PDS and Aadhaar

Why in news?

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An 11-year-old girl died of starvation in Jharkhand after the local PDS shop refused to provide her family with any food as their ration card was not linked to the Aadhaar number.

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What is the government's directive?

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- The Central government has been insisting on 100% Aadhaar “seeding” across various schemes.
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- These include the Public Distribution System, MGNREGA and pensions.
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- **Seeding** refers to the practice of entering Aadhaar numbers for each household member on the ration card.
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- Seeding is a pre-requisite for the **Aadhaar-based Biometric Authentication (ABBA)** system.
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- ABBA is a practice of using an electronic point of sale (PoS) machine to authenticate each transaction in the PDS.
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What is the recent problem?

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- To achieve 100% Aadhaar-seeding targets, some field functionaries just deleted the names of those who did not submit Aadhaar details.
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- Some others waited till the deadline and then struck off the names.
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- In some cases, the middlemen does the seeding wrongly, thus denying the beneficiaries of their rights.
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- Resultantly, the government claims these ration cards to be "fake" as detected with Aadhaar details.
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- This procedural mishap is considerably depriving many families of their entitlements through the Public Distribution System.
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What are the shortfalls?

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- **Awareness** - The aggrieved are being blamed for failing to seed Aadhaar but the reality is that many of them are unaware of the seeding requirement.
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- When pensions in Jharkhand suddenly stopped for many pensioners, they had no idea why.
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- **Technical** - Seeding is not as simple as it sounds and is one of the many barriers that the ABBA has created in the smooth functioning of the PDS.
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- At the time of purchase, the authentication process under ABBA requires:
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i. power supply.
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ii. a functional PoS machine.
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iii. mobile and Internet connectivity.
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iv. State and Central Identities Data Repository (CIDR) servers to be ‘up’.
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v. fingerprint authentication to be successful.
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- Given all these, the Finance Ministry’s latest Economic Survey, based on micro-studies, reports high biometric failure rates.
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- **Corruption** - Biometric Authentication for transactions has no role in reducing corruption.
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- Either seeding or the ABBA can do little to stop quantity fraud which is the practice of cheating on quantities sold.
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- PDS dealers continue to cheat people by cutting up to a kg of their grain entitlement despite successful ABBA authentication in some regions.
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What should be done?

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- Identity fraud, for example in the form of duplicate ration cards, requires only Aadhaar-seeding.
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- Certainly, the ABBA is unnecessary in many ways and some flexibility is lost when it is made mandatory.
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- E.g. If an elderly person asks a neighbour to fetch their grain, it would count as identity fraud under mandatory ABBA.
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- The mandatory biometric authentication (ABBA) can be withdrawn from the PDS and pensions.
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- Instead, alternative technologies such as smart cards could take their place.
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- This will allow offline PoS machines with smart cards and rule out the need for internet dependence and biometric authentication.
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- Continuing with mandatory ABBA would only disrupt the PDS, which is significantly a lifeline for the poor.
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Source: The Hindu

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