Addressing Exclusion Errors in Aadhar

What is the issue?

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- There was considerable euphoria when Aadhaar was envisioned as it was imagined as an effective mechanism to quell leakages considerably.
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- But two major concerns with Aadhaar have emerged over time - security of biometrics and authentication failures.
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- The later tends to affect the most vulnerable dearly and this article has delt specifically with authentication failures in PDS.
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What are the contours of the problem?

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- It was thought that Aadhaar (like any new technology) would be experimented first in urban areas where the connectivity and demography was suitable.
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- Such a start would have helped in detecting implementation and transitional flaws with lesser pain and also made troubleshooting easier.
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- After considerable such tirals, the scheme could’ve been expaned to elsewhere.
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- Contrarily, Aadhaar Assisted Biometric Authentication (AABA) was piloted in Jharkhand, which has a large tribal population and poor connectivity.
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- Inevitably, there have been multiple reports of authentication failures, which has adversely affected the most vulnerable segments of the population.
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- As these are the people who have the greatest need for subsidised food, Aadhaar has defeated its primary purpose - ensure proper PDS delivery.
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How has UIDAI responded?

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- Official data hasn’t been disclosed, but it has been estimated that the exclusion errors were as high as 20% in PDS if biometric authentication was required.
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- While this is shocking, the response of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) to such reports is blanket denial.
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- UIDAI maintains that it only provides a platform and Aadhaar applications (such as PDS) are within the domain of the respective ministries.
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- But this does not abdicate UIDAI of responsibility, as the contribution of authentication failures is a significantly high.
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- The limits of technology, whether in terms of the failure to authenticate biometrics or the absence of connectivity, should not hurt the poor.
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- Presently, multiple announcements have been made for using virtual IDs to secure greater privacy and the use of facial biometrics to reduce errors.
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- While the willingness to improve the technology is laudable, for the immediate need, UIDAI must talk with ministries to redesign priority areas like PDS.
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What was Madhya Pradesh government’s design?

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- The current PDS design places PDS dealer in charge of making biometrics work for each beneficiary every month.
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- As this has proven to be strenuous, the Madhya Pradesh government devised a scheme where the biometric authentication would be done only once a year.
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- Under this scheme, the authentication is secured by agencies unrelated to the PDS department.

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- Once authenticated, households are to be given coupons for the next 1 year, which can be exchanged for buying goods from the PDS.
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- The coupons were bar coded to prevent duplication and misuse, which helped in minimising the exclusion error.
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- But the MP government lost its nerve on the eve of its implementation, and scraped it in entirety.
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What is the way ahead?

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- Considering the appealing logic, it would be good for center and the UIDAI must take up the MP government's scheme to avoid exclusion errors.
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- While weeding out identity fraud is important, they are creating a far more serious problem of exclusion errors which can cost lives (due to starvation).
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- Also, smart cards that can be swiped like credit cards rather than the more sophisticated biometric authentication can be considered.
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- All of this still the possibility where the dealer just lies to an ignorant customer that authentication has failed, while it hasn't.
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- This will give his access to quanities that he can dispose off in the open market.
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- Contrarily, MP's coupon scheme will in fact prevent even this as the merchandise has to be provided to secure the distributed coupons.
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- A technology is only as good as the judiciousness with which it is used, and hence the Aadhaar needs to be curtailed from reaching menacing proportions.
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Source: Indian Express

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