Voter List Management

The Role Of
The Booth Level Officer

Thiruvananthapuram City
May 2016
CITY SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK
With an objective of improving quality of life in India’s urban centres, Janaagraha believes in addressing the root-cause of existing issues instead of the symptoms through its city-systems framework. This framework consists of four inter-related dimensions critical to the running of world-class cities.

Janaagraha’s Work On Voter List Management
Founded in 2001 as a platform for citizen participation in urban India, the Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy today works with citizens on catalysing active citizenship and with governments to institute reforms to urban governance. Its mission is to transform quality of life in India’s cities and towns.

Janaagraha has been involved in efforts to rid urban voter lists of their errors for over a decade. In this time we have led successful grassroots programs to encourage registration on the voter list, such as ‘Jaago Re!’ in partnership with Tata Tea. We have also worked closely with the Election Commission of India (ECI), through a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO), Karnataka which resulted in the creation of a voter-list maintenance process manual, called Proper UBran Electoral Lists (PURE), to be implemented across all assembly constituencies in Bangalore. Janaagraha has also undertaken a series of research studies designed to quantify errors on voter lists and examine the reasons which feed into such errors, with the ultimate aim of developing solutions and working towards reform. This report looks at the urban centre of Thiruvananthapuram City and highlights aspects around the Booth Level Officer (BLO), a crucial cog in the voter list management machinery as well as issues on the voter list itself.

The BLO - a vital part of the voter list machinery ensuring citizen requests are accurately reflected on the voter list

In essence, BLOs are both the face and the foot-soldiers of the Election Commission of India and this analysis dives into a part of the journey of a citizen depicted above, with the BLO at its centre, to identify issues driven by inefficiencies and explores how they can be tackled systematically.

The analysis of Thiruvananthapuram City starts by looking at the availability and quality of BLO information, followed by an examination of access to BLOs and the quality of their assistance. This leads finally into voter list errors and consideration for systemic solutions.

1 Voter List Management: Survey on the Quality of Voter Lists in Delhi (July 2015)
In Thiruvananthapuram City, 45% of BLOs live and work outside the area they service. Over a third of BLOs service areas with more than 1400 voters. More than 50% are anganwadi workers who may not possess the skills to deliver statistical reports required of them to ensure clean lists. All of this falls short of ECI guidelines and has a direct impact on the quality of voter lists. Issues such as these lead to errors on the list such as incorrect details, eligible citizens missing altogether and the presence of citizens who should not be there. Adding to this is the fact that a bulk of the BLO work happens in a few months as opposed to evenly throughout the year.

The solution is to leverage technology effectively:

- Review BLO role and workflows (using ICT) – use hand-held devices to collect citizen data and service requests; shift responsibility of conducting statistical analyses to EROs
- Create GIS based PP maps which allow BLOs to track households and citizens using hand-held devices
- Explore Automatic Voter Registration and database linkages which allows the ECI to track citizen movement and account for it effectively on the voter list

To ensure that BLOs can service their area effectively, the ECI mandates that only those residing in a PP can be the BLO for that PP. However, the majority of BLOs (n=29 out of 51) surveyed do not live in the PP for which they are a BLO. These BLOs noted they have to travel anywhere up to 90 minutes to reach the PP for which they are a BLO, making it harder to execute their duties.
Methodology

The Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala is made up of 14 Assembly Constituencies (ACs). The Thiruvananthapuram Municipal Corporation (TMC) administers roughly 4 out of these 14 ACs (Kazhakkoottam, Vattiyoorkavu, Thiruvananthapuram and Nemom). Referred to as Thiruvananthapuram City, this area houses a population of approximately 7.4 Lakh citizens3.

Information on BLOs of all 578 Polling Parts (PPs) within Thiruvananthapuram City is available on the Kerala CEO’s website4. An analysis of BLO information available was done on all 578 BLOs in charge of these PPs, looking for any missing information and analysis of the validity of the phone numbers.

Telephonic interviews were attempted with 100 BLO contacts that were randomly sampled from the information available (25 in each AC) with the aim to achieve 50 BLO interviews spread more or less equally across the 4 ACs in Thiruvananthapuram City. Calls were done to establish actuality of BLOs and their details listed online such as designation and office address as well as to discuss proximity of their home and office to the PP they have been allotted. Furthermore, the frequency of interaction BLOs have with citizens was also discussed. Telephonic interviews were conducted between 21/04/2016 and 10/05/2016. A total of 51 interviews were conducted, 12 in Kazhakkoottam, 13 in Vattiyoorkavu, 13 in Thiruvananthapuram and 13 in Nemom. A BLO contact was called 4 times, at different times of day before it was classified as ‘not answered’.

Voter lists in Kerala are publicly available on the Kerala CEO’s website5 in Malayalam PDF format. In order to analyse this data, it needed to be converted into a format easily read by a machine or obtained through the voter list search page6. A vendor, who had the capability to extract data from both sources, was used to source this data. All fields except for ‘age’, ‘gender’ and ‘relationship type’ were obtained from the electoral search website (in English), which is dynamic i.e. reflects data updated at the CEO’s database, between 15/04/2016 and 16/04/2016. The fields ‘age’, ‘gender’ and ‘relationship type’ were extracted from the PDF lists published on 01.01.2016. A total of 200 records selected randomly were checked against the electoral search website and voter list PDFs. These 200 were drawn equally from each AC i.e. 50, five each selected randomly from a random selection of 10 PPs. Discrepancies noted were fed back to the vendor for correction and the cycle was repeated until suitable quality was established. Using programming written in ‘Python’, the entries for all 4 ACs7 were analysed for errors. From the errors thus quantified, a random sample of 10 of each error type within an AC was then manually verified and checked by a researcher to ensure the accuracy of the analysis.

A sample of 20 PP lists8 was taken (five drawn randomly from within each AC) to analyse the quality of the Nazariya Naksha against a pre-determined set of parameters.

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2 The Thiruvananthapuram Municipal Corporation administers wards which lie within the mentioned 4 ACs but do not administer these ACs in their entirety. However, our study analyzes the voter list of these 4 ACs in entirety
3Census 2011 data – for Thiruvananthapuram City (ULB)
4Kerala CEO’s BLO search link - http://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/blobla.html; last accessed 09/05/2016
5Kerala CEO’s Voter List download link - http://ceo.kerala.gov.in/electoralrolls.html
6Kerala CEO’s Voter Search link - http://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/rollsearch.html
7These 4ACs together had 7,48,387 citizens enrolled on the voter list as of 16/04/2016
8From the PDF format of lists published on the Kerala CEO’s website - http://ceo.kerala.gov.in/electoralrolls.html (published on 14/01/2016)