The Fallacy of Technology Centric Solutions - PDS and DBT

What is the issue?

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- Various new governance tools introduced are derailing India's public distribution system (PDS) in several States across the country.
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- Notably, disruptions caused due to compulsory "Biometric Authentication" and "Direct Benefits Transfer" (DBT) is hurting millions.
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What is Jharkhand's case?

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- While Jharkhand's PDS has drastically improved over the past decade, its move to make Aadhaar authentication compulsory has proved disastrous.
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- A large numbers of people, especially among vulnerable groups such as widows and the elderly, found themselves excluded from the PDS.
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- Even those who managed to buy rations faced considerable inconvenience due to connectivity and biometric failures.
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- Notably, there was also a revival of corruption, as PDS rice meant for those who failed the biometric test was siphoned off.
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- **Card Cancellation –** Last year, Jharkhand mass-cancelled 11 lakh ration cards that weren't linked to Aadhaar by labelling them "fake".
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- As this was without verification, the action was inhuman and illegal and expectedly didn't stand scrutiny, and was in fact retracted later.
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- Many cancelled cards actually belonged to families that had been unable to link their card with Aadhaar for no fault of their own.
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- Despite this, Jharkhand continues to aggressively push Aadhar and has even

restricted the monthly ration of 5 kg rice per person to only those individuals who've liked their Aadhars to the ration database.
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- UIDAI is participating in the crusade to make Aadhaar-based biometric authentication compulsory in various contexts.
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- **Direct Benefits Transfer -** Under DBT, people have to collect their food subsidy in cash from the bank before using it to buy rice from the ration shop.
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- While until now, rice at the ration shop cost Rs.1 per kg, with DBT it will cost Rs.32, the reminder is what will be compensated for.
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- While a DBT pilot is on in Ranchi District, the State government already seems convinced of its success and is planning to extend it elsewhere.
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- The ground realities have been completely ignored as it is easily perceptible that the pilot is a clear disaster, with public anger mounting against DBT.
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- **The problem** - People waste enormous time shuttling between the banks, pragya kendras (banks insist on withdrawing cash here) and ration shops.
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- At every step, there are long queues, and for many people, accessibility is also an issue, due to the location of the entity, their age or disability.
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- The initial adaptation in particular is tiresome as there is no clarity on which bank account of a family gets selected for the DBT.
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- DBT might work better if people had some cash reserves, but so many people in rural Jharkhand have so little cash.
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What is the larger trend?

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- While Jharkhand is among the worst cases of Aadhar and DBT driven destabilisation of the PDS, similar trends are noticed in other States too.
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- Bihar, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh have all seen their PDS networks come

under dire strain in the pilot blocks.
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- Notably, many senior officers in the food department oppose this technological push privately but have no choice but to follow instructions from the top.
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- There is considerably push by the union government, which is indicative of growing centralisation and technocracy in India’s social sector.
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- The most disturbing aspect of this trend is a lack of concern for the hardships that people face in situations.
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- There isn’t even an effective arrangement for grievance redressed or information sharing.
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Source: The Hindu

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