

Editorial of the Day – 21.01.2026**Index**

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1. Augean mess- On the SIR and the genuine voter (TH)**General Studies 2- Governance**

Topic- Appointment to various Constitutional posts, powers, functions and responsibilities of various Constitutional Bodies.

Sub Topic- Election Commission of India (ECI); Electoral Reforms; Issues arising out of the electoral process; Salient features of the Representation of People's Act.

Introduction

The editorial "Augean Mess" critiques the Election Commission of India's (ECI) ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. While the administrative objective was to ensure the accuracy and integrity of voter lists by removing duplicates and errors, the actual outcome has been the widespread disenfranchisement of genuine voters across 12 States. The process has become so flawed that it has necessitated judicial intervention, raising fundamental questions about administrative fairness and the protection of the constitutional right to Universal Adult Franchise.

1. Concerns over the SIR Process

Systemic Flaws- The SIR is currently in the "claims and corrections" phase. However, rather than functioning as a precise tool to clean the rolls, it has acted as a "dragnet," indiscriminately trapping and removing genuine voters.

Widespread Impact- The scale and nature of complaints arising from 12 different States indicate that these issues are systemic failures of the process, not merely incidental errors.

2. Supreme Court Intervention

Judicial Directive- The Supreme Court was forced to intervene, directing the ECI to "ease the strain and stress" faced by millions of voters, with specific reference to the situation in West Bengal.

Root Causes of Errors- The erroneous verification notices sent to voters were attributed to

Outdated Data- The use of the 2002 electoral list for voter mapping, which is obsolete.

Technological Failure- Technical glitches in software that was deployed hastily without adequate testing.

Precedent- This follows similar judicial corrective guidelines issued previously to mitigate voter hardship in Bihar.

3. Lessons from Bihar's SIR

Temporary Relief- In Bihar, the Court permitted the use of Aadhaar as an additional identity document to provide relief to electors facing exclusion.

Gender Bias Anomaly- A disturbing pattern emerged in the final voter rolls where more women electors were deleted than men, pointing to deep-seated flaws in the verification methodology.

Unaddressed Irregularities- Independent analyses by *The Hindu* of deleted lists in Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal revealed irregular patterns. Despite these findings warranting deeper scrutiny, the ECI offered no response.

4. Tamil Nadu's Alarming Deletions

Aggressive Deletion- The deletion drive in certain booths was so aggressive that it resulted in a statistical impossibility. The sum of (Votes cast in 2024) + (Deleted names) exceeded the Original Electorate.

Implication- This mathematically proves that voters who actually exercised their franchise in the 2024 General Election have been subsequently removed from the rolls.

Erasure vs. Correction- Instead of deduplicating entries, the flawed exercise often led to the complete erasure of elector names.

5. Flaws in the 'Claims and Corrections' Phase

Illogical Burden on Voters- While lakhs of citizens are trying to restore their names, the ECI insists they register afresh using Form 6.

Procedural Issues

Misclassification- This approach treats long-standing voters as new entrants to the system.

Lack of Accountability- By forcing fresh registration, the ECI prevents an audit of exactly how many genuine voters were wrongly deleted in the first place.

6. The Uttar Pradesh Mismatch

Data Discrepancy- A staggering mismatch was discovered by the State Election Commission while preparing rolls for rural local body elections.

The Anomaly- The rural electorate alone was found to exceed the ECI's total voter count for the entire State in its draft rolls.

Integrity Questioned- Such a massive discrepancy raises serious doubts regarding the ECI's data integrity and the methodology used for the revision.

7. Broader Constitutional Implications

Delayed Judicial Review- By failing to rule early on the constitutionality of "aggressive self-enumeration," the Supreme Court is now left managing the fallout of a deeply flawed exercise.

Threat to Franchise- What was intended to be a routine administrative task—cleaning the rolls—has morphed into a process that threatens the bedrock of democracy—Universal Adult Franchise.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The debate has shifted from a technical discussion on "cleaning electoral rolls" to a core democratic concern—Are genuine voters being systematically scrubbed out of democracy? The ongoing SIR exercise highlights a troubling shift from electoral cleansing to voter exclusion. To preserve the legitimacy of Indian elections, the process requires immediate transparency, accountability, and corrective oversight. The ECI must ensure that administrative zeal to refine lists does not come at the cost of the fundamental right to vote.

Source- <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/augean-mess-on-the-sir-and-the-genuine-voter/article70529525.ece>

2. Secondary Particulate Matter (Secondary PM) (IE)

General Studies 3—Environment

Topic- Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment

Sub Topic- Air Pollution (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀), Management of Air Quality, Government Policies (NCAP, CAQM), and Environmental Chemistry.

Introduction

India's battle against winter air pollution is undergoing a critical paradigm shift. While traditional narratives focus on visible sources like stubble burning and vehicular smoke, scientific evidence now indicates that a significant portion of winter pollution is dominated by Secondary Particulate Matter (Secondary PM). These are pollutants formed not by direct emissions, but through complex chemical reactions in the atmosphere involving precursor gases. This realization demands a fundamental restructuring of regulatory frameworks, moving from "visual pollution control" to "chemical precursor management."

1. Understanding the Shift— From Primary to Secondary Pollution

Traditional View- Air pollution was historically attributed to visible primary sources

- a. Vehicular tailpipe emissions.
- b. Crop residue (stubble) burning.
- c. Construction dust and industrial smoke.

Scientific Reality– During winter, a major fraction of PM_{2.5} is secondary in nature.

Mechanism– It forms in the atmosphere when precursor gases chemically interact.

Key Precursors– Sulphur Dioxide (SO_2), Nitrogen Oxides (NO_x), and Ammonia (NH_3).

The Catalyst (Meteorology)– Winter conditions amplify this chemical process through

- a. Temperature Inversion– Traps pollutants close to the ground.
- b. Low Wind Speed– Prevents dispersion of pollutants.
- c. High Humidity– Accelerates the chemical reactions that create secondary particles.

2. Sources of Precursor Gases

Power Plants & Industry– Major sources of Sulphur Dioxide (SO_2) and Nitrogen Oxides (NO_x).

Vehicles– Significant contributors to NO_x .

Agriculture– A critical but often overlooked source of Ammonia (NH_3).

Origin– High usage of urea/fertilizers and livestock emissions.

Impact– Ammonia reacts with acidic gases to form secondary aerosols (ammonium sulfate and ammonium nitrate).

3. Critical Issues in Current Strategy

Policy Mismatch– Regulations disproportionately target visible sources (dust, smoke) while neglecting invisible chemical precursors.

Reactive measures– heavy reliance on emergency responses (GRAP stages, odd-even schemes, construction bans) rather than preventive emission control.

Regulatory Gaps

- a. Inadequate regulation of agricultural ammonia emissions.
- b. Weak enforcement of industrial emission standards.

Monitoring Deficits– Limited real-time monitoring infrastructure for gaseous pollutants compared to PM monitoring.

4. Multi-dimensional Challenges

Scientific Challenges

- a. Policymakers often lack understanding of secondary aerosol chemistry.
- b. Attributing pollution to specific sectors is difficult due to the complex atmospheric mixing of gases.

Institutional Challenges

Siloed Approach– Lack of coordination between Pollution Control Boards (PCBs), Agriculture Departments, and Urban Local Bodies.

Outdated Frameworks– Rules have not evolved to match new scientific insights on secondary PM.

Economic Challenges

High Transition Costs– Industries face high costs adopting cleaner tech (e.g., Flue Gas Desulphurization).

Agricultural Resistance– Farmers fear livelihood losses if fertilizer use is restricted without alternatives.

Governance Challenges

- a. Absence of legally binding emission caps for precursor gases at regional levels.
- b. Governance is city-centric, ignoring the regional nature of air sheds.

5. Dimensions of Impact

Environmental

- a. Ecosystem stress due to acid deposition.
- b. Climate forcing– Secondary aerosols and black carbon contribute to regional warming/cooling patterns.

Health

1. PM_{2.5} Toxicity– Deep lung penetration causes respiratory and cardiovascular diseases.
2. Vulnerability– Disproportionate impact on children, the elderly, and the urban poor.

Economic

- a. Productivity losses due to health-related absenteeism.
- b. Escalating public healthcare expenditure.

Social

Environmental Injustice- Lower socio-economic groups often live in areas with higher exposure but have the least resources to mitigate it.

Solutions & Way Forward

1. Strategic Policy Measures

Target Precursors- Shift focus from monitoring PM concentration to actively reducing SO₂, NO and NH₃ emissions.

Sector-wise Standards- Implement strict emission standards for precursor gases across industry, transport, and agriculture.

Policy Integration- Air quality goals must be embedded into national Energy (power plant emissions) and Agriculture (fertilizer policy) policies.

2. Technological Interventions

Power Sector- Mandatory and expedited adoption of Flue Gas Desulphurization (FGD) technology in thermal power plants to cut SO₂.

Transport- Accelerate Electric Mobility (EVs) and adoption of cleaner fuels (BS-VI).

Agriculture- Promote Precision Agriculture to optimize fertilizer use, thereby reducing ammonia emissions.

3. Institutional & Governance Reforms

Airshed Approach- Move from city-centric plans to Regional Airshed Governance (treating the entire Indo-Gangetic Plain as one airshed).

Empower CAQM- Strengthen the Commission for Air Quality Management to enforce inter-state coordination.

Fiscal Federalism- Link central fiscal transfers to states with tangible pollution reduction targets.

4. Data & Monitoring

Real-time Gas Monitoring- Mandate the monitoring of gaseous precursors alongside PM₁₀/PM_{2.5}.

Advanced Modelling- Utilize satellite data and AI-based modelling for accurate pollution forecasting and source apportionment.

5. Behavioural Change

- a. Farmer Awareness- Campaigns linking fertilizer overuse to local air pollution and health.
- b. Household Transition- Incentivize the shift to cleaner household energy to reduce indoor precursors.

Conclusion

Resolving India's air pollution crisis requires looking beyond the smoke. The battle against Secondary Particulate Matter demands a transition from episodic "firefighting" to structural, science-driven reform. By targeting the invisible chemistry of the atmosphere—specifically precursor gases like ammonia and sulphates—and adopting a multi-sectoral, airshed-based approach, India can break the cycle of seasonal health emergencies and move toward sustainable urban living.

Source- <https://indianexpress.com/todays-paper/2026/01/21/>