

PDS digitisation moving at snail's pace

Going nowhere: The project's aim is to help the government ensure that foodgrains reach the right beneficiaries. File Photo

The Narendra Modi government's claim to ensure end-to-end digitisation of the Public Distribution System (PDS) is coming to naught even after three years of being in mission mode. At least 11 States have not taken the elementary step of digitising fair price shops and nine other States, including Uttar Pradesh, have hardly made any progress.

The project was launched in 2012 at a cost of Rs. 884 crore to ensure that, at every step from field to fork, the government would be able to track the movement of foodgrains so that they reached the right beneficiaries. As part of the effort, all fair price or ration shops were to be digitised. But out of 5.26 lakh ration shops, only 51% have been digitised in three years, it was found at a review meeting chaired by the Minister of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution Ram Vilas Paswan, on Friday.

"When we took over in 2014, fewer than 10,000 fair price shops had been digitised even after two years of launch. In the last three years, we have made significant progress," a senior Ministry official said.

Connectivity issues

The numbers are most stark in the northeast. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland have cited connectivity issues for their inability to commence the process of digitisation.

Jammu & Kashmir, Kerala, Punjab and West Bengal fall in this category of non-starters, too.

Another nine States have made meagre progress. In Bihar, less than 1% of ration shops are digitised; the figure is 1% for Tripura, Delhi and Uttarakhand. Uttar Pradesh fares better with 16% shops digitised. The project also calls for automation of the supply chain — online monitoring of stock positions in godowns, tracking the movement of the food grains from the godowns to the fair price shops, SMS alerts to beneficiaries, etc. Thirteen States are yet to take the first step in this direction.

The Centre, meanwhile, has sought to present the digitisation of 23.11 crore ration cards as a great success, in the process uncovering 2.48 crore bogus cards, which have been deleted to save the nation a subsidy of Rs. 15,000 crore per annum.

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