

Aadhaar needs to pass a stringent welfare test

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The recent news of the starvation death of an eleven year old girl in the Simdega district in Jharkhand, allegedly because of denial of PDS ration due to Aadhaar linking problems, is appalling. What has happened is unacceptable and 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” if done well. 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 a high handed decision making and technological muscle flexing that is hard to comprehend. 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 negatives of Aadhaar - UPA for its careless introduction, and NDA for pushing it so thoughtlessly and recklessly.

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 that most of the reports are based only on anecdotal evidence, and that the testimonies presented often fail to conclusively establish the exact causes of the exclusions and the denials, they do point to crucial problems with the Aadhaar deployment and need to be taken seriously. 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 NFSA and NREGA 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 lame quoting of the Aadhaar Act to say that nobody should be denied their entitlements because of Aadhaar. Surely some more proactive measures are required?

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? Shouldn't the central and the state government functionaries be at the forefront to ensure fair and efficient disbursement of PDS ration? What have the food ministries and their officials got to say about the Aadhaar related problems? 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 web-sites, the presentation is not comprehensive enough to enable exact determination of the above. It is absolutely incredible that there appears to be no publicly available peer reviewed report that provides a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the above issues. The all around lack of accountability appears to be deeply problematic.

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 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; on transparent predictive analytics for targeting based on online transactional data using pre-audited algorithms, and, most importantly, on user education and a quick and effective grievance redressal 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 stake holders 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.