

The Obscenity of Hunger Deaths*

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There is no doubt that human life is cheap in India, perhaps more so now than ever before. The attacks, atrocities and killings of people from minorities and marginalised groups that have now become so common are particularly appalling because they reflect a culture of impunity. Indeed, the lack of punishment does more than embolden the perpetrators and those who would imitate them: it also points to a deadening of sensibilities not just among those in power but in society as a whole. The murder of innocents is no longer even a cause for much outrage; the horrifying proliferation of such actions begins to deaden the collective soul, until we do not even register some of these as the blatant and unforgivable acts of slaughter that they are.

This growing apathy, this inability to be shocked or horrified, is not only confined to those looking away from migrant workers being hacked and then burnt alive, or young boys being hurled from moving trains, or people just transporting cattle being lynched. It is even more evident when it comes to recognising deaths of people who have been denied their rightful basic food entitlements.

In recent months, we have already had several cases of the deaths of very poor people who have not received their food rations because of the implementation of Aadhaar-Based Biometric Authentication system. The stories are horrifying and painful. They range from the tragic death of the 11 year old girl in Jharkhand who died crying out for rice when she and her family had not eaten for several days; to the rickshaw puller in Dhanbad whose family lost the ration card after the death of his elder brother and so did not get food rations for several months; to the woman in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh whose family says she died of starvation after being denied food rations as the dealer refused to provide grain until she herself to give in her fingerprints despite being ill; to the Dalit brothers in Karnataka who were denied food rations for six months because they did not have a ration card.

In all these cases, the reactions of local and state-level officialdom have been if possible even more shocking than these terrible incidents. The attempt is first to attribute the death to some disease

After a temporary outcry, the news of one such incident is quickly taken over by news of several more, until we grow used to these and even seek to excuse them as the inevitable collateral damage of the current system of “governance” that has unilaterally decided on the primacy and infallibility of this particular system. The mainstream media, meanwhile, is too busy getting outraged about what one politician may or may not have said about another leader, to focus attention or time on such a paltry matter as yet another death of another hungry person.

But make no mistake: this is murder. And all those who are involved in the complicated legal and regulatory actions that have denied people their right to food and therefore life, are complicit in such murder.

It matters not whether officialdom seeks to blame the deaths of such people on “illness” or some other such cause. Starvation need not always be the direct killer; medically, hunger weakens the body such that illnesses can take over. The point is

that these were all very poor people, and they could not get what they are rightfully entitled to under the National Food Security Act in the form of basic food rations, because the government had imposed restrictions in the form of biometric authentication and Aadhaar-seeding of all ration cards.

In the state of Jharkhand, for example, the Aadhaar-based authentication system was made compulsory for the issue of foodgrains in August 2016, and is now operational in around four-fifths of the ration shops in the state. Later it went even further and ordered the cancellation of all ration cards that had not been “seeded”, or linked with Aadhaar, along with some other states like Rajasthan and Karnataka. This has led to the loss of ration cards for lakhs of families across these states. Even the central government’s Department of Food and Consumer Affairs issued a notification on 8 February 2017, requiring individual beneficiaries having ration cards under NFSA “to furnish proof of possession of Aadhaar number or undergo Aadhaar authentication to receive subsidies under NFSA”, and required all beneficiaries to apply for Aadhaar numbers by 30 June 2017. Note that this order was issued even as the court proceedings on the Aadhaar Act and on the right to privacy were still very much ongoing.

The government has claimed delightedly that this had meant that there has been a massive “savings” or reduction in the amount spent on food subsidy as a result – and this false belief is echoed by various others who believe that any reduction in the expenditure on NFSA is a cause for celebration, regardless of the nature of exclusion and its implications. But in fact, the costs of this supposed saving are hard to estimate or compare, since they are measured in lives, and in denial of access to food of some of the most vulnerable people in society, precisely those whom it most behoves the government to protect.

For example, surveys undertaken in Ranchi district alone have found that since January 2017 around 20 per cent of those households with ration cards had been unable to access their food rations, because of the failure of the biometric authentication system. State-wide, that would amount to around one million households being deprived of their food rations. Typically, those excluded are those who are the most in need of it, as the surveys found: widows living alone, elderly couples, families in remote areas with poor transport and communication links. Investigations by journalists have found many other examples of some of the poorest and most deprived families being hit by his requirement and losing out on their rations, either because they are unaware of the requirement, or because they have not been able to have the card made or because the biometric tests have failed (a very common feature for manual workers and elderly people, whose fingerprints do not remain exactly the same) or some other reason beyond their control.

Just consider the many hoops that now have to be jumped through by the poor in India, simply to receive the food rations that are their basic entitlements under the NFSA. The household and all its members should enrol for Aadhaar and have proof of their application. The biometric data must be correctly recorded and the data inserted into the Aadhaar card should contain no mistakes. (This, incidentally is not as simple as it sounds. In the case of this writer’s own mother who is 89 years old, the UIDAI authorities misspelled her name twice and put incorrect details into the Aadhaar card through sloppy typing, and it took months of effort to get the mistakes corrected. If this can happen in the capital city of Delhi to the widow of a former senior

government official, imagine what happens across the country to less privileged people.) The Aadhaar numbers must then be seeded into their ration cards.

Then comes the actual purchase of the food grain at the ration shop. For this to occur, the authentication process requires power supply, a functional Point of Sale machine, mobile and internet connectivity, the servers of the State and Central Data Repository to be functioning and easy to access, and the fingerprint verification to be successful. Any one of these steps failing means that the person – and the household – are denied their food rations.

Apart from these technical glitches that can prevent people from getting their entitlements, other machine or human errors can result in people being deprived. There was a reported case, again in Jharkhand, of a 64-year-old woman who died of hunger and exhaustion after the Aadhaar-based payment system had mistakenly mixed her details with someone else's so that she was not only denied her rations but her pension payment was redirected to another person's account without her knowledge.

This central government's own official Economic Survey 2016-17, Volume I noted that the exclusion error (or share of the targeted population that did not receive benefits) in the Public Distribution System for food was as high as 40 per cent. In other words, nearly half of those who deserve to receive food rations according to the government's own very stringent criteria, did not receive it. Imagine how much worse the situation will be now that the process of getting food rations has been made so much more difficult for the poor in particular.

According to the Economic Survey, leakages from the system, which are presumably what the Aadhaar based system seeks to plug, were reportedly less, at around 34 per cent. But ironically, these leakages are not controlled by the Aadhaar based delivery system, since most of such leakages come from quantity fraud, whereby the quantities sold to people are less than their entitlement, and the rest are siphoned off for sale elsewhere. Some techniques like computerised weighing systems have been found to be effective in limiting such fraud in states like Chhattisgarh – but these require systems to monitor the transport and the sale of grain, not systems that put the onus on the recipients and punish them for any mistakes.

The fact that the central government and some state governments can continue to insist on a system that has so many flaws and so many dire implications for people is bad enough. What may be even worse is that the rest of us – the media, the judiciary, society in general – by allowing this to happen, are complicit in this injustice and in causing these unnecessary tragedies.

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