

## Aadhaar Of Injustice

In September 2017, 11-year-old Santoshi, resident of Simdega district of Jharkhand, succumbed to starvation. According to her mother, she died “asking for rice, but there was not a single grain at home”. She was deprived of her subsidised ration as her family’s ration card was cancelled because it was not linked to [Aadhaar](#). Marandi in Jharkhand met the same fate — he could not avail of his share of ration supplies since his Aadhaar Based Biometric Authentication (ABBA) failed. Similar cases of starvation deaths have been reported from other states too, including Shakina Ashfaq from Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh, who could not present herself at the ration shop for ABBA due to ill health.

When the [Narendra Modi](#) government came to power riding on the promise of fighting corruption and ensuring effective service delivery, it was assumed that it will put in place a strong anti-corruption and grievance redress framework to ensure that no one is denied their rightful entitlements. However, instead of operationalising anti-corruption legislation like the Lokpal or implementing the grievance redress and social audit provisions in various laws, the government has been pushing Aadhaar as the ultimate solution to corruption.

This is inexplicable as Aadhaar can, at best, tackle only identity fraud, where an individual colludes with the system to be included multiple times in the list of beneficiaries. This accounts for a tiny proportion of corruption. In programmes like the PDS, the major reason for corruption is quantity and quality fraud with ration shopkeepers refusing to give people their full share of rations or pilfering good quality foodgrain and replacing them with poor quality stock. Aadhaar can do nothing to tackle this corruption, which can only be eradicated through greater transparency and effective accountability measures.

There is overwhelming evidence to show that mandatory linking of Aadhaar to ration cards has led to large-scale exclusions from benefits guaranteed under the National Food Security Act. Those who are not enrolled in the Aadhaar database are unable to apply for ration cards. Even if someone has an Aadhaar number, but it is not “linked”, benefits are denied. Finally, in states like Jharkhand and Rajasthan where Point-of-Sale devices have been installed in fair price shops, if the biometrics of beneficiaries don’t match or the cardholder cannot be present in person, they are unable to access their entitlements.

Instead of recognising and rectifying the problem, the government has been brazenly labelling those who are excluded due to Aadhaar as “bogus”, proudly claiming as “savings” the funds saved from denying basic services to the most vulnerable.

On February 7, 2017, PM Modi said in Parliament that using Aadhaar and technology, in two-and-a-half years his government had discovered “nearly 4 crore, meaning 3.95 crore bogus ration cards” which resulted in savings of about Rs 14,000 crore. The PM, however, did not provide any details of “bogus” cardholders. An RTI filed to the PMO seeking a state-wise break-up of bogus cards and the names of bogus card-holders revealed there was no evidence to back the claims.

The PM’s speech was subsequently corrected to state, “nearly 4 crore, meaning 2.33 crore bogus ration cards were found”, presumably to bring the figure in line with information provided by the Union food minister in response to a Parliamentary question in which a state-wise break-up of bogus ration cards was given. The figures provided by the minister, however, also did not match with the data disclosed by various states under the RTI Act. For instance, for Odisha while the minister quoted a figure of more than 7 lakh bogus ration cards, under the RTI Act the state food department replied that there were no bogus ration cards in the state. For Jharkhand, the minister quoted a figure of almost 8,000 bogus ration cards, while the state food department held that “this

information is not available in the department". Interestingly, the PM was silent on whether action was taken against corrupt officials who made "bogus" cards.

In the Global Hunger Index 2017, India ranked 100 among 119 countries. The question is: Instead of ensuring delivery of essential foodgrains, can the country afford to adopt systems which exclude the most vulnerable?

A government intent on tackling corruption should put in place effective and strong institutions which empower people to report corruption and seek accountability from the executive. It should not treat people as thieves unless they can prove their innocence, in this case by getting an Aadhaar number to show that they are genuine and not "ghosts".

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

crackIAS.com