

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

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"Hunger is not an issue of charity. It is an issue of justice."

– Jacques Diouf, Food and Agricultural Organization Director-general

For many years until today, the ration entitlements were distributed to the public manually across states in India. There has been a lot of hue & cry about how many fair price shops are serving the people without playing foul. Unavailability of adequate ration, hoarding, price fluctuations, quality complaints and turning down customers was a prevalent practice.

The plight of many dealers was that they were fighting a generalization that all fair price shopkeepers committed theft. With the new digital transformations and Aadhaar enabled devices promoted by the state, the shopkeepers had a sigh of relief. Gone were the days of, manual record keeping as now everything was updated automatically up on the state PDS website which was accessible to all. The cut they had sold, entitlements that were due or unavailed, everything had an electronic trail.

Computerized systems, electronic receipts and OTP-generated messages were being received by the customer up to their satisfaction. Hence, the age-old allegations that all PDS dealers commit thefts or are selling a poor man's share for profiteering, had died a natural death because Delhi had Aadhaar enabled system for three months (Jan-Mar'18). Apart from this, while I was gathering opinions on the ground during my pilot study on the 'Efficacy of Aadhaar in the PDS system' in June 2018, FPS dealers expressed views on other related things as well.

As they are also one of the most significant stakeholders in running the PDS systems efficiently all these years, they would want the state governments to at least take some perspective from them. For instance, they had a difficult time while implementing PoS machines, due to Wifi connectivity issues and technical glitches in the machines. The state once installed the devices,

showcased no responsibility in keeping the operations running. Companies like Reliance also did not believe in after sales servicing, these issues are detrimental for the whole system to keep going. Secondly, Delhi is facing frequent-server issues, due to which ration was denied as timely authentication could not happen. Also, as told by many dealers they faced problems when the 'portability policy' was introduced. It did empower the customers to avail ration from anywhere in the city, but for the shopkeepers the ration requirements were for a counted number of families hence, it did not make sense to cater to other people outside the regular customers. Sometimes they would have to turn down their regular customers, as ration was over. In other cases, they kept waiting for due customers who never came, as they had already availed from somewhere else and then the ration would get spoilt.

Apart from this, they spoke their mind on the so-called upcoming policy in the PDS domain by the Kejriwal government, where "Door-to Door Service" would be provided for all the people who cannot come to ration shops to avail their legal entitlements due to old-age or illnesses. The matter of Aadhaar authentication, identity-checks with portable PoS machines, listing of proper house address and deputing personnel in this regard sounds a bit of a task to them. As houses are haphazardly numbered, especially in slum-colonies in Delhi or can also missed out due to new encroachments altogether. It is not as easy as ringing a bell and giving out a 'food-delivery' or 'online-package or post' these days which is a common sight in most of the urban cities. Here, it's a tad-bit different, with 35-40 Kgs of ration loaded on a bike, there is a calculated risk of unidentified people, goons or gangs grabbing it in between. The safety of the personnel is also not guaranteed. "Ideas of such big policies should be well-thought of and discussed, before investing time and money in it. This cannot work in Delhi, given the traffic and crime-rate of the city. We are not denying it's a well-intentioned policy, but the government must consider the social factors while proposing a policy," said R. P. Sharma, an FPS dealer who runs a shop in Rohini-East.

"We would like the Aadhaar-system to be back in place, as it removed away the stigma that we are robbers/thieves as it was assumed that we cannot steal anything with the digital devices in order," said a shopkeeper in Chandni Chowk.