

Accessing the Right to Food in Delhi

NANDINI NAYAK, SHIKHA NEHRA

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Nandini Nayak (nandini@aud.ac.in) teaches at the School of Development Studies, Ambedkar University Delhi and is principal investigator of the research project on which this article is based. Shikha Nehra (shikhanehra92@gmail.com) is a graduate student at Ambedkar University Delhi and a research assistant on the same project.

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The renewed Public Distribution System (PDS) under the “rights-based” National Food Security Act, 2013 has increased access to foodgrains in Delhi. However, the Aadhaar-enabled PDS has created new barriers and glitches undermining the promise of efficient, error-free, and transparent service-delivery.

The National Food Security Act (NFSA), enacted by Parliament in 2013, brought the public distribution system (PDS) under its fold. In Delhi, the groundwork for the implementation of the revised PDS started before the enactment of the NFSA, when the National Food Security Ordinance, 2013 was promulgated. This was a positive head start. Several states such as Assam, Jharkhand, Tripura and Telangana, initiated the implementation of the NFSA only in 2015, whereas some others, such as Gujarat, did so much later, in April 2016. As part of implementing the PDS under the NFSA, the Government of Delhi identified the mandated 72.78 lakh beneficiaries by 2015. Despite the new “rights-based framework” for PDS implementation, the paradoxical per state cap on beneficiaries was adopted in keeping with the Government of India PDS Control Order of March 2015.

Gains under NFSA

A survey of 320 PDS beneficiary households was conducted across four districts in Delhi (North-West, West, East, and South) during May-July 2016, as part of a research project funded by Ambedkar University Delhi. Sample households were randomly selected from the beneficiary lists of three fair price shops (FPSs) in each of the above-mentioned districts. It was found that, among the sample households, access to the PDS had expanded after the implementation of the NFSA began, with 26.5% of sample households stating that they did not have PDS ration cards pre-NFSA. Of the sample households, 87% stated they had purchased PDS foodgrain at least once in the four months preceding the survey. This includes 68% of the total sample households who stated that they had purchased PDS

foodgrain in all four months preceding the survey. Of the sample households, 8% had not tried to access PDS foodgrains at all, primarily for reasons such as the FPS was too far, the quality of grain poor, or the FPS did not open during its mandated timings, while a few others had not received their new (NFSA) ration cards.

A positive aspect of the implementation is adherence to Section 13 of the NFSA, which states that the eldest adult female will be recorded as the head of the household for the purpose of the PDS ration card, unless such a person does not exist. The head of the household on the ration card was a woman in 98% of the sample households. The potential significance of the NFSA as a source of social security can be gauged by looking at the profile of these respondents. Of the sample households covered, 69% of household heads had undergone schooling till Class 8 or lower. Of the heads of households, 67% stated they were homemakers and did not have a regular source of income. Of the remaining heads of households, 20% indicated they had precarious access to work, including as domestic household workers, or were currently unemployed. Only 4% of heads of households stated they had a regular source of income, though none were in contractually secure employment. For these households, foodgrain accessed from the PDS was a significant means of coping with vulnerability.

Failures of Aadhaar-enabled PDS

Having said the above, there are several critical problems with the PDS implementation under the new “rights-based framework.” The revised PDS does away with the former below/above poverty line (BPL/APL) categories and classifies a majority of beneficiary households as “priority households” who get 5kg foodgrain per person per month for all household members listed on the ration card. Under the rationale of increasing transparency and reducing corruption in PDS implementation, the all-new NFSA-PDS ration cards issued in Delhi from 2013 onwards are seeded with Aadhaar numbers of household members. A parallel process of FPS automation or use of Aadhaar and internet-enabled point of sale (PoS) devices at PDS shops has also been unfolding in Delhi. This is similar to developments in other states, such as Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, a process that Union Minister Ram Vilas Paswan has taken pride in speaking about on more than one occasion. In Delhi, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal announced in October 2016 that all FPSs in the state will be equipped with PoS devices by March 2017.

While Aadhaar-enabled PDS is being touted as being the key to an efficient and fraud-free system, reliance on this can be problematic in critical ways: (i) the system excludes individuals who do not have an Aadhaar number; (ii) where a beneficiary has an Aadhaar number, the biometrics and internet-dependent delivery system may still not work, for instance, when biometrics are not recognised by the PoS device; or (iii) the machine does not work due to electricity or internet connectivity issues.

The Delhi NFSA survey found that of the sample households, 44% have 1-4 household

members missing from their ration card. In 48% of the households that had at least one person missing from the ration card, a cited reason for exclusion of household members was the absence of an Aadhaar number. Importantly, for each missing member, households lose out on 5 kg of foodgrain per person per month.

Further, of the 47.5% sample households that accessed ration from an FPS equipped with an Aadhaar-enabled device, 52% said they have faced problems accessing their rations. These problems included non-recognition of fingerprints of the person going to collect rations, and the inability to purchase rations due to problems with internet connectivity at the FPS. This, of course, highlights all too well the potential problems of reliance on technology for critical service delivery that can routinely fail even in the national capital.

Rather than prioritising expansion of Aadhaar-enabled distribution, the area where the PDS system needs significant intervention is in reigning in PDS dealers and regulating the running of shops. Of the sample households, 60% stated that their ration shop opens irregularly, and not as mandated—open on all weekdays with one weekly off. Another problem that cannot be corrected by Aadhaar includes instances where ration dealers disburse less than the full quota of ration against a card. This was reported by about 9% of households accessing foodgrain from Aadhaar-enabled shops. Worryingly, 62% sample households stated they did not know where to file a complaint if faced with a problem of access. A robust grievance redressal system is critical for the implementation of a rights-based programme such as the PDS under the NFSA. Whether there is adequate political will to strengthen the same remains to be seen