

Aadhaar Enabled Public Distribution System in Delhi
Stakeholder's Perspective
Fair Price Shop Customers

-BY SOUMYA GUPTA

“We know that a peaceful world cannot long exist, one-third rich and two-thirds hungry.”- Jimmy Carter, former President of United States

Five years since the National Food Security Act, hunger is still one of the major cause of starvation deaths in India. Many of the documented tragedies of the marginalised, and others which go unreported are all nothing less than criminal negligence by the duty bound governments at the centre and state.

The NFSA, 2013 spells out quite literally that three out of four rural homes are effectively the beneficiaries under the legislation. And another reality is that, the government is obligated to provide compensatory ‘allowance for food security’, if they are unable to deliver subsidized grains to them. We know this alternative aid can be secured under the ‘Antodaya Anna Yojana,’ but sadly that is not exactly the case off-paper. In Delhi, the Deputy Chief minister Manish Sisodia had ordered a probe into a case in Mandavalli Village, where a girl died a due to starvation, who had access to mid-day meals but not to PDS. Locals confirmed that almost 30 families in that area did not have a ration card.

Counting such cases, it's time to move on to incidents like these caused by Aadhaar in the city. FPS shops with e-PoS machine installed to recognise fingerprints of customers have taken them for a bumpy ride. During my fieldwork in June, 2018 I met number of PDS beneficiaries waiting in line for getting their entitled foodgrains. Domestic helps, MNREGA workers, fruit-sellers all missing their work hours to get ration on a weekday, because the ration shops do not open seven days. Not only they were failing to get their pay for that day, many of them had a story to tell that they did not get their biometric authentication right in the previous months.

Delhi only kick-started the Aadhaar enabled system at PDS shops in the month of January & it lasted till March 17th, 2018 as many incidents of exclusion were being reported from all parts of the city. Customers have been complaining of inadequate ration, even before Aadhaar related issues came in. Then, the state government had also come up with the 'Portability of ration scheme', wherein people could avail ration from anywhere/any shop. Which again failed to make the desired impact. Consequently, plastic ration cards have now been introduced distinctly enough from the physical booklets in other states. But none of the issues have really been addressed in the real sense.

The national capital region, in the coming months is planning to introduce 'Door-to-Door delivery service' under the public distribution system. However, many scholars, activists and critics claim that it would rather just drain more public resources, require more manpower, transportation and last-mile monitoring. I spoke to many beneficiaries who said to have heard about this upcoming policy change, they said: "It seems infeasible to a large extent, as PDS shop owners do not have extra labor, privacy and identity check would still be an issue when ration is delivered home. And rowdy elements in Delhi can also block and abuse the deliveries before they reach the right hands." A lady went to the extent of saying, "Women, children and the elderly have always been marginalised and would still be marginalised. Who will assure it reaches their family, if someone keeps it and never informs them while they are at work."

A migrant worker said, "I have been facing the issue of my family's name being struck off when I am not around or pay visit to my village for a few months together for work. How is a poor man supposed to fight such a policy?" It is also common for people to complain about the ill-preparedness of the government while introducing the machines, given that server connections are poor & inactivated SIM are allocated.