Aadhaar as a hurdle: Authentication failures and Welfare delivery

Why in news?

The Supreme Court has termed as ‘serious’ the allegation by a petitioner that 3 crore ration cards were cancelled solely because they could not be biometrically linked with Aadhaar.

What is the case about?

- A Bench led by the CJI asked the Centre to respond to allegation made in a petition by Koili Devi.
- Koili Devi’s 11-year-old daughter, Santhoshi Kumari, is allegedly a victim of hunger death in Jharkhand in 2017.
- She said the family's ration card was cancelled due to non-linkage with Aadhaar.
- She has sought an independent investigation into the starvation deaths, restoration of the cancelled ration cards and compensation for the death of her daughter.

What are the causes for such irregularities?

- The insistence on Aadhaar and biometric authentication had led to the cancellation of nearly 4 crore ration cards in the country according to the Union of India.
- The Union of India gives an explanation that these cancelled cards were fake ones.
- But the real reasons lies with -
    - the technological system based on iris identification, thumb prints / inefficiencies in biometric authentication and updating
    - linking of Aadhaar with bank accounts
    - non-possession of Aadhaar
    - non-functioning of the internet in rural and remote areas, etc
- Biometric authentication failures are but expected of a large scale and technology-intensive project such as the unique identification (UID) scheme.
- There are doubts about the success rates of authentication and the generation of “false negatives.”
- This is more so for labourers and tribal people.

- Those engaged in manual and hard labour, for example, are susceptible to fingerprint changes over time.
- Failures in authentication have thus led to delays in the disbursal of benefits in some cases.
- Moreover, the shortcomings lead to large-scale cancellation of ration cards without notice to the family concerned.

How serious is the issue?

- The government's continued emphasis on Aadhaar was unfortunate.
- The Supreme Court has notably laid down in clear terms that "no insistence on Aadhaar can be done for statutory entitlements".
- Tribals either do not have Aadhaar cards or the identification does not work in tribal and rural areas.
- The petitioner in the case emphasized that the Aadhaar exercise deprived millions of Indians living below the poverty line of food.
- It led to starvation deaths across the country.

What are the concerns with redressal?

- The government highlighted the redressal mechanism within the Food Security Act as the right place to go.
- But the petitioner side noted that not a single State had appointed independent nodal officers or district grievance redressal officer under the Act.
- All the States have mechanically granted additional designations to existing officers.
- In many cases, the officers given additional designations are from the Food Supply Department, where there are apprehensions of corruption.

What is the way forward?

- Inefficiencies in the Aadhaar project should not come in the way of welfare delivery.
- Right to food, which the ration card symbolised, cannot be curbed or cancelled because of lack of Aadhaar.
- Given the scale of the problem, the central and State governments should allow alternative identification.
- This would ensure that genuine beneficiaries are not denied due subsidies.
- The question of fraud can still be addressed by the use of other verification cards and by decentralised disbursal of services at the panchayat level.

Source: The Hindu

