# Voter List Management

## The Role Of
## The Booth Level Officer

Thiruvananthapuram City
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Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship & Democracy

## 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 URban 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 causes for such errors across urban centres in India.

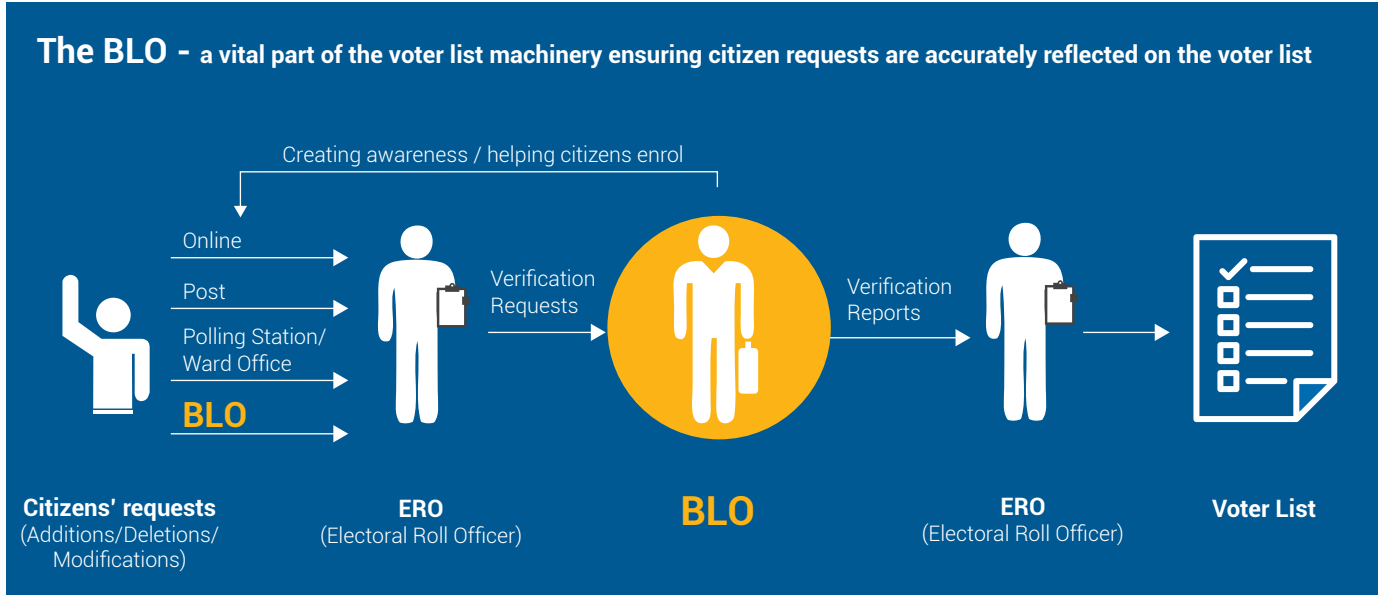# The Role Of The Booth Level Officer

Clean voter lists are considered a prerequisite to free and fair elections. However, it is a well-known fact that India's voter lists are riddled with errors such as the presence of deceased citizens, duplications, citizens who do not reside in their listed address anymore and a myriad of others. Moreover, several eligible citizens are also missing from the list. There is evidence to believe that such errors are more profound in urban India, primarily due to rapid urbanization and increased citizen mobility within cities, clubbed with the practice of voter list creation at the 'polling part' level. An earlier study conducted by Janaagraha in Delhi in 2015[1] showed that as many as 21% of listed citizens were no longer residing at their registered address and that about 28% of eligible citizens found to be missing from the list of their polling part claimed to be registered elsewhere in the city.

This work is part of a series of research studies undertaken by Janaagraha, 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 is a government/semi-government or retired government employee who is also on deputation to the Election Commission of India (ECI), the constitutional authority in charge of conduct of General and State elections and therefore, maintaining voter lists.

» BLOs work part-time for the ECI but at the same time, hold other full time jobs i.e. they are required to perform the duties of a BLO while holding a regular full time job with a government/semi government organization.

» They are a vital part of voter list maintenance as they are the single source/point of on-ground verification of citizen requests (additions, deletions, modifications) as shown in the graphic below.



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

**Citizens' requests** (Additions/Deletions/Modifications) — Online, Post, Polling Station/Ward Office — **BLO** → **ERO** (Electoral Roll Officer) — Verification Requests → **BLO** — Verification Reports → **ERO** (Electoral Roll Officer) → **Voter List**

Creating awareness / helping citizens enrol

**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 systemically.**

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.
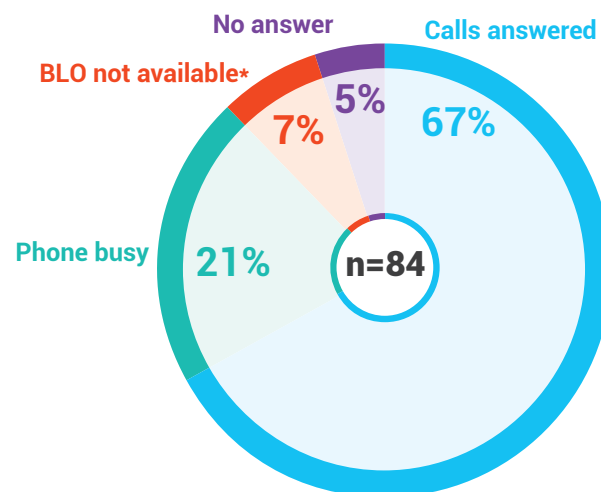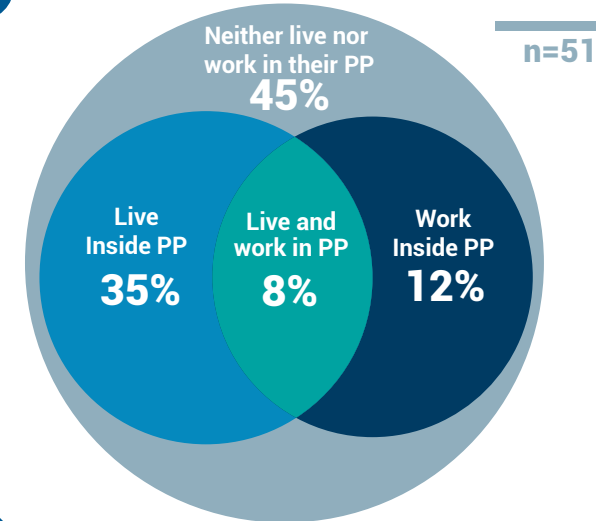
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[1] *Voter List Management: Survey on the Quality of Voter Lists in Delhi (July 2015)*
*- http://www.janaagraha.org/files/publications/Quality-of-Lists-Delhi-2015-MainReport.pdf*

# Thiruvananthapuram City

**1**

All 578 polling parts have an allocated BLO but 3 of these do not have listed contact phone numbers online. Only two-thirds of a random sample of 84 BLOs were contactable by phone after 4 attempts.
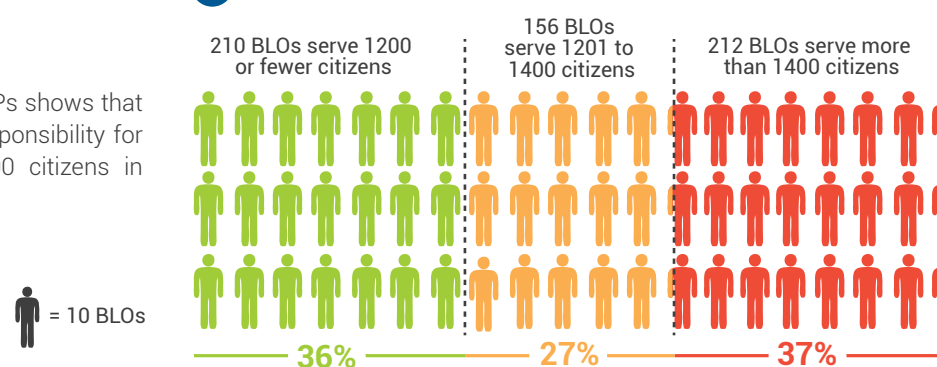
No answer
BLO not available*
Calls answered
**5%**
**7%**
**67%**
Phone busy
**21%**
**n=84**

*Phone answered by someone other than BLO who said the BLO was not available*

**2**

n=51

Neither live nor work in their PP
**45%**

Live Inside PP
**35%**
Live and work in PP
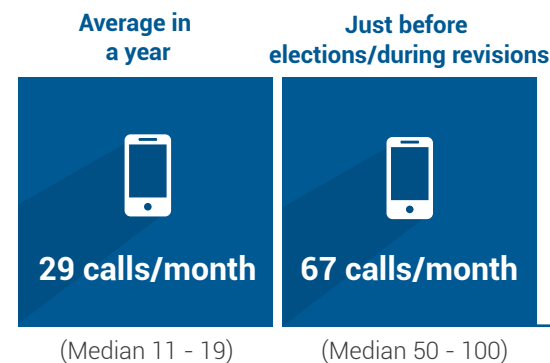**8%**
Work Inside PP
**12%**

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.

**4**

An analysis of the size of all PPs shows that 212 BLOs out of 578 have responsibility for more than the guideline 1400 citizens in urban centres.

210 BLOs serve 1200 or fewer citizens
156 BLOs serve 1201 to 1400 citizens
212 BLOs serve more than 1400 citizens

= 10 BLOs

**36%** — **27%** — **37%**

**3**

The Nazariya Naksha (NN) is a map, which as per ECI guidelines is supposed to be made and updated by BLOs to help them perform their duties better. It gives them an idea of their PP's boundaries, layout and of the households within. Geographical boundaries and layout of the PPs are unclear and not systematically recorded on the voter list. None of the Nazirya Nakshas sampled showed the PP mapped in any detail. All simply showed the outline of the Assembly Constituency (AC) with an outline of the PP in question which in just over a third of maps sampled was the wrong PP.

**NN from the TRV voter List**

**NN as per ECI guidelines**

**5**

Average in a year
Just before elections/during revisions

**29 calls/month**
**67 calls/month**

(Median 11 - 19)
(Median 50 - 100)

BLOs are on duty throughout the year, ensuring the citizens in their area are serviced and the voter list remains clean. However, the bulk of the work is centred around elections when calls to BLOs from citizens average 67 a month. More than a quarter of BLOs say this can be up to 100 per month and 5 BLOs say it is even more. This large concentration of work over and above full time employment, makes it harder for BLOs to exercise their duties.

In this time, other work like on-ground verification also increases.

**6**

## BLO Designation

**51%**
**30%**
**13%**
**6%**

Anganwadi Workers
Others *
Teachers
Clerks
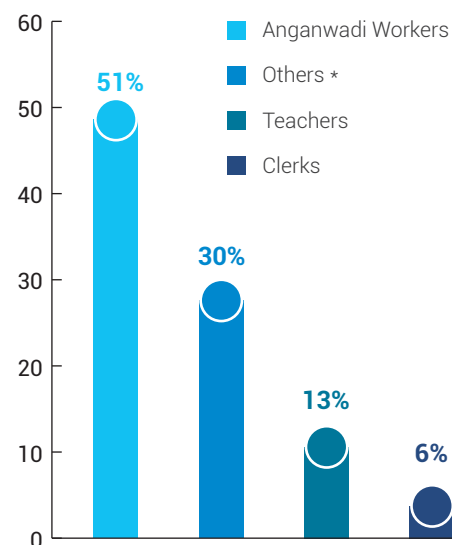
To ensure the voter list remains clean, BLOs are required to conduct statistical analyses such as comparing their PP's gender ratio to their district's census data. However, more than half of BLOs are anganwadi workers and may not posess the skills to conduct such analyses.

*Others include, among others, Retired Govt. Employees, Health Inspectors, Engineers, Draughtsman and a watchman*

**7**

## Voter List Errors

There are 1185 citizen entries with errors out of a total of 7,48,387 entries.

1. Citizen repetitions – 3 cases
2. Citizens with incorrect gender – 693
3. Citizens with spelling errors in their Names - 165
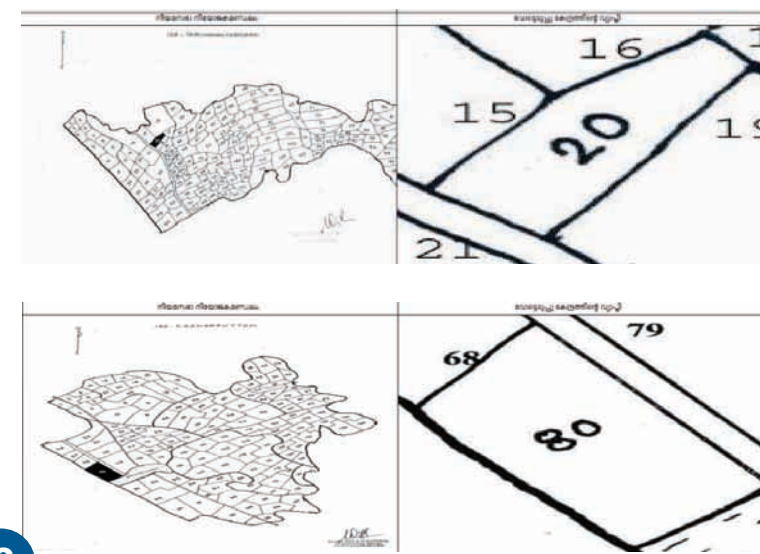4. Citizens with erroneous voter ID numbers - 84

**8**

## The Way Ahead

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.
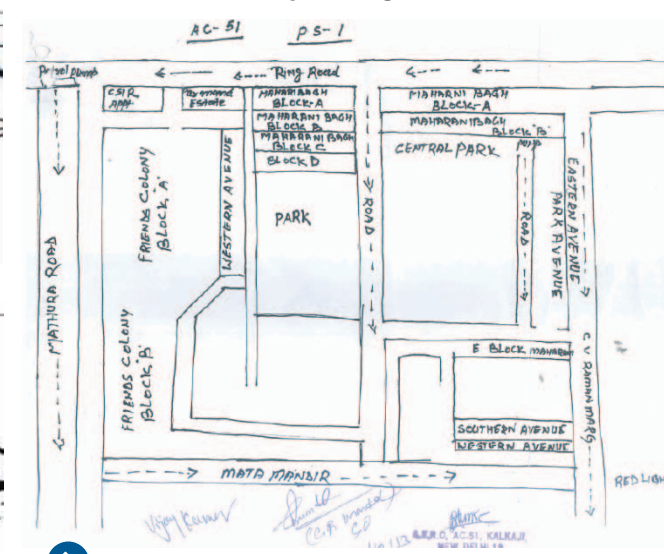
**The solution is to leverage technology effectively:**
» Review BLO role and workflows (using ICT) – use hand-held devices to collect citizen data and service requests; shift responsibility of conducting statistical analyses to EROs
» Create GIS based PP maps which allow BLOs to track households and 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

## Methodology

The Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala is made up of 14 Assembly Constituencies (ACs). The Thiruvananthapuram Municipal Corporation (TMC) administers roughly 4[2] 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 citizens[3].

Information on BLOs of all 578 Polling Parts (PPs) within Thiruvananthapuram City is available on the Kerala CEO's website[4]. 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 website[5] 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 page[6]. 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 ACs[7] 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 lists[8] 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

[3]Census 2011 data – for Thiruvananthapuram City (ULB)

[4]Kerala CEO's BLO search link - http://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/blobla.html; last accessed 09/05/2016

[5]Kerala CEO's Voter List download link - http://ceo.kerala.gov.in/electoralrolls.html

[6]Kerala CEO's Voter Search link - http://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/rollsearch.html

[7]These 4ACs together had 7,48,387 citizens enrolled on the voter list as of 16/04/2016

[8]From the PDF format of lists published on the Kerala CEO's website - http://ceo.kerala.gov.in/electoralrolls.html (published on 14/01/2016)