

## Left behind on the path ahead

The [tragic death of an 11-year old girl in Jharkhand](#) — which has resulted in the government going into defensive mode — reflects the dire situation that poor families in India find themselves in every day. On October 18, the Aadhaar-issuing body, [the Unique Identification Authority of India \(UIDAI\)](#), said that ‘the family of the girl, who allegedly died of starvation, had Aadhaar and that stringent action should be taken against those who denied her government benefits’. While it has been accepted that she was excluded from having access to rations due to Aadhaar, the government has gone out of its way to assert that the child died due to other causes. The Jharkhand Minister for Public Distribution has rescinded the order requiring the cancellation of ration cards not seeded with Aadhaar. This is another addition to a long list of mass exclusions that a callous state claims as “savings”.

While Aadhaar is part of a larger ecosystem of centralised governance where policymakers assert that digitisation, banking and cash transfers, and biometric tracking (JAM, or Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, Mobile) will sort out all problems of welfare, inquiry will show how unbridled, mandatory digitisation is causing immense pain and suffering to the poorest and most marginalised of this country.

The social security pension system in Rajasthan is another critical welfare system being broken by this tidal wave of digital solutions. This year, on Gandhi Jayanti, the State government announced that from October 2, 2017 pension forms would be accepted only ‘online’ through ‘e-mitra kendras’ or licensed private sector operators.

Also read

[Aadhaar and the right to privacy](#)

Social security pensions are a lifeline for the elderly poor. In Rajasthan alone, there are 63,18,095 active pensioners. Previously, to apply for a pension, an eligible person could submit pension forms to the panchayat. Now, they have to first go to an e-mitra kendra. The applicant must have with them Aadhaar and Bhamashah cards (a State-level identification platform similar to the UID/Aadhaar system), upload all the documents, submit their biometrics, pay a small fee and wait for verification and sanction. Pensioners must also periodically re-verify themselves. This process is supposed to cost 11 but “enterprising” e-mitras charge 100.

For the elderly poor, end-to-end digitisation of social security pension processes is a disaster waiting to happen. The inability to open and use bank accounts, seed them with Aadhaar and Bhamashah, and then withdraw pension payments from their accounts using biometric authentication every month is resulting in sanctioned beneficiaries being removed from pension lists. Nobody knows how many of them were alive when arbitrarily classified as “dead”. Take the case of Kanku Devi, Sita Devi and Dhaku Devi, pensioners who the government said were dead.

Every village has a Kanku Devi. Now 50, she has a congenital disability that rendered her limbs lifeless. Single, she lives in a one room, stone house. Her brother’s daughter-in-law gives her enough firewood, ration and water to prepare a small meal for the day — a dry roti with salt.

Before she passed away, Sita Devi, 40, had been bedridden for five years after a spinal injury at work. Her three children, the eldest who is 15, looked after their mother and house. Her children are now struggling to get social security benefits, challenged by digital requirements.

Dhaku Devi, 90, who also passed away, and with no children to look after her, was almost blind and did not have an electricity connection in her house. She managed to be mobile within the

house. Her daily roti, if it came, was brought to her by a family member who lived nearby.

These women were the luckier ones who got their pensions restarted after the intervention of civil society organisations. The meagre pension gives them some semblance of dignity and independence. There are countless such people across India, who are now bewildered and suffering the consequences of new digital systems.

Though effective digital applications exist, the question is this: who does digitisation serve? And, are there other, better mechanisms freely available? The most sensible policy would be to provide a parallel digital option.

A demand that beneficiaries have the option to choose a payment mode that is convenient to them has been assiduously ignored.

There is, for instance, the plea to retain the option of choosing the panchayat route for pension applications. A useful digital-based reform would have been to have an automatic pension sanction as soon as people become eligible for it. The policies being pushed through appear to be more out of a concern for administrative convenience than the right to life. There is no consultation, no transparency, no accountability and no regard for what systems people know will suit them best.

Schemes such as 'Digital India' sound exciting as they "spell" progress. But what these schemes mean to a majority of the poor and the devastation they cause is lost on us. A disturbing lack of empathy, transparency and participation is allowing the weakest to be bullied into what is being portrayed as a way ahead.

*Nikhil Shenoy is with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan*

The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

END

Downloaded from [crackIAS.com](http://crackIAS.com)

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com