

Gist of EPW March Week 4, 2021

The Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) is an important source of study material for [IAS](#), especially for the current affairs segment. In this section, we give you the gist of the EPW magazine every week. The important topics covered in the weekly are analysed and explained in a simple language, all from a [UPSC](#) perspective.

Roll Out a Universal Public Distribution System

Context:

The article highlights the problems with the present [PDS](#) and provides an insight into the possible solution.

Introduction:

- A [Public Interest Litigation](#) that alleged the cancellation of nearly 3 crore ration cards due to their linking with Aadhaar numbers, has brought into focus major issues related to the Public Distribution System.
- It is argued by the petitioners that the exclusion of the poor on such a large scale due to the insistence on the use of Aadhaar identities for biometric verification, which often fails due to bad internet connections in rural and remote areas, is questionable.

Public Distribution System and the Problem of Exclusion:

- The problem of exclusion has been increasing with programs like the Targeted Public Food Distribution System and the Antyodaya Anna Yojana.
- The Targeted Public Food Distribution System in 1997 segregated beneficiaries into those below the poverty line (BPL), with larger entitlements of grain and subsidies, and those above the poverty line (APL), who were required to pay the economic cost of the grain.
- The Antyodaya Anna Yojana resulted in higher grain allocations and larger subsidies for the poorest households.
- The PDS and TPDS control orders of 2001 and 2015 stipulated an annual review of beneficiary lists by the states to ensure the exclusion of ineligible beneficiaries and include eligible ones.
- This led to the deletion of a total of 4.39 crore ration cards between 2013 and 2020, and 17.7 lakh cards were deleted despite the pandemic, in 2020.

Seeding of Aadhaar Numbers in the PDS:

- The seeding of Aadhaar numbers in the ration card database has added to the problems.

- The central government refutes the Aadhaar seeding as a reason for such large-scale deletion of ration cards pointing to the data of the period between 2006-2015, much before the Aadhaar-seeding period.
 - During the period of 2006-2015, the number of ration cards deleted was 4.95 crore.
- There is a major loophole in the [NFSA](#) (National Food Security Act) as well, which raises some concerns regarding the present PDS.
- The beneficiaries in the PDS are decided on the basis of the last published census numbers.
- NFSA limits the coverage of PDS to a ratio of the last published census data, effectively freezing the number of PDS beneficiaries for a 10-year period.
- It locks out the additional population till the publication of the next census a decade or more later.
- Such provisions have resulted in a shrinkage in the number of ration cards issued, with their numbers going down marginally by 45.6 lakh, from 24 crores in 2011 to 23.54 crore by September 2020.

Redressal Mechanism and Limitations:

- There can be government bias in favouring particular regions, communities, or groups, especially when the demand for subsidized grain exceeds the state quotas.
- The current redressal machinery is a part of the state machinery that also selects beneficiaries, and may not always be in a position to correct inclusion and exclusion biases.
- An independent redressal mechanism completely segregated from the state machinery identifying PDS beneficiaries can ensure more transparency and correct local selection biases.

Universal PDS:

- The illegal deletion of ration cards and the decade-long delay in enrolling new beneficiaries could be resolved with a universal PDS.
- Universal PDS would be accessible for the whole population, with larger quantities of grain and subsidies for those below the poverty line.
- A universal PDS will offer procurement of grains at [Minimum Support Prices](#) extending a better price to the farmers.

Conclusion:

- The current PDS has several issues which seem to be a combination of the loopholes in NFSA and Aadhaar seeding.
- The continuous questions and PIL by activists do have some gravity as they highlight the limitations of the present PDS.
- A universal PDS looks promising as it could eliminate the issues of NFSA and Aadhaar number, simultaneously.

