

WEST BENGAL

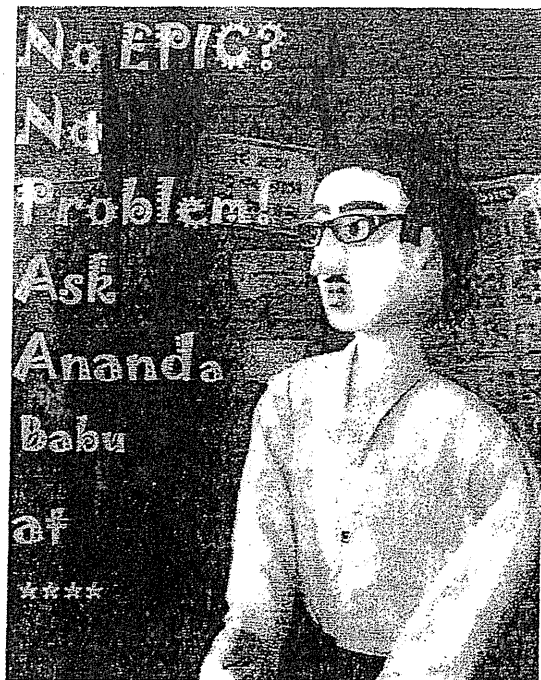
Demystifying Electoral Registration in Partnership with Civil Society

-Debashis Sen
Chief Electoral Officer, West Bengal

The common urban citizen, busy as she is, is keen to get her voter ID card but doesn't know how to go about it. She knows the Election Commission of India, of course, but she has also heard of the State Election Commission, the Election Commissioners, Chief Electoral Officers, District Election Officers, Electoral Registration Officers, Assistant Electoral Registration Officers, Returning Officers, Designated Officers and, may be, even of Booth Level Officers. Not surprisingly, she is confused. She is not quite sure whom to talk to or where to get her photo ID card, without which her bank won't open her account.

In course of my interactions with various distinguished persons, I have often been amazed at their ignorance on the procedure for enlisting one's name, incorporating change of addresses, correcting mistakes in spelling the names in their EPICs (Elector Photo Identity Card). On the other hand, everybody seemed to have a problem or knew someone who had a problem and needed help.

The communication gap between the citizens and the electoral machinery is more pronounced in the cities rather than in the villages. In the rural areas, villagers know that if there is a problem, they must enquire at the office of the Block Development Officer (BDO) who not only doles out relief materials during natural calamities and provides them work under the 100-days' work scheme (National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme) but also deals with EPICs and electoral rolls. However, the institution of the BDO is absent in urban areas and the disconnect between the elector and the electoral registration officer is most acute in metropolitan cities like New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Hyderabad and Bangalore.



Indeed, in recognition of the complexities of election work in such large cities, the Election Commission conducted a special one-day workshop in 2008 with the Chief Electoral Officers, District Election Officers and Municipal Commissioners of these six large metropolitan cities. In the workshop, I had suggested that we needed to demystify the registration procedure and undertake innovative approaches to catch the attention of the average city dweller. I even presented a mock poster displaying the face of Anandababu with the words "No EPIC? No Problem! Ask Anandababu". The words '*conditions apply*'

were written in fine print at the bottom !

Anandababu is a puppet character. He is a central character in a video-film that we developed. The idea was to develop an audio-visual film that would educate and inform polling personnel in training classes. The DVD film was used extensively during the General Parliamentary Elections 2009 at training sessions in all districts of West Bengal. The success of the docu-film '*What really are elections*' ("*bhot jaharey koy?*") rested on the fact that there was a story line, a drama to which the polling officers could immediately relate. Dressed traditionally in yellow shirt and black rimmed glasses, Anandababu was a natural team leader in the film, who could inspire and comfort, guide and joke while skillfully explain the nuances of all that the Presiding Officers were expected to do at the polling booth on the day of the election. Anandababu's leadership in the film is gentle yet firm and he is successful in showing that polling duty can be enjoyable too.

While the film's script was being finalized, I debated with my team members as to whether we should use television stars, noted actors or actual staff of the DEOs to carry the message. The problem of using real life characters in the West Bengal scenario was that almost all such personalities were perceived to

tilt towards one political party or the other. The other option was to use 2D or 3D animation but it so transpired that this would be a very costly option and, what was worse, it would take a very long time to develop it. I recalled that in Bengal, there were very successful puppet plays such as 'Aladin' and I suggested that puppets could be used in the training film. I was glad that the suggestion was warmly supported by officers of the Roopkala Kendra to whom we had entrusted the making of the film. It was thus that Anandababu was born.

The natural choice for our campaign for 100% EPIC coverage was thus Anandababu. We presented him as a friendly neighbourhood person who was easily approachable and who would patiently listen to one's problems and advise. We designed publicity material in-house and engaged an agency to print in flex through for being put up in billboards or hoardings across Kolkata and Salt Lake. The hoarding sites selected belonged to the state government and I met the Principal Secretary of the concerned department for making the outdoor sites available to us without cost. This was agreed to and we went ahead with our campaign '*No EPIC? No Problem! Ask Anandababu*'. Translation to Bengali was tricky and looked alien. Instead, I chose '*Naam aachhey, card nei? Ananadababuke phone korun*' which would probably roughly read in Hindi as '*naam hei, par card nahi? Anandbabuko phon lagaiye*'.

Before we put up the hoardings, we had to solve two issues: one was to get an easy number to remember and the other was to put in place the back office personnel who would respond to queries of the people. Each of these problems turned out to be more complex than I thought at the beginning.

I discussed the issue of a common call number with BSNL. I told the Chief General Manager of BSNL that I required a four digit number that when dialed from anywhere around the state would land in one of the six telephones kept at my office. I told him that I did not want a toll-free number because I thought that nobody would mind paying a rupee for a call that would solve his electoral problem; on the other hand, we would save ourselves from frivolous calls and a large bill. I would be proved right in the end because once we launched the programme, the only issue always was that the line was difficult to get through:

not once did anybody demand a toll-free line. BSNL was quick and efficient to give us the number 1506 but they could not assure that this would work with non-BSNL mobile service providers. So I convened a meeting with Vodafone, Airtel, Reliance and Tata Indicom and requested them to fix a software patch that BSNL would provide so that any user of any service provider could avail the 1506 facility without problems. Everybody agreed readily. It still required a day or two to stabilize all the factors but soon the technical issues were resolved.

The matter of organizing back-office arrangements for handling the calls proved to be the most difficult. I was clear in my mind that I would not use the traditional out-sourced call-centre route not only because it was prohibitively expensive but also because explaining the complexities of electoral law and practice to an outsider would be an uphill task and require months of training. I therefore decided that it would have to be located in our office premise so that seasoned officers were always available to respond to tricky issues. This naturally meant that Anandababu would be available only on office working hours and I requested BSNL to so switch the calls that any incoming call outside office hours to Anandababu at 1506 would lead to a recorded message that said the service was available only during 11 am to 4 pm on working days.

The next problem was to engage personnel to respond to the calls from the six telephones that were dedicated to receive calls to 1506. I was looking for volunteers as all my office staff were occupied with their own work and were not free or suitable to handle calls non-stop for five hours every day. I began contacting NGOs based in Kolkata but response was weak since I had no intention of paying for the volunteers as this would have meant calling of expressions of interest, request for proposal and all the formalities of parting with public money. I was on the verge of giving up and was toying with the idea of calling in staff from the districts when I met this remarkable person called Bappaditya.



Bappaditya ran *Prantakatha*. This is an NGO that called itself a youth advocacy group. It was linked to the Bangalore based NGO called *Janagraha* who was doing a great job in launching the campaign 'A Billion Votes'. Soft spoken and efficient, with a fire in the eyes, Bappaditya looked like he is still in the university. He said that since would be happy to be associated with the Anandababu campaign. He said that he would be able to provide six volunteers during 10 to 5 every day. He would also provide supervisors to take care of timely attendance of the volunteers and to handle situations of sudden absences. I explained to him my difficulties in making payments. He said he would be ready to finance the cost of deploying the volunteers from his own end. I was overjoyed and arranged training of the six volunteers of *Prantakatha* right away. In exchange, I put the logo of *Prantakatha* in our outdoor hoardings and acknowledged the support given by them.

I associated each volunteer of Prantakatha with one of our own officer to guide her while a live call was under way. This was the first time that the new Delimitation of Constituencies was in effect after a gap of three decades and complications were substantial. I put two computers with databases and search engines and connected to our central server to retrieve details of the particular caller whose name appeared in the electoral roll database. Volunteers of Prantakatha were instructed to note the name, age and contact details of each caller before responding to his query. They were told to be polite even in the face of rudeness. Indeed, as we later discovered, many callers would initially be abusive and gave vent to their prior experiences of frustration in dealing with electoral offices, but by the time they ended their calls, they were happy and thanked us, often mentioning that they had never had such a courteous and sensitive response from a public office in the past.



Anandababu appeared in the public domain on 23rd February 2009. The first campaign was launched with the catch line '*naam achche, card nei?*' ('Enrolled, but no EPIC?'). It was meant for the electors, especially the urban electors who were registered in the electoral rolls but did not have an EPIC: in fact, while the coverage of EPIC for the whole state was 94% at that time, the figure was 84% in Kolkata. The volunteers of Prantakatha answered various queries of citizens about how to get an EPIC, how to enroll one's name in the voters' list, whether they would be required to change their EPICs now that the names of Assembly Constituencies were changed after the recent delimitation, how to deal with change of addresses and also how could they change the photograph in their EPICs with better ones.

The Anandababu helpline proved to be a hit right away. Its popularity soared every day. Anandababu quickly became a lovable icon throughout the state. Calls never stopped coming in. Thousands of calls were answered daily but many more could not get a connection as all six lines linked to 1506 were perpetually busy. Somebody said that it was easier to get through to the organizers of 'Kaun banega crorepati' than to Anandababu ! Cartoons appeared in newspapers showing that poor Anandababu with hairs standing up on head handling two calls at a time, not knowing what to do with all the other pending calls. My friends and colleagues and their families would tell me about their exasperation in not being able to get through to Anandababu. Myths began doing the rounds that once you spoke to Anandababu, your EPIC woes disappeared. Despite clear indications, thousands would call Anandababu even after the scheduled hours just to hear Anandababu's pre-recorded voice.



The concept of Anandababu was developed on a zero budget. No advertisement agencies were engaged, no paid advertisement made and no call centre agencies appointed. The Anandababu helpline was a success because it recognized upfront that electoral service delivery is in dire need of demystification and that this can be achieved in partnership with dedicated and loyal civil society organizations like Prantakatha. There is a case for taking the idea forward.

I conclude with an excerpt from the India Today of 17th February 2009
"Next time Opposition parties rant and rave about electoral malpractices in West Bengal, they will get a one-line reply from the Election Commission (EC) — "Dial 1506 and tell Ananda Babu". The number is not toll free though. From now on, Ananda Babu will answer all enquiries by voters, from how to get a new voters' ID card and how to get your name on the voters' list, to change of address and incidents of browbeating by political parties..."