aadhaar. The burden has suddenly fallen on the citizen to prove she is indeed a citizen," he said.

Justice Bagchi raised questions about the strict deadlines of the SIR process. "You say within 30 days citizens have to do this and another 30 days they have to do that... The timing is very short... Why is SIR so election-focused," he asked.

Mr. Sankaranarayanan questioned why the SIR, meant to be implemented nationwide, began in Bihar ahead of the election later this year.

USED IN EARLIER ELECTIONS
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