



Aadhaar As A Hurdle

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(Mains GS-2: Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability)

Context:

- The Supreme Court recently said, it was a “very serious” matter if three crore ration cards have been cancelled, including those of tribals and the poor, solely because they could not be biometrically linked with Aadhaar.
- Court said this on a petition which is based on reports that an estimate of roughly two to four crore ration cards has been cancelled in the country without prior notice to the beneficiaries”.
- Right to food, which the ration card symbolised, cannot be curbed or cancelled because of lack of Aadhaar.

Inefficiency in linking aadhaar:

- The unique identification scheme has been in existence for more than a decade and recent data has estimated that nearly 90% of India’s projected population has been assigned the Aadhaar number.
- Following the Court’s judgment in 2018, upholding the Aadhaar programme as a reasonable restriction on individual privacy to fulfil welfare requirements and dignity
- In January 2021, a 4-1 majority Bench had also rejected a review petition that questions about the scheme’s validity for public purposes have been put to rest.
- But that has not meant that concerns about the failures in the use of the identity verification project have been allayed.
- These include inefficiencies in biometric authentication and updating, linking of Aadhaar with bank accounts, and the use of the Aadhaar payment bridge.
- With benefits under the PDS, the NREGA and LPG subsidy, among other essentials, requiring individuals to have the Aadhaar number, inefficiencies and failures have led to inconvenience and suffering for the poor.

- Failures in authentication having led to delays in the disbursement of benefits and, in many cases, in their denial due to cancellation of legitimate beneficiary names.

Government's view:

- The government had promised that exemption mechanisms that would allow for overriding such failures will help beneficiaries still avail subsidies and benefits despite system failures.
- But reports from States such as Jharkhand from 2017, for example, suggest that there have been starvation deaths because of the denial of benefits and subsidies.
- The government also gives an explanation that these cancelled cards were bogus.

Reasons behind cancellation of ration cards:

- Biometric authentication failures are expected of a large scale.
- the technological system based on iris identification, thumb prints, non-possession of Aadhaar, non-functioning of the internet in rural and remote areas, etc, led to largescale cancellation of ration cards
- Despite being designed to store finger and iris scans of most users, doubts about the success rates of authentication and the generation of “false negatives” have always persisted, more so for labourers and tribal people.
- Those engaged in manual and hard labour, for example, are susceptible to fingerprint changes over time.
- In practice, beneficiaries have tended to use Aadhaar cards as identity markers but there have been instances of people losing cards and being denied benefits.

Conclusion:

- The Hunger Watch Report of the Right to Food Campaign in 2020 characterised the hunger situation in India as “grave”.
- India ranks 94 out of 107 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2020 and is in the ‘Serious Hunger Category’.
- Given the scale of the problem, the central and State governments would do well to allow alternative identification so that genuine beneficiaries are not denied due subsidies.
- Thus, the question of fraud can still be addressed by the use of other verification cards and by decentralised disbursement of services at the panchayat level.

Supreme Court