

AADHAAR AS A HURDLE: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON BIOMETRIC AUTHENTICATION FAILURES AND WELFARE DELIVERY

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Public Distribution System: Objectives, Functioning, Limitations & Revamping

The Supreme Court, on Wednesday, did the right thing by [terming as serious the allegation by a petitioner that three crore ration cards were cancelled](#) for not being linked with the Aadhaar database and that these were connected to reported [starvation deaths in some States](#). 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 — a 4-1 majority Bench had also [rejected a review petition in January 2021](#) — 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. There are reports that show 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. 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. That has been the response by the government to the recent petition as well, 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.

Biometric authentication failures are but expected of a large scale and technology-intensive project such as the UID. 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. 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. 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.

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