

Why ABBA must go: on Aadhaar

In a sickening way, October 2017 was like October 2002.

Fifteen years ago, in Rajasthan's Baran and Udaipur districts, there was a spate of starvation deaths. The government of the time made up fanciful stories to deny that the deaths had anything to do with hunger or government failure.

In October 2017, the [death of an 11-year-old Dalit child, Santoshi Kumari](#), of Jharkhand, was widely reported. She had been pleading with her mother to give her rice as she slipped into unconsciousness and lost her life. The government insists that she had malaria but in video testimonies, her mother, Koyli Devi, says she had no fever. After Santoshi's death, more hunger deaths have been reported, of which at least one, Rupal Marandi, is related to the government's Aadhaar experiment.

The starvation deaths in 2002 became the springboard for positive action on many fronts, which included the passing of judicial orders and even political action. Since then, there has been a perceptible improvement in programmes of social support including, but not limited to, the Public Distribution System (PDS). In Baran, it led to a recognition of the vulnerability of the Sahariyas — a tribal community in Baran — and a special PDS package consisting of free pulses and ghee being announced.

Dark clouds over the PDS

Similar action is required today. Instead, the government remains in denial. The Food Ministry in Delhi issued an order in late October that is silent on the crucial issue of reinstating wrongly cancelled ration cards and makes token concessions (with no guarantee of implementation).

Targets and the reality

For months, the Central government has been insisting on 100% Aadhaar "seeding" across schemes such as the PDS, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and pensions. Seeding refers to the practice of entering Aadhaar numbers for each household member on the ration card. It is a pre-requisite for the Aadhaar-based Biometric Authentication (ABBA) system, the practice of using an electronic point of sale (PoS) machine to authenticate each transaction. The government has made seeding and the ABBA mandatory in the PDS. As explained below, the distinction between seeding and the ABBA is important.

In their zeal to achieve 100% Aadhaar-seeding targets, some field functionaries just deleted the names of those who did not submit Aadhaar details. Others waited till the deadline and then struck off names. The government claims that all of these were "fake", detected due to Aadhaar, thus saving crores of rupees. Santoshi's family was one such example. According to the State Food Minister, their ration card was cancelled in July because they failed to seed it with Aadhaar.

Exclusions are not savings

Some people blame the aggrieved for failing to seed Aadhaar. But many of them are unaware of the seeding requirement. When pensions in Jharkhand suddenly stopped for many pensioners,

they had no idea why. No one had told them about Aadhaar. In some cases, the middlemen had seeded it wrongly. Others still had tried repeatedly and failed. Seeding is not as simple as it sounds.

Seeding is just one of the many barriers that the ABBA has created in the smooth functioning of the PDS. The ABBA requires that family members be enrolled for Aadhaar and correct seeding. At the time of purchase, the ABBA requires power supply, a functional PoS machine, mobile and Internet connectivity, State and Central Identities Data Repository (CIDR) servers to be 'up', and for fingerprint authentication to be successful.

All that data that Aadhaar captures

Ruplal Marandi's family passed the first two hurdles, enrolment and seeding, but was tripped at the last stage by the ABBA. For no fault of his own, the Marandi family was excluded from the PDS. His daughter told journalists that he had died of hunger as the family could not collect rations because of a biometric mismatch at the PDS shop.

There is enough evidence to show that the ABBA does not work. The Finance Ministry's latest Economic Survey, based on micro-studies, reports high biometric failure rates.

In Rajasthan, government data for the past year show that around 70% of cardholders are able to use the system successfully. The rest have either been tripped up by one of the ABBA hurdles or, less likely, they did not attempt to buy PDS grain. In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the ABBA's poster child States, it is used to disburse MGNREGA wages and pensions: biometric failure rates are between 8 and 14%. In some months, one in four pensioners returns empty-handed.

A case against ABBA

What most people don't realise is that the ABBA has no role in reducing corruption. If the ABBA helps reduce corruption, it might be worth fixing these failures. Quantity fraud is the practice of cheating on quantities sold. Neither seeding nor the ABBA can stop quantity fraud. In a survey in Jharkhand, dealers continue to swindle people by cutting up to a kg of their grain entitlement despite successful ABBA authentication. Identity fraud, for example in the form of duplicate ration cards, only requires Aadhaar-seeding; the ABBA is unnecessary. Two caveats on seeding: it can be foolproof against identity fraud only in a universal system. More seriously, it raises privacy issues.

Further, in Aadhaar's rulebook for example, an elderly person asking a neighbour to fetch their grain would count as identity fraud. In fact, it is flexibility that is lost when the ABBA is made mandatory.

Thus, each month, people are being forced to cross five meaningless hurdles in the form of electricity, functional PoS, connectivity, servers and fingerprint authentication in order to have access to their ration. Failing any one hurdle even once causes anxiety in subsequent months. Think of the ATM running out of cash, post-demonetisation, just when it was your turn. The resultant anxiety defeats the very purpose of such forms of social support. Failure in consecutive months leads to people giving up entirely. They stop trying. States such as Rajasthan were planning to treat such households as dead or non-existent.

The ABBA must be withdrawn immediately from the PDS and pensions in favour of alternative technologies such as smart cards. This will allow us to keep the baby (offline PoS machines with smart cards) and throw out the bathwater (Internet dependence and biometric authentication).

If the government continues to insist on the ABBA, there is only one conclusion that can be drawn. That it is actively trying to sabotage the PDS, which, quite literally, is a lifeline for the poor.

Reetika Khera is Associate Professor (Economics) at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi

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