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Original Article

Digital Biopolitics and the Algorithmic Disenfranchisement of the Marginalized: A Critical Analysis of Bihar's Special Intensive Revision (SIR)

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Abstract

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) represents a paradigmatic shift in voter registration, leveraging algorithmic design to streamline electoral rolls. However, this paper critically examines the SIR in Bihar, India, and argues that such data-driven governance, far from being a neutral instrument of administrative efficiency, operates as a biopolitical mechanism of systematic exclusion. By mandating specific, often inaccessible, documentary proofs and transferring discretionary power to opaque automated systems, the SIR renders historically marginalized populations digitally invisible and politically illegitimate. Drawing upon empirical survey data collected by SAMAR for the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) Bihar chapter and anchoring the analysis in Michel Foucault's framework of biopolitics alongside Safiya Noble's critical theory of algorithmic oppression, this paper challenges the prevailing narrative of digital governance as an unequivocal public good. The findings reveal that the SIR's algorithmic logic produces a modern form of citizenship stratification, wherein entitlement becomes contingent upon legibility to a machine rather than constitutional guarantees. Ultimately, this study calls for a fundamental reorientation of data science praxis, advocating for a justice-oriented approach that prioritizes inclusivity, transparency, and the protection of democratic rights over procedural expediency.

Keywords: *Algorithmic Governance, Biopolitics, Voter Registration, Digital Disenfranchisement, Data Justice, Electoral Reforms, Caste and Marginalization, Bihar, Critical Data Studies, SAMAR Survey, PUCL*

Introduction: The Paradox of Digital Governance

1. The Global "Data Revolution"

The early 21st century has been defined by a global push to harness data and technology as the primary engines of governance. Championed by powerful international entities like the United Nations, this movement, often termed the "data revolution," promises unprecedented efficiency, transparency, and inclusivity in achieving developmental and democratic goals. The seminal 2014 UN report, *A World That Counts*, encapsulates this vision, arguing that better data is essential for monitoring progress, holding governments accountable, and ultimately ensuring that "no one is left behind" (United Nations, 2014). This report advocates for the integration of traditional statistical data with new, digital sources, including satellite imagery and mobile phone records, to create a more robust and dynamic evidence base for policy-making. The underlying narrative is one of techno-optimism: that digitization is an unambiguous good, a neutral and objective force that can modernize bureaucracies and empower citizens universally.

2. The Local Reality

However, a significant and troubling paradox emerges when this global rhetoric encounters local realities.

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Rather than acting as a great equalizer, these technologically sophisticated systems often exacerbate existing social inequalities and create new forms of exclusion. The very frameworks lauded for their efficiency can become mechanisms of marginalization, systematically filtering out populations who lack the resources, documentation, or literacy to interface with digital bureaucracies. A prime case study of this paradox is the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the voter list in Bihar, India. Touted as a technological upgrade to purify and modernize the electoral roll, the SIR process relies on a digitized, document-centric, and automated framework. In practice, however, its implementation raises a critical question: why does a system designed to enhance democratic participation instead appear to disenfranchise the most vulnerable segments of the state's population?

3. Research Statement

This research paper contends that Bihar's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process is not a neutral administrative tool but a mechanism of algorithmic oppression. It argues that the SIR leverages the technical and bureaucratic logics of the global data revolution to perform a biopolitical sorting of the population. By mandating specific forms of digital identification and ceding administrative discretion to automated systems, the SIR algorithmically constructs categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy. In doing so, it systematically disenfranchises what Partha Chatterjee (2004) terms "populations on the margins of legality," "transgressive communities that navigate informal economies and habitats," rendering them digitally invisible and, consequently, politically illegitimate. This case study of the SIR in Bihar, particularly in relation to the data collected by SAMAR in the slums of Patna, exemplifies how modern digital governance, operating under the guise of neutrality and efficiency, can reinforce and deepen existing social hierarchies.

Theoretical Framework: Biopolitics, Measurement, and Population

1. Foucault and the Administration of Life

To understand the exclusionary mechanics of modern digital governance, we must first situate it within a history of state power focused on the management of human life. Michel Foucault's (1978) concept of biopolitics provides the foundational lens for this analysis. Unlike sovereign power's right to "take life or let live," biopolitics marks a shift in the 18th century towards a power that seeks to "foster life or disallow it to the point of death." It is, as Mitchell Dean (1999) succinctly defines it, "a form of politics entailing the administration of the processes of life of populations." This form of power is concerned with the population as a biological collective, its birth rates, health, mortality, and productivity, which becomes the central object of state intervention. Modern states, therefore, operate not just by governing territory but by optimizing the life of their human resources through policies on sanitation, public health, welfare, and security. The primary goal is to regulate and secure the population to ensure its orderly and efficient functioning within the state apparatus.

2. The Historical Role of Measurement

The very concept of a "population" as a knowable, governable entity is not a natural given but a historical construct, produced through techniques of measurement and classification. Ian Hacking (1990) detailed the explosion of statistical thinking in the 19th century, which made it possible to perceive regularities in human affairs and thus to imagine governing them. Nowhere was this link between knowledge and power more explicit than in the colonial context. In India, the British colonial administration undertook massive exercises in mapping and measurement to render a complex society legible, manageable, and taxable. As Matthew Edney (1997) argues, the Great Trigonometrical Survey was not merely a scientific project but an act of "cartographic colonization" that created the very entity of "British India" as a bounded, knowable, and controllable space. Similarly, Bernard Cohn (1987) demonstrated how the colonial census transformed fluid social identities like caste and religion into rigid, enumerated categories, thereby creating the "population" it claimed only to describe. These exercises, the census, cadastral surveys, and mapping, were, as Ian J. Barrow (2003) notes, fundamental technologies of colonial governance, used to define, control, and exploit both territory and people.

3. From Colonial Cartography to Digital Algorithms

The contemporary "data revolution" championed by global institutions is not a break from this history but its direct digital successor. The algorithm has become the new cartographic tool, and the database the new map. Where colonial surveyors once traversed the land with theodolites to draw boundaries and classify land, digital systems now traverse social life with data points to draw boundaries of eligibility and classify citizens. The pursuit of legibility and administrative efficiency remains the same; only the technology has evolved. The digital voter roll, purified through processes like Bihar's SIR, is the modern equivalent of the colonial census, a technology that creates the "electoral population" by defining the criteria for legitimate membership and excluding those who fail to conform. Therefore, this paper argues that the automated systems and rigid data requirements of the SIR represent a 21st-century incarnation of biopower. They are the latest in a long historical line of bureaucratic techniques that administer life by sorting populations into categories of value and exclusion, using the ostensibly neutral language of science, whether statistical, cartographic, or algorithmic, to legitimize political ends.

Case Study: The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in Bihar

1. Understanding the SIR

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) is an intensive drive conducted by the Election Commission of India to update and purify electoral rolls. Its stated objectives are to maximize voter registration, remove duplicate or ineligible entries (such

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as deceased or relocated individuals), and ensure a clean, accurate voter list (ECI, 2023). Framed as a technological upgrade to enhance the integrity of the democratic process, the SIR operates on a highly digitized and document-centric framework. The process heavily relies on online forms, mandatory submission of specific digital identity proofs, and automated cross-verification against other government databases. This model epitomizes the "data revolution" in practice, prioritizing automated efficiency, data linkage, and the creation of a single, verifiable digital identity for each voter.
Key features of the SIR:

- Revision of the electoral rolls of 7.89 crore voters in Bihar, as on 24th June 2025
- Proof of citizenship required as per Election Commission guidelines
- Voters listed in the 2003 electoral roll are exempt from providing any document.
- Voters not listed on the 2003 electoral roll must submit proof of citizenship.
- The exercise commenced on 25th June 2025 and concluded on 26th July 2025. 025.
- Final Electoral Roll published on 30th September 2025, with 7.42 crore voters

2. The Architecture of Exclusion: Categorization and Documentation Requirements

The technical logics of oppression within the SIR are codified in the Election Commission's official instructions (ECI, 2025). The process imposes a tripartite categorization system based on an applicant's year of birth, each tier demanding an escalating level of documentary evidence to prove citizenship and age.

Table: SIR Voter Categorization and Documentation Requirements

Category	Birthdate Range	Documentation Requirement
1	Born before 01-07-1987	Own birth date and place
2	Born between 01-07-1987 and 02-12-2004	Own plus one parent's birth date and place
3	Born after 02-12-2004	Own plus both parents' birth date and place

Source: *Adapted from Election Commission of India (ECI) instructions, June 2025*

To fulfill these requirements, the ECI mandates a narrow list of eleven prescribed documents, including government-issued birth certificates, passports, matriculation certificates, caste certificates, and land allotment certificates. Crucially, the instructions explicitly state that Aadhaar (after Supreme Court direction, accepted in August 2025), PAN cards, and driving licenses are not acceptable as sole proof of date and place of birth (ECI, 2025). This architectural framework is the primary mechanism of exclusion.
The three-tiered system creates a particularly high barrier, raising concerns for this exercise:

1. Age-based burden: The younger the voter, the heavier the documentation burden. This could discourage participation among youth, first-time voters, and children of migrants.
2. Slum and floating populations: People living in slum areas or the floating population in cities who usually don't have a permanent residence face significant barriers.
3. Flood-prone areas: People living in flood-prone areas such as the Kosi region of Bihar, where it is difficult to store necessary documents (the Kosi region has faced severe floods in recent times—2024, 2023, and 2021).
4. High-migration districts: Non-residents of districts with a high intensity of migration, like Katihar, Araria, etc.

Moreover, younger voters, especially those from Category 3, must now produce documented proof of both their parents' birth details. This directly impacts first-time voters from marginalized or floating communities where institutional birth registration for parents is historically low. Furthermore, the list of acceptable documents is composed almost exclusively of formal, state-issued certificates that are notoriously difficult for informal and transgressive communities to obtain. The explicit exclusion of more commonly held and accessible photo-identity documents like Aadhaar or driver's licenses, despite their near-universal penetration, appears illogical from an inclusion perspective but perfectly logical from a biopolitical one: it ensures that only those with a deep, documented, and multi-generational footprint within the state's formal bureaucracy can achieve the status of "legitimate" voter.

Identifying the "Major Default Causes": The Technical Logics of Oppression

1. **The Documentation Barrier**

The demand for specific documentation, as detailed in its official architecture, transforms the act of voter registration from a right of citizenship into a bureaucratic hurdle contingent on possessing specific documents. The requirement for a narrow set of proofs of identity and residence, while explicitly excluding more common forms of ID, creates a primary barrier to entry. For marginalized communities, including migrant workers, informal settlement dwellers, the homeless,

and transgender individuals, these documents are often inaccessible. Their lives are characterized by informality: they may lack a formal address, live in precarious housing without utility bills in their name, or have identities that do not conform to the binary gender choices or legal names required by standardized forms. As the PUCL Bihar (2025) survey found, a significant majority of applicants facing rejection were turned away due to "a lack of required documents or a mismatch in document details." This requirement is not a neutral filter; it is a mechanism that systematically filters out those on the margins of the formal economy and state recognition.

2. **Ceding Discretion to Automation**

A profound consequence of this digitized framework is the replacement of human discretion with automated, algorithm-driven eligibility systems. Previously, local electoral registration officers (EROs) could exercise judgment, accept alternative forms of evidence, or rely on community verification to affirm a person's identity and residence. This discretion allowed for the accommodation of complex, non-standard lived realities. The automated systems central to the SIR, by contrast, operate on rigid, binary criteria. An algorithm checking a database for a precise Aadhaar number or address match cannot interpret context, accept sworn affidavits, or understand informal proofs of residence. As Safiya Noble (2018) argues, such technical systems are presented as objective, but their architecture is embedded with the biases of their designers, "privileging whiteness and discriminating against people of color," driver's licenses, and color, a dynamic that in the Indian context translates to discrimination against the informal, undocumented, and marginalized. The machine's "yes" or "no" decision is final and unappealable in the moment, stripping the process of the nuance required for equitable governance.

3. **Creating "Digital Invisibility"**

The failure to meet these technical requirements results in more than just a missing name on a list; it constitutes an active erasure from the political body, creating a state of digital invisibility. When an individual is rejected by the system due to a document mismatch or absence, they are not merely unregistered; they are algorithmically categorized as an anomaly, a duplicate, or a "ghost" to be purged. This erasure has a cascading effect, as exclusion from the voter roll can then be used to justify denial of other rights and services linked to proven citizenship. Thus, these individuals are rendered politically illegitimate. Their claim to belonging and their right to have a say in the governance of their country is invalidated by the system's technical logic. This outcome is a direct manifestation of biopolitical sorting, where, as Foucault described, the state administers life by defining who is a legitimate subject worthy of recognition and who is not, effectively "disallowing [their political life] to the point of death."

Empirical Evidence: PUCL Bihar's Survey Findings

1. **Methodology of the PUCL Survey**

To move from theoretical critique to evidence-based argument, this analysis draws upon the empirical findings of a comprehensive survey conducted by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Bihar. The survey, titled "Survey Conducted on Special Intensive Revision of Voter List in Bihar-2025," was carried out from 15th July to 21st July 2025 in Patna. The households were randomly selected in six slum areas in Patna (PUCL Bihar, 2025). The methodology involved a mixed-methods approach, combining:

1. Structured Interviews: Over 1,000 individuals who had attempted to navigate the SIR process.
2. Stakeholder Engagement: Conversations with Booth Level Officers (BLOs), local administration officials, and civil society organizers.
3. On-ground Observation: Documenting the functioning of voter registration camps and help desks.

This methodology provides a crucial ground-level perspective, capturing the lived experiences of citizens interacting with the SIR's digitized system and offering quantifiable data on its exclusionary outcomes.

2. **Corroborating the Theory with Data**

The PUCL findings provide stark empirical substantiation for the theoretical claims of algorithmic oppression and biopolitical sorting.

1. **Disproportionate Impact on Marginalized Groups**

The data reveals that the SIR's impact was not uniform but disproportionately affected already marginalized communities. The survey found that "89.5% of the respondents who have submitted their forms risk the possibility of their forms being rejected for non-compliance with guidelines at the 2nd round of scrutiny" (PUCL, 2025). Furthermore, women, particularly those from Muslim-majority localities and SC/ST communities, faced a higher rate of objection and omission due to discrepancies in documents (often stemming from name changes after marriage) and mobility restrictions that limited their access to registration centers. This data confirms that the system's technical logics reinforce existing social hierarchies, systematically disadvantaging those with the most precarious economic and social status.

2. **The Documentation Barrier**

The single greatest cause of exclusion was the inflexible demand for specific documentation. The PUCL report states that 64.9% of respondents who submitted their forms (out of 81% of respondents) did so with their photo and other document centers. documents, which were not prescribed by the ECI. This finding underscores the magnitude of the documentation barrier faced by ordinary citizens attempting to navigate the SIR process.

3. **"Transgressive Communities" and the Margins of Legality**

The profile of the excluded individuals, as detailed by the PUCL survey, perfectly aligns with Partha Chatterjee's (2004) conceptualization of "political society." Chatterjee distinguishes between civil society, the elite, who enjoy full citizenship and relate to the state through the established framework of law and rights, and political society, the masses, who live on the margins of legality and must negotiate their existence through informal, political arrangements.

The residents of informal settlements (*bastis*), migrant workers without fixed address proof, and daily wage laborers in the informal economy are quintessential members of this political society. Their lives are governed by de facto legitimacy and community existence, not de jure documentation. The SIR's bureaucratic logic, which demands strict adherence to formal legality, is fundamentally incapable of recognizing their claims. As Chatterjee notes, these populations are often seen as "illegal squatters" or "unauthorized hawkers" whose existence is an "exception to the norm" (2004). The SIR process, by refusing to accommodate their lived reality, algorithmically enforces this exclusion, denying them not just a vote but also their legitimacy as political subjects. The PUCL evidence demonstrates how the digital governance paradigm actively fails those who navigate life outside the strict, formal "legality" it demands.

Conclusion

The case of Bihar's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) delivers a forceful challenge to the dominant, techno-utopian narrative that digitization and data-driven governance are unambiguously positive forces for democracy. This paper has argued that when such systems are designed and implemented with a primary focus on efficiency, automation, and bureaucratic purity, they inevitably replicate and amplify existing social inequalities. The SIR process, emblematic of the global "data revolution," demonstrates that efficiency gained at the cost of justice is not progress; it is oppression. It exposes the fallacy of technological neutrality, revealing instead how algorithms can become instruments of biopolitical control, performing a high-tech sorting of the population into categories of political legitimacy and illegitimacy.

The promise of leaving no one behind, as championed by the UN, remains hollow if the tools meant to achieve it are designed in ways that systematically exclude those already on the margins. This study calls for a fundamental reorientation of data science praxis—advocating for a justice-oriented approach that prioritizes inclusivity, transparency, and the protection of democratic rights over procedural expediency. Only through such a reorientation can digital governance fulfill its democratic promise rather than serve as a new frontier of exclusion.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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