

India's voter roll revision brings more bureaucratic misery



by Krishn Kaushik

For a few weeks this summer it seemed my Indian citizenship was in jeopardy. I did not break any laws or move to another country.

Instead, a national exercise to revise voter rolls resulted in me, along with millions of others, believing I had been thrown off India's voting register.

I was born in India. I possess an Indian passport, pay taxes and have been assigned a unique digital identity as a resident. And yet, according to the government, none of these were enough to validate that I am Indian.

The cause of this problem was the Election Commission of India's decision to launch a "special intensive revision" of the voter rolls — the first in more than two decades.

All voters in India need an Electors Photo Identity Card, or Epic, to vote. My Epic number has enabled me to vote in four national and several state elections. After the revision, however, I learnt that my Epic number ceased to exist; the regulator could not find my name in voter rolls before the last revision.

As a journalist who has covered Indian politics and policy for over a decade, I have had prolonged and close interactions with this country's dreary bureaucrats. I am aware the bureaucratic monolith is unyielding. But nothing has made it so clear that the core of Indian bureaucracy's belief system is suspicion than the revision of the voter rolls.

For the uninitiated, it may sound like a small clerical error — something

that should be easy enough to rectify. The election commission has called it "logical discrepancies".

But the scale of exclusions means that re-enrolling is proving difficult for those who were wrongly ejected.

One friend attempting to re-join the voter register was told that her passport, one of the 11 documents allowed as proof by the election commission, had been rejected. Another was asked to find her 40-year-old birth certificate. She managed to dig it out but is not yet sure if it has been accepted.

Just because systems for redress exist does not mean they always work.

R Rajagopal, a revered former newspaper editor, was denied a passport because his name did not feature in West Bengal's revised voters' list. As the Editors Guild of India noted, if this could happen to a public figure like Rajagopal, it could happen to anyone.

"The fate of others who have been similarly disenfranchised by a bureaucratic stroke of the pen, and lacking the voice to seek redressal can only be imagined," it wrote. This "highlights the misery that millions of Indians are being put through".

Voting registers affect many areas of life in India. Before someone can receive welfare, they are asked to prove their citizenship.

India's opposition claims that the revision exercise was done at the behest of the Hindu rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party.

In recent regional elections, Prime

Minister Narendra Modi's BJP managed to win control of the eastern state of West Bengal for the first time. The elections were preceded by 2.7mn voters in the state being wiped off the registers, which some claim played a crucial role in the party's victory.

Being left off the electoral rolls also makes millions vulnerable to what human rights activists claim is a targeted crackdown against Muslims in a state where they account for more than a quarter of the population.

Following the elections, the BJP has expelled more of the residents it believes to be "illegal immigrant" families — mostly Muslims — deporting them to neighbouring Bangladesh.

Rajagopal did finally manage to get his passport after the opposition took up his case.

As for me, just as I was hunting through my documents to gather all of the evidence I would need to regain my right to vote, I received a call from a confused junior official saying my registration had not been cancelled. Instead, for some inexplicable reason, my Epic number had been changed.

The relief came with a twinge of guilt, for how easily we let ourselves be questioned.

Recent reports suggest it will take courts more than 20 years to go through all the challenges to the voter-roll revision. For those excluded, the actions are a reminder that no rights can be taken for granted.

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