Issues with social benefit schemes

What is the issue?

Recent instances proves mandatory digitisation is causing immense pain and suffering to the poorest and most marginalised of this country.

What are issues with Aadhaar in Jharkhand?

- Recently 11-year old girl in Jharkhand died tragically due to starvation.

- The family of the girl, who allegedly died of starvation, had Aadhaar.
- This incident raises the concern that Social welfare beneficiaries must have the option to choose a convenient payment mode.
- The Jharkhand Minister for Public Distribution has rescinded the order requiring the cancellation of ration cards not seeded with Aadhaar.
- This is another addition to a long list of mass exclusions that a callous state claims as "savings".

What is the issue with Rajasthan elderly pension scheme?

- **Rajasthan-**Recently the State government announced that pension forms would be accepted only 'online' through 'e-mitra Kendras or licensed private sector operators.

- Previously, to apply for a pension, an eligible person could submit pension forms to the panchayat.
- Now, the applicant must have with themAadhaar and Bhamashah cards (a State-level identification platform similar to Aadhaar system), upload all the documents, submit their biometrics, pay a small fee and wait for verification and sanction.
- This process is supposed to cost Rs. 11 but "enterprising" e-mitras charge Rs. 100.
- The meagre pension gives them some semblance of dignity and independence.

- Though effective digital applications exist, the question is this: who does digitisation serve? And, are there other, better mechanisms freely available? The most sensible policy would be to provide a parallel digital option.

What measures needs to be taken?

- A demand that beneficiaries have the option to choose a payment mode that is convenient to them has been assiduously ignored.
- There is, for instance, the plea to retain the option of choosing the panchayat route for pension applications.
- A useful digital-based reform would have been to have an automatic pension sanction as soon as people become eligible for it.
- The policies being pushed through, appear to be more out of a concern for administrative convenience than the right to life.
- Issues related to Consultation, Transparency, Accountability must be answered as soon as possible.

- In many instances pensions schemes were restarted and eased after the intervention of civil society organisations, such interventions needs to be encouraged.

Way forward

- For the elderly poor, end-to-end digitisation of social security pension processes is a disaster waiting to happen.
- There are countless such people across India, who are now bewildered and suffering the consequences of new digital systems.
- A disturbing lack of empathy, transparency and participation is allowing the weakest to be bullied into what is being portrayed as a way ahead.

Source: The Hindu