

Gist of EPW February Week 2, 2021

Need for Local Access Points for Central Administration of Identity Cards

Context:

The article analyses the issue of difficulties faced by people in getting various identity cards which are necessary for availing various government services and suggests having a streamlined and more organized form of administration to issue these identity cards.

Introduction:

- The inequality in the cities of India and the need to emphasize attention towards the urban poor have always been evident.
- Due to the pandemic, it became clear that there is fragility or absence of security in terms of livelihoods, income, and basic services.
- A study on the topic, the efficiency of the government allocations during the Covid 19 pandemic for low-income families, was conducted by a researcher in 15 states.
- According to this study, 100% loss of income was recorded in the case of 43% of households in Maharashtra. In addition to this, 52% of the total respondents lost their jobs in 15 states and another 20% recorded loss of wages.
- It was also suggested by the report that although the delivery facility of the [Public Distribution System \(PDS\)](#) was widened during the Covid 19 pandemic, the Aadhar card/ration card issues acted as a hindrance in the way of availing the benefits.

Issue of many identity cards:

- It is necessary to have the relevant identity cards/documents, such as Voter ID card, Aadhar card, caste certificate, Below the poverty line (BPL) card while accessing the benefits of various services such as access to rations, gas cylinders, government schemes and to exercise the right to vote.
 - It is essential to possess these documents every time, not just during the pandemic.
- In order to have subsidized foodgrains, one must show the BPL card at the ration shop, and in order to avail the benefits of the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) community-specific services, it is essential to show a caste certificate.
- Availing such identity documents is a difficult and time-consuming task for most of the citizens in cities across the country, let alone the urban poor.
- There are various complexities involved in this process and on top of that, there is no provision of a standard or universal BPL/ration card which implies that when people migrate to new states, they find it difficult to avail the benefits of welfare schemes such as PDS.

- This situation was witnessed by a lot of migrants during the lockdown period when relying on such schemes was the only way for them to survive.
- This has contributed to the tragic reverse migration India has witnessed over the last months.
- The proposal of the [“One Nation, One Ration Card” scheme](#) is a most celebrated step. This scheme will be fully implemented by March 2021 across the country and under this, citizens will be allowed to avail the benefits of PDS from any fair price shop in the country rather than only in their assigned locality. Nevertheless, the initial process of getting the ration card is still an issue.
- It is high time we have hyperlocal, central points for the management and administration of these documents in all cities across India. Karnataka is a limited example of this management system.
- Karnataka has introduced an integrated citizen service project named Karnataka One and it functions both online and offline in 17 cities across the country.
- In Bengaluru, there are 146 government-owned centres named Bangalore One centre, and 32 centres are managed by franchisees, which are connected to the city.
- The lowest political unit of cities are wards that cover a population between approximately 10,000 and 1,00,000 people each.
- Each ward is required to have a designated ward office in cities across the country which functions as a source of information regarding the schemes of the government available to the citizens.
- It will also give access points to the municipality as well as to the government departments starting with the identity documents.

Penetration of Identity Cards

- As part of a current research being conducted on the delivery of public services, such as electricity, water, sanitation, and roads in 17 cities across the country, data were collected on a host of identity documents' availing and possession.
- The data shows that the penetration of most of these identity cards for the urban poor is less in comparison to the others.
- For example, in Hyderabad, penetration of Aadhar cards and voter ID cards for people living in informal settlements show the lowest figures.
- Without an Aadhar card or ration card, the chances of getting other significant identity documents such as a BPL card or caste certificate are also reduced because Aadhar cards or ration cards are often required to avail other documents.
- Sometimes, it becomes mandatory to show a BPL card to get the caste certificate. Hence, it becomes difficult to understand the sequence of the cards and where to apply for each card.
- Many welfare schemes of the government such as [Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana](#), Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana, are linked to the caste certificate and the BPL card.
- The need for one card to get another card leads to a domino effect and this is supported by the data collected on citizens living in the informal settlements that show that they do not possess a BPL card or caste certificate in comparison to other identity cards.

- The study found that access to a caste certificate is relatively low across all the cities for citizens belonging to SC, ST, and OBC categories but, Kochi and Mumbai are amongst the top.

Difficulties of Accessing Cards

- At present in India, there is no standard procedure for availing the basic services. It becomes difficult for the citizens to get the specific identity card because of its linkage with some other cards.
- Hence, it creates a web of issues for citizens such as understanding which card to apply first, followed by the process of application in each case.
- The processes and access centres also vary from state to state. For example, in Maharashtra, 12 types of documents apart from the ID card and address proof are required to avail of the caste certificate.
- The citizens are also required to visit different offices for different procedures multiple times and these offices are often located in different parts of the city.
- The opportunity cost of time and cost for daily wage workers is very high.
- According to the survey by Lokniti–Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), 46% of the total population finds it difficult to avail identity cards such as passport, ration card, voter ID card, etc.
- If we look at the data on the urban poor living in slum areas, 43% find it difficult to get the identity cards while according to 20%, it is a very difficult task which is greater in comparison to the people living in non-slum areas (34% in the difficult category and 13% in the very difficult category).

Bypassing the System

- In addition to the offline option of availing the identity card which requires a visit to relevant offices, there is an online option also in some states. Although, it is evident from the data that people don't go through such options.
- They generally prefer to approach an elected representative, most notably the local corporator or in some instances, a member of the legislative assembly (MLA) to get these identity cards.
- Mumbai and Hyderabad are amongst the top where this approach is most prevalent.
- Looking at the complexities involved in getting the identity documents, it is not a surprising fact that people opt for approaching the elected representatives to obtain the documents.
- However, for such individual bureaucratic applications to require handling/intermediation by elected representatives is simply inefficient and unnecessary for both the citizens availing these cards and the elected representatives.

The Way Forward

- As Covid-19 has highlighted, there is inequitable access to services in infrastructure for people in different parts of the country. Simplifying the procedure by providing local access points to issue identity cards is a critical step towards more equitable infrastructure and service delivery.
 - To ensure more equitable delivery of services there is a need for stronger ward-level governance. For example: In Bengaluru, when the lockdown was imposed, community groups stepped in to identify and locate migrants and those in need to facilitate access to basic services.
 - A ward secretariat scheme has been launched in Andhra Pradesh, in which a ward secretariat takes care of the municipal services at the ward level.
 - There is a need to look into the effectiveness of such a scheme and consider extending it into even the next unit within a ward i.e. polling booth.
-

