

A welfare test for Aadhaar

The news last month of the starvation death of an 11-year-old girl in the Simdega district in Jharkhand, allegedly because of denial of PDS ration due to [Aadhaar](#) linking problems, is appalling. The Aadhaar ecosystem definitely needs to pass a stringent welfare test much more crucially than the privacy test.

Aadhaar undeniably has potential, and can perhaps even be a “game changer”. But the way it has been used to design public policies, especially in welfare, seems to have caused havoc. The relentless push of Aadhaar without adequate justification or calibration, with complete disregard of the distress it may be causing to the poor and the under-privileged, is symptomatic of high-handed decision-making and technological muscle-flexing. It is rapidly setting an example of how not to do public policy interventions. Both the last UPA and the current NDA governments must share the blame for these faults of Aadhaar — UPA for its careless introduction, and NDA for pushing it so thoughtlessly.

Independent researchers and civil society activists have long been alerting us to the possibilities of such tragedies. There have been reports of widespread exclusion and disruption that Aadhaar may be causing in welfare schemes. While it is true these are based on anecdotal evidence, they do point to crucial problems with the Aadhaar deployment.

Irrespective of what may have been happening before Aadhaar was introduced, it is imperative to ensure that nobody who needs welfare is ever denied. After all, the rights derived from the NFSA and MGNREGA are unconditional.

The narrative from the government and the UIDAI in response to the reports of exclusion and disruption has often been callous. It has primarily been based on denial, on dubious savings claims, and on the lame quoting of the Aadhaar Act to say that nobody should be denied their entitlements because of Aadhaar.

It is the UIDAI which has been at the receiving end of much of the public flak, but whose responsibility is it to ensure that no deserving person is denied their due benefit? Shouldn't the Central and the state government functionaries be at the forefront to ensure fair and efficient disbursement of PDS ration? Where are the ground reports from the district administrations about the PDS denials because of Aadhaar? Who has designed and deployed the Aadhaar-based PDS? Is there any standardisation across the country and are the designs available for public scrutiny? There may indeed be leakages in PDS, but where is the policy analysis that biometric-based identity verification is necessary for every transaction and that a periodic KYC, as is common with more privileged citizens, will not suffice? And, does the UIDAI have no responsibility towards standardisation and audit?

What is immediately required is a thorough analysis of the denials in PDS. What is the exclusion rate due to targeting errors independent of Aadhaar and how many are excluded only due to Aadhaar? What is the biometric failure rate across the population, sorted according to age, gender, occupation and region? Are the failures inherent to the technology or are they avoidable process errors? What exactly are the problems with the Aadhaar linking processes and can they be rectified? To what extent is the problem due to connectivity failures?

Despite the fact that some of the state governments, like Andhra Pradesh and Delhi, do make the data publicly available on their websites, the presentation is not comprehensive enough to enable an exact determination of the above. It is incredible that there appears to be no publicly available peer-reviewed report that provides a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the above issues.

Mandating a biometric-based digital identity for PDS for a population that may lack the cultural capital required for a smooth adoption was bound to be challenging, and the designers needed to be much more thoughtful. Rather than the rhetoric on whether Aadhaar empowers the citizen or the state, what is urgently required is a precise statement on how exactly Aadhaar may help targeting by reducing both false negatives and false positives. It is also necessary to precisely spell out how exactly and to what extent Aadhaar and the associated digitisation may help to prevent leakages by curbing corruption.

An effective design of using digital identity in PDS is not possible without a thorough understanding of the ground realities. However, it does appear from reading of public accounts that the elements of such a design must be based on an offline identity verification system with opportunistic uploading of cached records; on an error-free linking process; on deployment of tamper-proof digital weighing machines and end-to-end recording at the supply chain and at the ration shops; on effective online receipt systems and online audits; and, most importantly, on user education and a quick and effective grievance redress system.

The offline identity verification may simply be based on digital reading of an encrypted and digitally signed photograph of the beneficiary encoded on the ration card, followed by physical comparison and storing for records along with a time-stamped photograph acquired on the spot with a tamper-proof device. And, it will be crucial to discuss and debate any such design with all stakeholders and not push anything down from the top.

We have to ensure, with or without Aadhaar, that people do not go hungry in this country. Otherwise all claims to development are bound to sound hollow.

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