

FACIAL RECOGNITION : Bihar's Voter Roll Turmoil: Democracy on the Edge

Facial recognition systems have rapidly emerged as one of the most transformative technologies in the fields of security, law enforcement, and user authentication. Using advanced algorithms and artificial intelligence, these systems analyze unique facial features such as the distance between the eyes, the shape of the jawline, and contours of the face to identify individuals with remarkable accuracy.

From unlocking smartphones to streamlining airport security, facial recognition has already become an integral part of modern life. Governments and private sectors across the globe are increasingly deploying these systems for surveillance, crime detection, border control, and even attendance tracking in schools and workplaces. In India, the technology is being used by police departments to trace missing persons and identify criminals in crowded areas.

One of the key advantages of facial recognition is its contactless nature. Unlike fingerprint or iris scanners, facial recognition does not require physical interaction, making it ideal in a post-pandemic world where hygiene and touchless operations are prioritized. The technology is also time-efficient, processing results in seconds, which enhances convenience and responsiveness.

However, the rapid adoption of facial recognition systems has also triggered concerns related to privacy, ethics, and data security. Critics argue that constant surveillance using facial data may lead to mass tracking, profiling, and potential misuse by authoritarian regimes or private corporations. Civil liberty groups have raised alarm over lack of consent, potential bias in algorithms-especially in misidentifying people of color- and the absence of strong regulatory frameworks.

Several countries have begun to enforce regulations to address these concerns. The European Union has proposed strict rules under the AI Act, while some U.S. cities have banned government use of facial recognition due to privacy issues. In India, the Personal Data Protection Bill seeks to address concerns over biometric data handling, although comprehensive legislation is still pending.

Experts advocate for responsible use of facial recognition with transparency, oversight, and informed consent. They stress the need for government regulation to strike a balance between technological innovation and citizens' rights.

While facial recognition systems offer groundbreaking potential in enhancing security and convenience, their unchecked use could lead to serious privacy infringements. The future of this technology depends not only on how it evolves technically but also on how it is governed ethically.

■ BAIRAJ CHAWALGAMI

Democracy becomes meaningless without elections, for it is through elections that the will of the people finds its voice, and governance is legitimized. Elections are the cornerstone of any functioning democracy, and they must be conducted in a manner that is free, fair, impartial, and without fear or favour. The responsibility for ensuring that such elections are held lies squarely on the shoulders of the Election Commission of India (ECI). As Bihar heads toward its assembly elections, a storm of controversy has erupted over the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the state's electoral rolls. While the ECI asserts that the exercise is aimed at cleansing the voter list of ineligible, duplicate, and fraudulent entries to ensure free and fair elections, opposition parties claim that the revision is a ploy orchestrated to benefit the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies, raising tensions and casting shadows over the democratic process. The controversy stems from the sheer magnitude of the exercise and its implications. The ECI has pointed out that crores of ineligible voters, including individuals allegedly from Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, and other countries, have found their way into Bihar's electoral rolls. According to the Commission, the removal of such voters is essential to protect the sanctity of the electoral process. Estimates suggest that nearly two crore such names need to be deleted to ensure a free and fair poll. In a statement issued on July 17, 2025, the ECI revealed that of Bihar's 7,89,69,844 registered voters, surveys have found that 4.5 percent were not present at their listed residences, 1.59 percent were deceased, 0.73 percent were enrolled at multiple locations, and 2.2 percent had permanently shifted their place of residence. This data forms the basis for the ECI's push to cleanse the rolls, with July 25 marked as the deadline for confirming the status of

these voters through ground-level verification and submission of enumeration forms. As of July 17, the ECI reported that 70,818,162 voters, or 89.7 percent of the electorate, had already submitted their forms, while 5.8 percent of voters had yet to comply, with the draft rolls scheduled for publication on August 1.

Opposition parties, however, have reacted sharply, alleging that the SIR is a politically motivated manoeuvre designed to disenfranchise legitimate voters, particularly those aligned with non-BJP parties. Leaders of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Congress, Samajwadi Party (SP), Communist Party of India (Marxist), and Communist Party of India, among others, have accused the ECI of functioning as a "stooge" of the BJP. They allege that the revision aims to exclude approximately four crore eligible citizens by exploiting gaps in documentation, particularly with respect to proof of citizenship, and by intimidating voters from marginalized communities. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi went so far as to publicly accuse the ECI of being "caught red-handed stealing votes" in the name of electoral roll revision, sarcastically referring to it as the "Election Chori Branch" of the BJP. Gandhi's remarks capture the deep mistrust festering between the opposition and the poll body, a mistrust that could erode public faith in the electoral process itself.

The ECI, for its part, has maintained that the SIR is not only legal but long overdue, as Bihar's electoral rolls have not undergone a comprehensive revision in 22 years. According to the Commission, the exercise is intended to remove ineligible names, correct duplicate entries, and ensure that every eligible citizen is enrolled in the draft rolls. Far from being a partisan ploy, the ECI argues that the revision will strengthen democracy by ensuring a cleaner, more accurate voter list. The Commission has sought to address con-

cerns by sharing information about voters flagged for removal-such as those found to have shifted residence, passed away, or registered at multiple places-with ground-level workers and district presidents of all recognized political parties. By involving political parties in the verification process, the ECI claims it is ensuring transparency and fairness, giving all stakeholders an opportunity to contest or confirm the findings before the draft rolls are finalized. The stakes, however, remain high, and the optics are fraught with danger: Bihar's assembly elections are historically contentious, often shaped by caste dynamics, migration patterns, and socio-economic divides. The removal of large numbers of voters, particularly if concentrated among marginalized or migrant populations, risks inflaming social tensions and fuelling allegations of voter suppression. Opposition parties argue that the demand for citizenship documentation disproportionately impacts the poor, many of whom lack formal records despite residing in Bihar for generations. They contend that the SIR, while ostensibly a bureaucratic exercise, could effectively silence the voices of those who are already disenfranchised by poverty and systemic neglect.

The controversy has reignited a broader debate about the role and independence of the Election Commission. While the ECI has traditionally been regarded as a neutral arbiter of India's democracy, its actions in recent years have come under scrutiny from opposition parties, who accuse it of favouring the ruling dispensation. In Bihar, where political rivalries run deep, even a legitimate effort to clean up the electoral rolls can be interpreted as partisan interference. The current uproar underscores the fragile balance between administrative necessity and political perception in a polarized environment. For voters, the immediate concern is the risk of being wrongfully excluded from the rolls. The ECI has urged all citi-

zens to verify their status and submit the necessary forms by the July 25 deadline to ensure their inclusion in the draft rolls. Civil society groups and political parties alike are mobilizing to assist voters in navigating the verification process, but the sheer scale of the exercise means that errors and grievances are inevitable. If the final electoral rolls, to be published on August 1, reflect significant exclusions, the credibility of the upcoming Bihar assembly elections could be severely undermined, with legal and political challenges likely to follow.

Ultimately, the controversy surrounding the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls in Bihar reflects the larger challenges facing India's democracy. While the need to remove ineligible voters and maintain accurate rolls is undeniable, the process must be carried out with scrupulous fairness and transparency to avoid even the perception of bias. The ECI must not only be neutral but must be seen to be neutral, engaging constructively with all stakeholders to build confidence in the process. Political parties, too, must rise above opportunism and work to ensure that every eligible voter can exercise their franchise, even as they scrutinize the Commission's actions. As Bihar prepares for its assembly elections, the integrity of the voter list will play a pivotal role in shaping the outcome and the public's faith in democracy itself. If handled with fairness and sensitivity, the Special Intensive Revision can strengthen the foundations of the electoral process by ensuring that only eligible voters cast their ballots. If mishandled, it risks becoming a flashpoint that undermines the legitimacy of the elections and erodes confidence in one of India's most vital democratic institutions. In a state where politics is often a high-stakes battleground, the stakes for democracy itself have rarely been higher.

Reel Obsession and Its Toll on Generation

■ VIVEK KOUL

In today's world, digitization has become an integral part of our lives. Almost all services and products we use are connected to the internet and have some digital content attached to them. Using a smartphone before going to bed is the most common thing for all people. Surprisingly majority of the content that we consume now is reels, shorts, and other small videos. There are Instagram reels, Youtube shorts, facebook reels, tiktok reels, snapchat spotlight reels etc. These are some platforms where one can earn money by uploading short videos if they get the maximum views, subscribers or if they meets the reel or youtube policies for monetization. However, Mobile reels are not just entertainment anymore - they are a slow, silent poison, eating away at the minds and lives of our children, students, and even adults. What was once a harmless distraction has become a full-blown addiction, gripping homes and streets alike. From toddlers barely able to speak to teenagers preparing for their future, our youth are being

consumed by a culture of endless scrolling. They are no longer living life; they are living through a screen, hooked to 30second bursts of dopamine that leave their minds restless, unfocused, and disturbingly numb. This is not just a fad. This is a crisis. Everywhere you look, the signs are glaring: Children are no longer found playing outdoors; they are indoors, eyes glued to tiny glowing screens, flipping through reels for hours without pause. Students are falling behind in studies, incapable of focusing for even a few minutes, their minds trained to crave quick jolts of pleasure instead of the discipline needed to learn and grow. Parents complain of kids showing irritability, aggression, and withdrawal, but rarely do they acknowledge their own role - scrolling endlessly in front of their children, teaching by example that the phone comes before human interaction. This is how we are breeding a generation of addicts, and the addiction is not alcohol or drugs - it is the reel. Psychologists across the country are raising alarm bells. They warn that these short videos are designed to hijack the brain's

reward system, releasing dopamine in quick hits, rewiring the mind to seek constant stimulation. For young, developing brains, the effects are devastating: plummeting attention spans, sleep disruption, anxiety, depression, and even physical health issues caused by hours of inactivity. A child glued to a phone is not just wasting time; their mental and emotional development is being stunted, perhaps irreversibly. Worse still, many of these reels push toxic, misleading, or inappropriate content, shaping fragile minds with ideas and behaviors far removed from reality, decency, or truth.

Yet, this crisis thrives not because children are helpless, but because adults are complacent. Parents hand over mobiles as pacifiers, happy to keep children quiet and distracted. Schools, beyond banning phones on paper, turn a blind eye to the digital epidemic gnawing away at their students' future. Tech companies, driven purely by profit, design algorithms that exploit human psychology, ensuring that users - especially minors - stay hooked, no matter the cost to their health or future. And

governments, despite knowing the stakes, move at a snail's pace, hesitant to challenge the billion-dollar empires profiting from this cultural decay. The outcome is plain to see: a generation losing the ability to think deeply, communicate meaningfully, or simply live without a screen. Children who once played, read, and dreamed now sit slouched in corners, endlessly swiping, their eyes hollow from overexposure, their creativity suffocated by the constant flood of empty entertainment. We are not just raising phone addicts; we are raising citizens stripped of patience, focus, and resilience - qualities essential for a functioning society. It is worth reflecting that technology, when used mindfully, can be a powerful tool for learning, connection, and creativity. Reels, too, have the potential to entertain, inform, and even inspire. But without boundaries, they quickly transform into tools of distraction and destruction. For children and young adults, who lack the maturity to self-regulate, unbridled access can be especially harmful. The burden is on families, educators, tech platforms, and

society at large to create a balanced environment where screens do not dictate the rhythm of life. The threat posed by mobile reels is not just about wasted time; it is about a future generation growing up with fractured attention spans, declining physical and mental health, and a distorted sense of reality. If unchecked, this addiction could have long-term consequences on productivity, creativity, and social harmony. Tackling it requires collective effort and urgency. The first step is acceptance - acknowledging that the problem is real and growing. The second is action - at home, in schools, in policy frameworks, and within tech industries.

The solution cannot be polite suggestions anymore. It is time for urgent, aggressive action. Parents must stop being hypocrites and put down their own phones first if they want to save their children. Homes need mobile-free zones, no-screen hours, and a revival of outdoor play, reading, and real conversations. Schools must stop treating this as a side issue and integrate digital awareness, strict phone policies, and mental health counseling into

their systems. Governments need to wake up and crack down on predatory algorithms with regulations that protect children instead of protecting corporate profits. And yes, tech giants must be held accountable-age gates, screen time limits, and stricter controls should not be optional, they must be mandatory. This is not alarmism; it is a warning. If we continue to let our children drown in this endless scroll, we will pay a heavy price as a society. An entire generation risks growing up detached from reality, addicted to a virtual world of shallow thrills, incapable of building real skills, relationships, or resilience. The damage will not just be personal; it will be national - an unproductive, distracted youth is a burden no country can afford. Reel culture may seem harmless, but it is devouring our future, one child, one mind, one family at a time. The time for complacency is over. Parents, schools, policymakers, and platforms must act now. Otherwise, we will not just lose control over our children's screens - we will lose an entire generation to them.

Statehood for Jammu & Kashmir: A Convenient Diversion from Governance Failures

■ G.L.RAINA

The periodic clamour for the restoration of statehood in Jammu & Kashmir - mostly orchestrated by the National Conference (NC) and its allies - has become a predictable political strategy. It resurfaces not as a serious policy demand but as a deflection mechanism, deployed with precision each time governance failures become too obvious to ignore.

This recurring pattern reveals an uncomfortable truth: for the NC, statehood is not a constitutional objective but a rhetorical shield, employed to mask deep-rooted administrative inadequacies and political escapism. A clear pattern has emerged: each time their governance record is called into question, statehood becomes the convenient smoke screen.

A Promise Made, A Condition Explained

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, on the floor of the Rajya Sabha on August 5, 2019, made a categorical assurance "As soon as the situation becomes normal, and when the right time comes, we have no objection in making it a state again... We are not interested in prolonging it." This assurance has since been reiterated multiple times by the Government of India. However, instead of fostering the very stability and progress required to facilitate that transition, NC leaders continue to indulge in provocations and irresponsible rhetoric-ironically validating the caution expressed by the Home Minister on the very day of Article 370's abrogation. Home Minister had alerted on floor of the Parliament, "But the way the speeches were being made today, I feel that it will take a little longer, because these speeches are going to be repeated later in the Kashmir valley also. If the situation becomes normal, then we are not interested in prolonging it any longer and neither do we want to do it". This was not just a statement of intent - it was a clear conditional commitment based on stability, normalcy, and cooperative political conduct.

Ironically, the behaviour of the NC and its leadership since then has only reinforced the Centre's caution. Instead of contributing to an environment conducive to full statehood, they have repeatedly chosen provocation over partnership, posturing over performance, and blame games over bold reforms.

Governance Deficit and Unfulfilled Promises

The 2024 electoral campaign saw the NC make ambitious promises to the electorate - promises that now lie in neglect. A party that vowed to dismantle bureaucratic inefficiency and red tape has itself become captive to institutional inertia. Despite the Centre's consistent

push for digitalization, ease of governance, and citizen-centric service delivery, basic administrative responsiveness remains elusive in J&K. Their manifesto brimmed with lofty promises-digital reform, job creation, power decentralization, and relief for the economically weak. They promised: One lakh jobs within three months through a Youth Employment Act. Filling all government vacancies within 180 days. 200 free electricity units, 12 LPG cylinders annually for the poor. A comprehensive job package through mini hydro and solar projects. Establishment of a Minority Commission, rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandits, and implementation of WAIDA (War Against Drug Abuse).

Yet, nearly a year later, none of these promises have translated into meaningful action. Bureaucratic red tape remains untouched. Public grievances remain unaddressed. The political capital they earned has been squandered through silence, inefficiency, and blame games.

Escapist Politics Masquerading as Assertiveness

The post-election period has been defined less by governance and more by political theatrics. Chief Minister Omar Abdullah's performative wall-jumping stunts to party spokespersons resorting to conspiracy narratives after terror attacks like the tragic incident at Bhaisharan, the ruling party appears more interested in curating political drama than in executing administrative responsibility. Instead of reviewing lapses crisis response mechanisms, the NC chose to blame the Centre, vilify tourists, and indulge in divisive rhetoric. The suggestion that J&K needs "quality tourists" - not quantity - reflects a disturbingly elitist and sectarian mindset, especially when tourism is one of the few inclusive engines of economic growth in the region.

Such remarks do more than just insult national sentiment - they directly undermine J&K's fragile economic recovery and alienate the very stakeholders whose participation is essential to long-term peace. NC's current political posture is defined by confrontation, not collaboration. Instead of addressing institutional gaps or improving service delivery, the ruling party in J&K has chosen to politicize tragedies, demonize tourists, and play identity-based politics.

The National Security Lens

One cannot discuss statehood in isolation from national security. Poor governance, social discontent, and political alienation provide fertile ground for radical elements to exploit. The Centre's heavy investments in infrastructure, education, health, and connectivity in

J&K - from AIIMS to new highways, sports infrastructure to digital outreach - are aimed at long-term stabilization. But investments cannot substitute for local administrative will. If the political class is disengaged, if bureaucracy remains opaque, and if local governance continues to be politicized, then these gains risk being neutralized. By focusing on emotional issues and jurisdictional posturing rather than structural reform, the NC is not only neglecting its core responsibility-it is actively undermining the very conditions required for restoring statehood.

No More Excuses

For a long time, NC leaders hid behind the notion of a "dual power structure" and the Lieutenant Governor's overriding role. But even Chief Minister Omar Abdullah has now admitted that the LG's involvement is limited largely to law and order. So his role is accountable for stalled development, broken promises, and public alienation? It is time the NC leadership stopped hiding behind the veil of statehood debates and started delivering on the mandate they sought. Governance is not symbolic; it is structural. It is measured not by slogans, but by outcomes. And yet, what we see is a government still stuck in a Cold War-era political vocabulary: blaming New Delhi, romanticizing pre-2019 politics, and dodging responsibility behind the shield of "statehood denial."

Conclusion: Leadership Must Match the Moment

We are in an era where public scrutiny is sharper than ever. The digital age has no patience for incompetence dressed up as activism. Bureaucratic patronage, discretionary transfers, and emotional symbolism-tools that once propped up parties like NC-are fast becoming relics of a bygone era. NC and Kashmir centric politicians must either embrace the responsibilities of modern governance or risk permanent irrelevance in a digital democracy where public memory is sharp and unforgiving.

Jammu & Kashmir deserves efficient, transparent, and forward-looking leadership-not escapism disguised as advocacy. The question is not when statehood will be restored-it will, as promised, when the situation warrants it.The real question is: Will the present leadership rise above political opportunism and deliver governance worthy of the people's aspirations?

Until then, invoking statehood remains a tired excuse-one that no longer fools the people of Jammu & Kashmir.

(The writer is former MLC)

From Waiting to Becoming: Women and Youth in a New Kashmir

■ SHAFIYA WANI

Kashmir is not just a place on the map. It is a feeling, a wound, a memory, a heartbeat. For those of us who have grown up here, empowerment was never just about big words or government speeches. It was about survival. About finding a reason to believe in tomorrow. For the longest time, we were taught to adjust, to endure, to be grateful for the bare minimum. But something in the air has changed. There is a restlessness in our youth, a new confidence in our women, and a quiet rebellion in our silence. It does not mean everything is fine. But it means we are no longer content with waiting.

Kashmir has always been a land of stories-of silence, of resistance, of waiting. But in recent years, I have seen new stories unfold. Not the kind that erase pain, but those that quietly promise a different kind of tomorrow. Amidst all the noise and debates about politics, one cannot ignore the subtle yet powerful change that has started to shape the lives of women and youth here. And much of it has come through government schemes launched during the Modi government. For decades, young people in Kashmir lived with a certain stillness. Education without employment, skills without platforms, and dreams suspended in fear. Women, especially, were seen more as keepers of honor than holders of ambitions. But now, slowly, we are witnessing something shift. We see girls in villages starting their own tailoring units, not waiting for a government job. We see boys from remote areas getting trained in digital skills. We see women forming self-help groups, learning to stand for each other, and more importantly, for themselves.

Schemes like Start-Up India, Skill India, MUDRA Yojana, PMEGP, Mission Youth, and Tejaswini may sound like policy names printed on paper. But behind those names are real stories. Stories of courage, of small beginnings, of financial independence. I remember reading about a girl in Anantnag who used the Tejaswini scheme to open a beauty parlour: It was not just about the income. It was about reclaiming a space that once belonged to silence. For the youth, Mission Youth has offered both skill and dignity. In a place where many once found themselves standing at the edge of hopelessness, these initiatives have offered a hand. Not to pull them into dependency, but to

help them rise on their own feet. And this, I believe, is the heart of real empowerment. Not loud celebrations, but quiet revolutions. Another initiative that has begun to touch the lives of Kashmiri women is the UMEED scheme under the Jammu and Kashmir Rural Livelihoods Mission. UMEED is more than just a financial support system. It is a lifeline. It brings women together in self-help groups and gives them access to bank credit, training, and the courage to imagine themselves as entrepreneurs. Whether it is dairy farming in Kupwara or pickle-making in Pulwama, these women are no longer asking for charity. They are asking for opportunity and making the most of it. For many, stepping out of their homes to attend a group meeting is the first step toward stepping into their own identity. And for a society like ours, that first step is nothing short of revolutionary. But let us not romanticize it. The road is still long. Unemployment is still a haunting reality. Gender bias still breathes in our homes. Many women are still denied choices, and many dreams are still labelled too big. But in the midst of all this, the fact that we are beginning to talk about self-reliance, about women leading rallies, about boys from Shopian becoming software developers, that fact matters. I often think about my own journey as a Kashmiri girl. How difficult it was to even imagine stepping into spaces outside the set boundaries. And now, when I walk past a local entrepreneurship fair or see a group of girls attending a digital marketing session, I feel something in me healing. As if the valley, too, is learning to breathe differently. These schemes are windows. Windows that allow light to enter dark rooms that have stayed shut for too long. What matters now is what we do with that light. Do we allow it to fade, or do we hold it, multiply it, and pass it on? To the young women reading this: your voice matters. Your ideas matter. You do not need permission to dream. And to every youth in Kashmir who has felt invisible, uncertain, or unheard-I see you. This land needs your courage, your creativity, your fire. The schemes may have come from Delhi, but the transformation, that is ours to own. Ours to build. Because empowerment is not something given. It is something we choose to claim. And maybe, just maybe, Kashmir is beginning to choose.

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