Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy

VOTER LIST MANAGEMENT

THE STATE OF BOOTH LEVEL OFFICERS (BLOs) IN BANGALORE;

A LOOK AT WHAT’S GOING RIGHT & WHAT’S NOT

Executive Summary

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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.
India's voter lists are riddled with errors. There is evidence to believe that voter list errors are more profound in urban India, primarily due to rapid urbanization and a resultant increase in citizen mobility. And while there is evidence of the issues that exist on urban voter lists, more remains to be understood about the layers within VLM in India that lead to such issues. One such layer, is of functionaries known as Booth Level Officers or BLOs. BLOs are one of the most crucial layers in the entire Voter List Management machinery in India. They are the ECI’s foot-soldiers, in charge of all on-ground verification of voter claims and requests of the Polling Part (PP) they are allotted. In addition to this, the functions they perform for the maintenance of voter lists also makes them one of the largest sources of data on the electorate.

- BLOs are govt., semi-govt. or retired govt. personnel ideally in charge of 1 PP each and are supposed to be resident in the PP they are in charge of.
- The ECI is required to provide BLOs with adequate training and materials that helps them perform their duties efficiently.
- BLOs are required to conduct exercises such as door to door visits in order to keep the voter list of their PP clean and accurate.

Citizens may need to contact the BLO of their PP if they wish to get enrolled on to their PP’s voter list or wish to change or correct some of their details mentioned on the list. However, contacting their BLO may not be very easy.

This study, on BLOs in Bangalore intended to understand better this layer of VLM and explore how issues within BLO functioning may be contributing to the errors seen on urban voter lists. Conducted in three phases involving both qualitative and quantitative interviews, the key findings of this study are outlined below.

1. **How easy is it to contact BLOs?**
   - Citizens may need to contact the BLO of their PP if they wish to get enrolled on to their PP’s voter list or wish to change or correct some of their details mentioned on the list. However, contacting their BLO may not be very easy.
   - Total PPs in the 11 ACs that were a subject of this study: 3077 PPs
   - BLO information available for: 2996* PPs
   - No information available for: 81 PPs
   - *these 2996 PPs share among them, 2751 unique BLO names (the rest are duplications)

   When called, of 2563 BLO numbers attempted, only 27% were answered after 3 attempts. 11% of all numbers were invalid.

2. **Who are Bangalore’s BLOs?**
   - A majority are ‘Teachers’, an occupational class that, as per the ECI’s guidelines, should be avoided while appointing BLOs given the crucial nature of their work and the fact that they are overworked. Some are private sector employees, a category that is not supposed to be made BLOs at all.
   - 58% of interviewed BLOs were Female and 42%, Male. Two thirds of all BLOs interviewed were between 30 and 59 years old and a large proportion, 43%, of all BLOs said that they had been one for 7 years or more.

   BLO Occupation

   - Teacher: 37.7%
   - Clerk: 17.9%
   - Tax Inspectors: 6.6%
   - Revenue Inspectors: 4.7%
   - Aanganwadi Teacher: 3.8%
   - Social Worker: 1.9%
   - Others: 27.4%

   How long have these BLOs been serving as one

   - 1 to 2 years: 14.2%
   - 3 to 4 years: 16%
   - 5 to 6 years: 26.4%
   - 7 to 8 years: 10.4%
   - 9+ years: 30.2%
   - Couldn’t recall: 2.8%
To help BLOs perform their duties efficiently and accurately, ECI guidelines state that they be provided with a ‘BLO Kit’ and be trained adequately. Lack of adequate materials and low frequency of trainings, found in the study, can adversely affect a BLO’s ability to perform their duties.

### Frequency of Receipt of Materials in the BLO kit

A large proportion of BLOs reported that they had never received some of these materials. 18% of BLOs reported that they had never received a BLO ID card, 25% an appointment letter, 48% a BLO register and 49% a BLO handbook.

- A BLO Register: 48.1% received once a year or more frequently, 3.8% received less than once a year, 48.1% never received.
- A Bag with the ECI’s logo on it: 37.7% received once a year or more frequently, 9.5% received less than once a year, 52.8% never received.
- An appointment letter: 24.5% received once a year or more frequently, 11.3% received less than once a year, 64.2% never received.
- A BLO Identity Card: 17.9% received once a year or more frequently, 24.5% received less than once a year, 57.6% never received.
- BLO Handbook: 49.1% received once a year or more frequently, 11.3% received less than once a year, 39.6% never received.
- Blank forms to distribute/give to citizens: 14.2% received once a year or more frequently, 4.7% received less than once a year, 81.1% never received.
- Pens/Pencils and empty note-pads: 21.7% received once a year or more frequently, 15.1% received less than once a year, 63.2% never received.

### BLO Training:

While a large majority of BLOs reported being satisfied with their training, 47% claimed to have received training less than once a year.

- Less than once in 2 years: 19% received, 71% not received.
- Less than once a year: 28% received, 72% not received.
- Once a year but less than twice: 38% received, 62% not received.
- Twice a year but less than thrice: 11% received, 89% not received.
- 3 times a year: 2% received, 98% not received.
- 4 or more times a year: 2% received, 98% not received.

### National Electoral Roll Purification 2016 (NERP)

Have BLOs been trained on NERP as claimed by the ECI?

- 77% not trained, 19% trained, 4% don’t know.

### How do Bangalore’s BLOs go about doing their job?

BLOs do not perform their duties as mentioned in ECI guidelines; this feeds into inaccuracies in voter lists.

7% of all BLOs interviewed (n=106) said that they conducted no door to door visits, during which they are required to perform critical functions to ensure lists remain clean. On average, BLOs perform only 4 out of the 6 crucial functions they are required to perform in a year; none perform all 6.

#### Number of door to door visits conducted (in a year)

- 1 to 2: 42% (n=106)
- 3 to 5: 40% (n=106)
- 6 and above: 3% (n=106)
- Don’t Know/Can’t Recall: 9% (n=106)
- None: 7% (n=106)

#### Total no of days on which BLOs conduct door to door visits each year

- 5 - 10 days a year: 11.2% (n=89)
- 15 - 30 days a year: 40.4% (n=89)
- 45 - 60 days a year: 19.1% (n=89)
- 75 - 150 days a year: 25.8% (n=89)
- more than 150 days a year: 3.4% (n=89)

#### Proportion of BLOs performing each critical function annually

- Collecting data on people who just turned 18 or are about to turn 18 in the polling part: 84.0% (n=106)
- Collecting data on the new residential units/buildings that come up in the polling part: 71.7% (n=106)
- Collecting data on number of males, females and others/third-gender in the polling part: 69.8% (n=106)
- Comparing gender ratio of the polling part to district/Assembly Constituency census data: 60.4% (n=106)
- Updating the Polling Part map (a visual representation of a Polling Part showing roads, lanes, buildings and houses within): 59.4% (n=106)
- Comparing age-group proportion data with that of district/Assembly Constituency census data: 52.8% (n=106)

Average number of tasks performed (out of 6) = 4
The long duration of time it takes BLOs to get to their PP, not having ID cards or proper house numbering in their PPs adversely affects BLO performance.

The number of PPs a BLO is in charge of and the time it takes them to reach their allotted PPs has a direct bearing on the quality of a BLO’s work. 27% of BLOs interviewed claimed to be in charge of 3 or more PPs while official data showed that less than 0.5% were in charge of 3 or more PPs. 16% of BLOs reported that it takes them more than 45 minutes to reach their PP.

Not having a BLO identity card, poor on-ground address infrastructure and a lack of citizen cooperation were cited by BLOs as the three most important issues that affect their work adversely.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most important issues in executing work on-ground</th>
<th>Proportion of BLOs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A lack of a valid BLO Identity Card (ID)</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lack of proper house numbering in the polling part</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lack of cooperation from the people/citizens in the polling part</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The time it takes to reach the polling part area</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your concerns on safety and security while in the polling part</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lack of motivation and support from seniors/superiors</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent changing of the polling parts allotted to you</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lack of proper road/lane signage in the polling part</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lack of supervision from seniors</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentration of work in just a few months i.e. uneven spread of work over a year</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lack of blank forms to be handed to the citizens</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lack of a proper Polling Part (PP) map or ‘Nazari Naksha’</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount Received Last</th>
<th>(n=84)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; ₹1000</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>₹1000 to ₹1999</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>₹2000 to ₹2999</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>₹3000 to ₹3999</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>₹4000 to ₹4999</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>₹5000 to ₹5999</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>₹6000+</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Addressing issues systemically

There are three principal systems underlying the VLM machinery in India. Together, these three help a citizen take their journey to the voting booth:

1. Registration Processes (and data standards)
2. Voter Awareness
3. Polling Booth Management

The BLO layer of functioning is core to the first two systems and any issues in it is bound to adversely affect the overall efficiency and accuracy of the VLM machinery.

The questions shown in the executive summary help highlight that issues exist at each stage, right from BLO appointment and PP allocation explored in question one to the payment of BLO honorariums, explored in the last question. These issues fall across both 1) Registration Processes (and data standards) and 2) Voter Awareness:

These issues plaguing BLOs and therefore VLM in Bangalore, need to be addressed in order to make the existing system perform to its potential. Towards both these ends, technology offers solutions. Creating smart technology enabled workflows for BLOs involving hand held devices for servicing voter requests, GIS mapping of PP boundaries, improved MIS systems for performance management etc. can help improve the BLO system greatly. Additionally, technology driven reforms such as Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) and Database Linkages that can help identify voter movement can also help the system in reducing BLO workload by targeting their intervention better.

**Methodology:**

This study was conducted in three phases:

1) Desktop Research Phase: Analysing BLO information available on the CEO, Karnataka's website from 11 ACs in the city
2) Qualitative Interview Phase: 10 Qualitative Depth Interviews from BLOs across 7 ACs in the city
3) Quantitative Telephonic Interview Phase: 106 Computer Aided Telephonic Interviews with BLOs across 10 ACs in the city

Each phase was designed to feed into the next one. Data from desktop research phase was used to sample BLOs to interview in the qualitative stage and themes that emerged from these interviews fed into the creation of a telephonic survey instrument.

For the main report on this study, visit www.janaagraha.org/publications/ or contact Research & Insights at any of the mail IDs mentioned on the first page.