

Understanding Voters' Political Awareness: A Survey of the 16-Yachuli Assembly Constituency in Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India

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Abstract

Voters' political awareness is considered to be the important element which determines public engagement with politics, participation and active citizenship. It orient towards the political events, campaign, political parties, elections and its related mechanism and activities, etc. and serve as a primary step towards political socialization in a society. The present study explores on the facets of political awareness among the voters in the 16-Yachuli assembly constituency in the Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh, India. We employed a multi-stage stratified random sampling to ensure fair representation of sample at all levels i.e., constituency, polling station, and voter respondents. The study is partly empirical and partly descriptive. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Structured questionnaires were employed to gather information on voters' level of awareness. Personal interviews with adult respondents were conducted. Our results indicate that while voters were well aware and familiar of the EVM (100%), voting age in India (86%), NOTA provision in the EVM (72%), their elected representatives (MLA, CM, MP, PM), ruling party(s)/government in state and centre (92%), conduct of free and fairly election (88%); many of them were not familiar or aware of VVPAT (35%), and none of them were aware of the ECI norms of maximum expense limit during the elections at both parliamentary and assembly election. The study suggests that more sensitization initiatives are required in order to promote awareness among the voters in the study area specifically and in Arunachal Pradesh in general.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh, voters' awareness, EVM, VVPAT, ECI

Introduction and Background

Voters' participation in selection of their representatives in a representative democracy is one of the most essential processes for the smooth functioning of any democratic system. Contemporary democratic politics often signify voting as a dominant activity serving as an important institution of political participation. It is commonly considered as the basic foundation of democratic representative government which enables the general masses to present their respective representatives through the election process.

Studies on voting behavior are but an enquiry into socio-cultural process which influences the psychology of voter (Sirsikar, 1965). While such endeavours significantly contribute towards exhaustive empirical investigation and help to the understanding as to how and why a voter decides for whom to vote, voter's political awareness on the other hand, is generally understood as one's orientation towards the political events, campaign, political parties, elections and its related mechanism and activities, etc. It is not only a key asset for the voters in selection of candidate in the election but also a primary step towards political socialization in a society. According to Denk, Olson, and Kristensen (2018), political awareness operates in the political information exchange between the individual and various sources of political messages communicated in public space. It is considered to be the important element which determines public engagement with politics, participation and active citizenship. Considering this weight of importance of voter's awareness and also to strengthen the democratic process and its smooth functioning, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has been constantly taking various initiatives to enlighten the voters towards the electoral process through several means viz., awareness campaigns, conferences in various institutions, TV/Radio broadcastings, newspapers, voter's awareness in printed materials as well as on the ECI website (<https://voters.eci.gov.in/>).

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In Arunachal Pradesh, prior to the introduction of the Panchayati Raj system, the political and social affairs of the tribal people were regulated through indigenous institutions in the form of village councils. In the absence of a modern participatory democratic institution, the state was primarily dominated by tribal norms which were mostly clan and tribe oriented. Studies have suggested that in the initial years of electoral politics, the tribal voters in the state behaved politically in response to the dictate of the society or group. In fact, members of a clan or lineage group functioned as an extended family. They used to vote for a candidate as he is related to the voters either through blood or marriage. In recent time, however, the nature of electoral politics in the state has undergone certain changes. These are because of restructuring of social and political structures and economic development of the state. Clan or group solidarity is very often diluted because of political compulsions. The competitive party politics has introduced 'politics' among the clan brothers. However, primordial group considerations, to some extent, still influence voters' choice of candidates and parties (Bath, 2009).

Contemplating a tribal society's voting remains more of a social activity than a political activity where voters tend to vote on family, kinship, clan, and monetary considerations than on the basis of party, candidate or party ideology, the present study explores on the facets of political awareness among the voters i.e., their knowledge, attitude, and concerns and its deliberation in the 16-Yachuli assembly constituency in the Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh, India.

The Study Area

The 16-Yachuli assembly constituency, one of the assembly constituencies under Arunachal West Parliamentary Constituency, falls within the Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh which is located approximately between 92°40' and 94°21' East Longitude and 26°55' and 28°21' North Latitude². Across the three circles (Table 1), the total number of voters in the constituency was 15976. The constituency comprised of 25,399 persons out of which 12,857 are males and 12,542 are females (Census of India, 2011) (Table 2). The studied constituency is one of the high expenditure-sensitive assembly constituencies, listed by the Election Commission of India. There has been perception even among the common people that the expenditure level in this constituency during assembly elections is extremely high. Besides, kinship and other, social factors do play a significant role in such elections.

Table 1: Circles and literacy rate under 16-Yachuli assembly constituency

Constituency	Circle	Literacy (%)
16-Yachuli assembly	Yachuli	60.58
	Pistana	57.36
	Yazali	62.47

Source: District Statistical Handbook of Lower Subansiri District 2011-12

Table 2: Population profile of the study area

Circle	No. of Villages	Population		Scheduled Tribe	Others	Total
		Male	Female			
Yachuli	57	4393	4173	7912	654	8566
Pistana	57	3539	3631	7053	117	7170
Yazali	66	4925	4738	7307	2356	9663
<i>Total</i>	180	12,857	12,542	22,272	3,127	25,399

Source: District Statistical Handbook of Lower Subansiri District 2011-12

² District Statistical Hand book of Lower Subansiri District 2011-12, retrieved on 23/01/2024

Methodology

Sampling

The survey employed multi-stage stratified random sampling which ensures representation of the social, cultural and political diversity of the population within the sample. The first stage of sampling involved the selection of the polling stations within the 16-Yachuli constituency. Each polling station was again sampled by employing Probability Proportionate to Size (PPS) method. The PPS method ensures that locations with larger population are sampled, and the underlying assumption is that locations with larger population will be more representative of the diversity within the universe. After sampling the polling stations, the final stage was the sampling of respondents, who were selected from the ECI electoral rolls. Respondents were sampled using Systematic Random Sampling (SRS) method, which is based on a fixed interval ratio between two respondents. A total sample size of 201 respondents were included in this study (Table 3).

Table 3: Selected circles, polling stations, and number of respondents

Circle	Polling station (Place)	No. of respondents
Yachuli	Middle school building (Loth)	10
	Middle school building (Linia)	10
	Middle school building (Yakha)	10
	Secondary school building (Talo)	10
	Secondary school building (73Joram-I)	10
	Middle school building (Mai)	10
Pistana	Secondary school building (Yachuli)	10
	Residential school building (Kugitago)	10
	Community hall Neelam	10
	Secondary school building (Pistana)	10
	Middle school building (Ambam)	10
	Middle school building (Poru)	10
Yazali	Primary (SSA) building Pania	11
	Middle school building (Dellipeji)	10
	Residential school building (Lichlit)	10
	Middle school building (Dodo)	10
	Higher secondary school building (Yazali)	10
	Primary school building (Takampassa)	10
	Secondary school building (Peetapool)	10
	Middle school building (Potin)	10
	Total	201

Table 4: Socio-economic profile of the respondents (n=201)

Variable	Frequency (%)
Age	
18 - 30	62 (30.84)
31 and above	139 (69.15)
Gender	
Male	75 (37.31)
Female	126 (63.68)
Education	

Up to Primary level	92 (44.77)
Up to Secondary level	84 (41.79)
Graduation and above	25 (12.43)
Occupation	
Employed	19 (9.45)
Unemployed	182 (90.55)
Monthly income (INR)	
Up to 10,000	162 (80.59)
10,000 – 20,000	26 (12.93)
20,000 – 50,000	11(5.47)
50,000 and above	2 (0.99)

Data collection

The study is partly empirical and partly descriptive. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Apart from the requisite information on voters' participation referred from the statistical handbooks published by State's Chief Electoral Officer, books, research journals, newspapers, web resources etc. formed the source for secondary information. Structured questionnaire were employed to gather information on voters' level of awareness. Personal interviews with selected adult respondents, across different socio-economic categories (Table 4) comprising graduate/post-graduate students, Panchayat members, village elders and political leaders were held at several intervals.

The parameters used to assess voters' political awareness comprise of eight key questions which were close-ended in nature: (i) whether the voters are aware of the minimum age of voters in India; (ii) are they aware of the electoral mechanism of Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) and also to identify/detect in case of act of its tampering; (iii) If they are aware of the NOTA provision in EVM; (iv) whether they know the importance and use of the Voter's Verifiable Paper Audit Trial (VVPAT); (v) whether they know or familiar with their representatives viz., Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Prime Minister of India, Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), Member of Parliament (MP); (vi) if they are aware of the ruling party(s) in the state and the centre; (vii) whether they are aware of *free and fair* election which is the initiative of the ECI to check corruption and malpractices during election process; and (viii) if the voters are aware on the ECI norms on maximum limit of election expense at both parliamentary and assembly level. All questions provide the same choices of answer to the respondent(s) i.e., (a) Aware (Y/N), (b) Unaware (Y/N), and (c) Don't know/Not sure/No answer.

Results

The results of the present study are presented in Table 5. On the question whether the voters are aware on the minimum age of the voters in India, corresponding figures show that 86.06% of the respondents were aware of the minimum age of the voters, indicating high voters' awareness regarding the knowledge on the voter's age. On the other hand, 13.93% respondents were not aware of the minimum age required, which is one of the qualifying criteria for getting enrolled in the voters' list. It is to be noted that the people who were not aware of the minimum voters' age were mostly village elders and those with lower formal educational qualifications.

In order to understand the voter's knowledge about the modern EVM, one of the questions was on their awareness of the EVM. In all the three circles under study, our results show that all (100%) the respondents were fully aware of the use of the EVM. In respect of the NOTA provision, while 71.64% voters were well aware of the provision, 43.28% of them either did not know or did not pay attention about such provision. On the question if they have ever faced any EVM tampering during the election so far, no EVM tampering had been known during their voting in the election so far. Further, Table 5 also shows that respondents with awareness of the VVPAT is 35.32% and 64.67% of them were without the knowledge of VVPAT. Those respondents who lack awareness of the VVPAT were mostly those with less

familiarity of the modern electoral mechanism. One major reason of the low awareness could be the limited number of VVPAT machine available in the polling stations during the elections.

Table 5: Voters' political awareness across parameters

Parameter (Knowledge on/of)	Yachuli (n=70)		Pistana (n=61)		Yazali (n=70)		Total (n=201)	
	Aware (%)	Unaware (%)	Aware (%)	Unaware (%)	Aware (%)	Unaware (%)	Aware (%)	Unaware (%)
Age of voter (min.)	59 (84.28)	11 (15.71)	52 (85.24)	9 (14.75)	62 (88.57)	8 (11.42)	173 (86.06)	28 (13.93)
EVM	70 (100)	-	61 (100)	-	70 (100)	-	201 (100)	-
NOTA	32 (45.71)	38 (54.28)	39 (63.93)	22 (36.06)	43 (61.42)	27 (38.57)	114 (71.64)	87 (43.28)
VVPAT	14 (6.96)	56 (27.86)	25 (12.43)	36 (17.91)	32 (15.92)	38 (18.90)	71 (35.32)	130 (64.67)
*Chief Minister	62 (88.57)	-	60 (98.36)	-	63 (90)	-	185 (92.03)	-
Prime Minister	66 (94.28)	4 (5.71)	61 (100)	-	67 (95.71)	3 (4.28)	194 (96.51)	7 (3.40)
*MLA	68 (97.14)	-	61 (100)	-	70 (100)	-	199 (99)	-
MP	70 (100)	-	61 (100)	-	69 (98.57)	1 (1.42)	200 (99.50)	1 (0.49)
*Ruling party(s)	57 (81.42)	-	57 (93.44)	-	70 (100)	-	184 (91.54)	-
Free & Fair election	60 (85.71)	10 (14.28)	57 (93.44)	4 (6.55)	60 (85.71)	10 (14.28)	177 (88.05)	24 (11.94)
*Election expense (max.)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

*Remaining/unreflected percentage indicates *Don't know, Not sure or No answer* [Chief minister: 7.97%; MLA: 1%; Ruling party: 8.46%; Maximum election expense: 100%]

Understanding people's attention, or how serious they are while choosing their representatives concerning their choice on the capability of their representatives to perform in the center, state and in their respective local levels is integral during electoral process. One of the indicators that one can assess the voters' political awareness, is on their awareness and identification of their own representatives. When asked if the respondent(s) can tell who the chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh is, our findings show that 92.03% of the voters know who their Chief Minister is. Around 7.97% of the voters Don't know/Not sure/No answer to the question. Likewise, respondents were also asked if they could tell the name of the Prime Minister of India. Of the 201 total respondents, 96.51% of them were aware of who is the Prime Minister of India while 3.48% were unaware of the same. Similarly, 99% of the respondents knew the name of their MLA while very few (0.99%) didn't know. Further, 99.50% respondents were aware of their MP while 0.49% were not.

Additionally, our results also show that while 91.54% of the voters showed awareness of knowing what are the political parties that formed the government, few (8.45%) were not aware of those parties in the government. With respect with the voters' awareness on the conduct of *free and fair election* as laid by the ECI, the present study found that, in all three circles under study, more than 88% of the respondents were aware of the ECI initiatives, while 11.94% respondents do not know about it. These results indicate a good number of people are aware of crime /corruption free

and free & fair election initiatives by the ECI. Surprisingly, none of the respondents were aware on the ECI norms of maximum limit of election expense in an assembly and parliamentary constituency.

Discussion and Conclusion

While voting is considered as one of the most visible form of the people's participation in the politics as well as reflection of healthy democratic system, one cannot deny that, without voter's awareness, the effective civic participation is less likely to occur. Moreover, the voter's awareness plays a crucial role for the smooth functioning of the democratic process. As a concerned citizen, it is not simply enough to know the election dates and caste the vote just because one must to do it. Rather, being a responsible citizen, it is primary importance for the voters to know about the electoral process, political party manifesto, background of the candidate, the mechanism through which they elect their candidate, attending political meetings etc. in which their whole society is residing and plays a crucial role while selecting responsible leaders.

The present study covers the analysis of respondent's awareness of the electoral processes through interaction with the help of some basic electoral questions. The criteria which were used to measure the voter's awareness were questions related to voter's awareness on voter's age in India, the EVM and NOTA provision in EVM, the VVPAT, their respective representatives identification, limit of maximum election expenditure, and the voter's awareness on the information related to the government and party(s) currently ruling at the centre as well as in the state. The major findings of the present study indicate that majority of the voters (86%) in the study area were aware of the required voting age in India. Surprisingly, a large proportion of the voters (43%) were not familiar with the NOTA provision in the EVM though many (72%) were well aware of the same. Unlike the high level of awareness on the EVM, voters awareness on the VVPAT indicate a trend of low familiarity (35%), the reason of which could be attributed to the less accessibility and insufficient availability of the same across polling stations during the elections. It is also noticed that the voters' were well aware of who are their elected representatives, except some elders. Additionally, the electors were well updated of the government which is running in the state and at the centre (92%).

One of the striking findings considering voters' awareness in the study area is that, while all (100%) voters were familiar with the pros and cons of the EVM, none of them were aware of the ECI norms of maximum expense limit during the elections at both parliamentary and assembly election. Despite this result, however, majority (88%) of the voter respondents were well aware of the initiatives taken by the ECI to the conduct of free and fairly election in the country.

In light of the present findings, despite the higher awareness and familiarity of the EVM, voting age in India, NOTA provision in the EVM, their elected representatives, ruling party(s)/government in state and centre, conduct of free and fairly election; many of the voters were not familiar of the VVPAT, and none of them were aware of the ECI norms of maximum expense limit during the elections at both parliamentary and assembly election. Since election is the process through which individuals choose the representatives to hold office for the public affairs through free will of the people in representative democracy, the study suggests that more sensitization initiatives are required to further promote awareness among the voters in the study area specifically and in Arunachal Pradesh in general. For the conduct of free and fair elections, general awareness programs could be held at different levels i.e., state, district, local village and Panchayat levels in line with the ECI modalities. Free and fair election is not only related to the political liberty and equality in electoral, but also are the basic foundation of democratic form of government.

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Glossary

EVM: The Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) is a modern electronic machine which is a replacement of conventional ballot box in the electoral process. It was first used in 1982 general election in Kerala. However, the absence of specific law prescribing its use led to the Supreme Court striking down that election. Subsequently, the parliament amended the People Representative Act, 1951 to create the provision for the use of EVMs in the election. From the year 1999 to 2001 it had been used in many of the constituencies. In 2004 general election to the Lok-Sabha, the EVMs were used all over India (ECI, 2018).

NOTA: The Election Commission of India (ECI) has introduced a particular symbol for “none of the above” (NOTA) since 2013. NOTA is a ballot option which enables the voters to reject or disapproval for all candidates who are contesting. If a voter chooses to press NOTA, it indicates that he/she has not chosen to vote for any party. Generally, this symbol appears in the last panel on all the EVMs. The main objective of the NOTA option is to enable the voters who don’t wish to vote for any candidate or party, or if they feel that the contesting candidates do not deserve to be voted for.

VVPAT: The Voter’s Verifiable Paper Audit Trial (VVPAT) is a specific machine that is used in elections to make sure that the electors’ vote has been placed correctly. The provision has been made to ensure voting transparency to prevent EVMs tampering and to ensure the voter’s faith in free and fair electoral process. The basic purpose of the study is to understand the voter’s awareness towards electoral mechanism and its related provisions provided by the Election Commission of India for the better transparency in electoral system.

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