

Death by Digital Exclusion- on faulty public distribution system in Jharkhand

The story deals with how the Government of Jharkhand insistence on digitization deprived the people living on the edge from the benefits of the public distribution system. In an attempt to plug in the leakages in the PDS the State government decided that all the ration cards should be linked to Aadhar. Beneficiaries who could not link their ration card with Aadhar or had no Aadhar cards their names were struck off and were denied ration. For ration dealers a new concept of Point of Sale (POS) machine was introduced where PDS will be released to beneficiaries after details were entered into the system. The phenomenon led to huge distress among a section of tribal population who were denied of the benefits. While there were reports of deaths due to malnutrition the State government not only denied those reports, no follow up was done to ensure that the families who have alleged malnutrition deaths are brought under the system. The report makes a detailed attempt to look at how digital push had an impact of the population. In families or neighbourhood where deaths due to malnutrition have been reported there was hardly any follow up by the government. What is interesting that there has been admission by the government about the distress on ground but the situation on ground remained the same. The story is based on detailed fieldwork on the ground, visits to several districts where the denial of PDS benefits came to fore, also has versions from Right to Food activist and the State government.

Death by digital exclusion? : on faulty public distribution system in Jharkhand



Kunti Nagasia and her son Rinku Nagasia live in abject poverty in Mahuadanr block of Latehar district, Jharkhand. The family has no ration card and is surviving with the help of neighbours. (Below) Family members of Santoshi Kumari, 11, who died of starvation after her family ration card was deleted for not being linked to Aadhaar. The family members show ration cards given to them under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana. | Photo Credit: Manob Chowdhury

Many in Jharkhand have been denied food under the public distribution system as their ration cards have been cancelled in the mad rush for putting in place a digital system. While activists claim that some have died from starvation, the government denies this. Shiv Sahay Singh reports on the faulty PDS

A few weeks before Kaleshwar Soren, 45, died, he sold the last of his belongings, a Palash tree, for one and a half kg of rice. His ration card was cancelled in 2016 for reasons that are still not clear. As a result, the tribal had not received any foodgrain under the public distribution system (PDS) since then. Human rights activists claim that Soren, from Mahuadanr village in Dumka district of Jharkhand, died of starvation on November 11, 2018. The government denies this.

Jian Kisku and his wife Rasodi Hembram live in similar conditions next door. The couple has no ration card and has not received any foodgrain under the PDS. A few days ago, they sold a chicken that was bred in their backyard to buy 5 kg of rice, which they ate with the paste of a wild fruit. There is no telling where the next meal will come from.

Soren, Kisku and Hembram had 'priority household' cards that were later cancelled. Under the National Food Security Act, 2013, the PDS ensures 5 kg of foodgrain per person per month to those who hold these cards. Antyodaya families, or the poorest of the poor, are entitled to 35 kg of foodgrain per family per month under the Act.

These people are not exceptions. There are dozens in the village who claim that they are not receiving foodgrain under the PDS. Others who do receive foodgrain don't have a ration card; they have a ration card number scribbled on a piece of paper. It is on the basis of this that they get their foodgrain.

A cruel joke

Mahuadanr is a remote tribal village about 300 km from Ranchi, Jharkhand's capital. The market closest to the village is a few km away in Lakadchowk, where the centre of attraction on a rain-swept afternoon is a giant LED screen mounted on a truck. The screen runs small video clips in the local language as well as in Hindi on how the "double engine growth" of the Narendra Modi government at the Centre and the Raghubar Das government in the State has taken Jharkhand to new heights.

Two days before Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit here to participate in International Yoga Day celebrations, hundreds of people gather in front of the screen to listen to how the Centre's Ayush and Yoga programmes can cure ailments. While people enjoy the spectacle, they don't appear to be interested in the message. Men drink hadia, the local liquor made of rice sold by over a dozen women who have brought the drink in plastic containers. While there are video clips on several schemes of the State government, including one to set up a tribal museum dedicated to tribal freedom fighter Birsa Munda, there is no video on the PDS, a lifeline for the tribals who comprise 26% of the population in the State. It seems like a cruel joke to them.

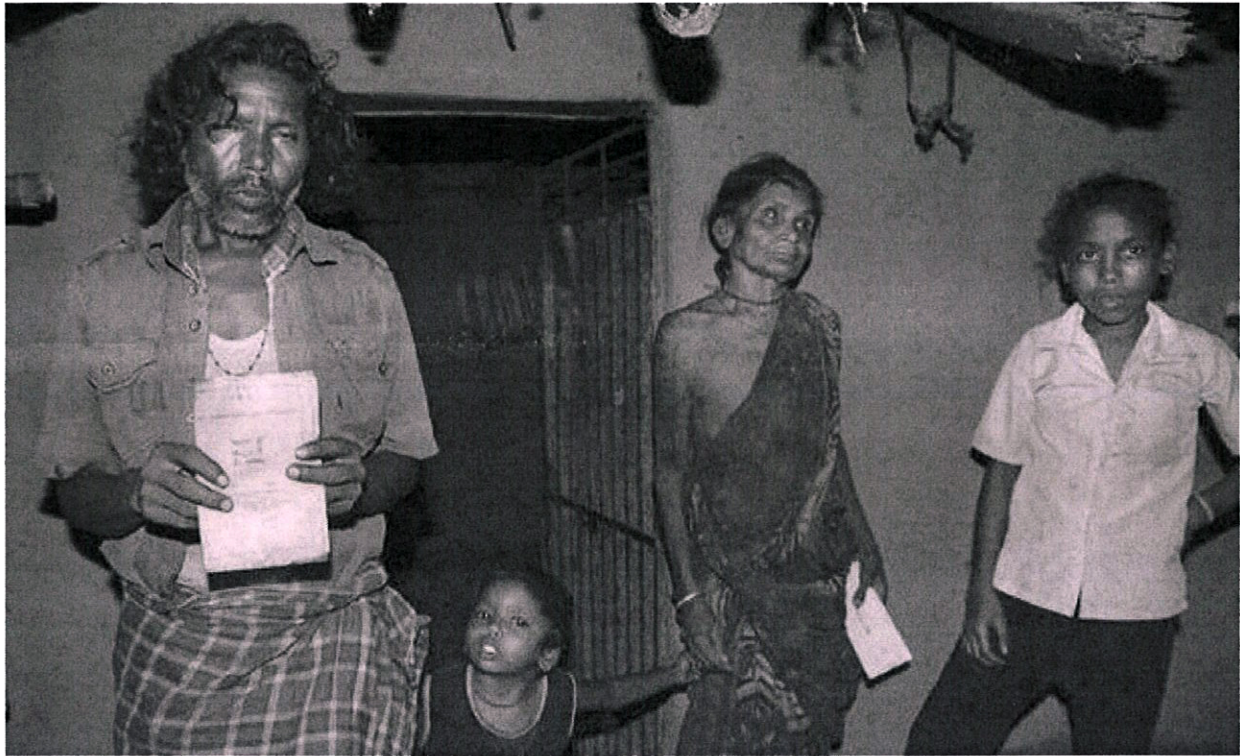
Right to Food activists in Jharkhand have listed in detail 20 deaths between September 2017 and June 2019 due to hunger and malnutrition because of alleged irregularities in the PDS and a few due to denial of social security pensions. The irregularities are manifold. From the deletion of ration cards to the problems in linking ration cards to Aadhaar, the system seems to create more problems than it solves, excluding many families rather than including them. Many activists also point out that the Socio-Economic and Caste Census of 2011, which helps identify PDS beneficiaries, is faulty and outdated.

The last in the series of deaths compiled by the activists was from Latehar district, where Ramcharan Munda, 65, died on June 6, 2019. While the administration is still investigating how Munda died, everyone including the ration dealer admits that ration was not delivered to Munda's village for several months. The curious case of non-delivery of foodgrain is what ails the PDS in one of the poorest States of the country.

Problems without Internet

For obtaining foodgrain and other essentials through the PDS in Jharkhand, a beneficiary has to meet several criteria. First, the family needs a ration card. Then they need to have Aadhaar cards. Next, the ration cards and Aadhaar numbers have to be linked. But it doesn't end there. In a majority of the ration shops of the State, delivery is through an electronic point of sale (EPOS) machine. It is through this machine that the biometrics of a beneficiary, mostly thumb impressions, have to be entered and verified from the server database. The EPOS machine works only if it is connected to the Internet. If the beneficiaries face no hiccups in any of these stages, they get their quota of foodgrain.

Something or the other can go wrong in any of these stages. In Lurgumikala village, for instance, the Internet failed. Due to irregular connectivity, the ration dealers of Mahuadanr block of Latehar began distributing ration offline — they made entries in a notebook or register after the ration was handed over to the beneficiary. Problems arose when the ration dealer, Ramrudra Prasad, 68, died and his job was transferred to his wife Manju Devi. This transfer somehow turned the system from offline to online. This meant that the dealer was required to distribute foodgrain by keeping the EPOS machine online and record the biometrics of every beneficiary. As there was no connectivity even after her husband's death and the EPOS machine would not work, for months Manju Devi collected foodgrain from the warehouse but did not distribute it. The foodgrain remained undelivered.



Ration dealers of the block say they have to feed all the information into the EPOS machine offline and then wait for Internet service to upload the data online. The senior-most ration dealer of the block, Ramdutt Prasad, says he sends his son to the adjoining district of Simdega to upload the data. “Unless we upload the data we will not get foodgrain for the next month. Moreover the SIM in the EPOS machine is 2G, whereas we have 4G facility on our phone,” he says.

The Internet problem in Latehar not only confuses ration dealers but also district officials. At the office of the District Collector, a young employee of a major hospital chain is struggling to write an application in Hindi. He is working on a pilot project on telemedicine in Latehar, but bad connectivity is posing some serious problems for him.

The District Collector, Rajeev Kumar, says there are several areas in the district, including blocks like Mahuadanr, Barwadih and Latehar, where connectivity is a major issue. Of the 592 ration dealers in the district, about 328 are distributing foodgrain offline. “But I cannot say that leakages will stop if the online system is fully functional,” he says. “Even if someone uses his thumb and gets 2 kg of rice instead of 5 kg, what can you do?”

Jharkhand’s Food and Supplies Minister Saryu Roy admits that the reports of deaths due to irregularities in the PDS are presenting the State in bad light, but says there is no going back on the online distribution of foodgrain. “There is no point in going back to the earlier system. If we go back, it will be regressive. What we can do to is to bring improvements in the existing system,” he says.

To prevent deaths caused by irregularities in the PDS, some steps have been taken. Every ration dealer has been provided with an 'exception register' through which he can provide foodgrain to those whose names are not in the system. A protocol has been put in place to investigate the hunger deaths. This requires the district surgeon, the district supplies officer and any representative appointed by the District Collector to determine the cause of death.

A lab for experiments

At his residence in Ranchi, the Minister blames the overenthusiasm of bureaucrats for the "slippages" and "glitches" in PDS distribution. Roy refers to an order passed by a Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) of Chatrapur earlier in the day. The SDO had said that families not using the toilets built under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan programme would not get foodgrain under the PDS. Things took a turn for the worse, he says, when former Chief Secretary of Jharkhand, Rajbala Verma, in a video conference on March 27, 2017, directed that ration cards that were not linked to Aadhaar be cancelled.

Roy does not directly answer why Jharkhand has turned into a lab for all these digital experiments. He goes on to talk about another pilot project, Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), in which money was being transferred directly to the bank accounts of PDS beneficiaries to enable them to buy ration. The project has been stopped, because that too came with many problems. The DBT scheme was tried at Nagri in Ranchi where about 12,000 people across 13 Panchayats received money to buy rations. Other than connectivity issues and money not landing in accounts on time, the DBT made things more complicated. Roy says: "While it took one day for a beneficiary to get foodgrain earlier, under the DBT the PDS beneficiary had to go to the bank, collect money, and then buy rations from the PDS dealer." After nearly a year of protests by people and Right to Food activists, the Jharkhand government finally decided to roll back the DBT scheme in October 2018.

A government in denial

While the government remains in denial about the deaths highlighted by Right to Food activists, the Minister admits that Santoshi Kumar, 11, died because her family ration card was deleted for not being linked to Aadhaar. Taramani Sahu, a foot soldier of the Right to Food Campaign, says she had raised this issue with the district authorities months before Santoshi died. The administration assured intervention, but that came only after the child's death. Twenty months after Santoshi died in Karimati village, her family has ration cards under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) scheme, which means that they are entitled to 35 kg of foodgrain a month.

Again, it was only because activists intervened that Koyli Devi got a shed built for rearing goats. Despite having a MGNREGA card, Koyli Devi has not got any work under the scheme. She works at a construction site at a nearby market. A Panchayat functionary says

she has not applied for work under MGNREGA. The distress emerging out of patchy PDS distribution in the State is further compounded by poor implementation of 100 days of work guaranteed under MGNREGA.

A report sent by the Jharkhand government to the Director of MGNREGA at the Centre looks at 18 cases of alleged hunger deaths between 2017 and 2018. While there is no mention of whether the families got jobs under the rural job guarantee scheme, the document dated December 26, 2018, has one concluding sentence at the end of each of the 18 cases: “In this case the death does not appear to be linked with MGNREGA”. The same report rejects hunger deaths in all 18 cases. While in the case of Santoshi the report points out that her death was due to an illness, in case of Soren it refers to a knee injury that occurred due to a fall he had almost two years before his death.

While in Santoshi’s case the administration has ensured ration cards to the family, in several cases where similar allegations have surfaced, the families are yet to be enrolled in the PDS. For instance, Budhni Birajia of Amaotoli village in Mahuadanr block of Latehar district died on January 1, 2019. The family, which belongs to a particularly vulnerable tribal group and maintains that there was no food when she died, still does not have a ration card. Sanchi Birajia, Budhni’s daughter-in-law who has to feed a family of five, says that the local ration dealer has spared a few kg of rice for her. In cases where the local dealers feel that denial of ration can lead to starvation, they spare a few kg of foodgrain to those who are not enlisted as PDS beneficiaries.

Siraj Dutta, a prominent face of the Right to Food campaign in Jharkhand, says that of the 20 who died, 11 were Adivasis and four were Dalits. Eleven of the deceased were women. In 13 cases, the inability to link Aadhaar to ration cards led to the denial of entitlements. Dutta says all the experimentation with the PDS in Jharkhand is aimed at doing away with “identity fraud”, but studies from 2016 have shown that most of the leakages are “quantity fraud”. Dutta and other activists claim that over 10 lakh ration cards were cancelled in the State when ration cards were linked to Aadhaar.

Abject poverty

Balram, a Right to Food activist, says, “Even if the digitisation is perfect and all the ration cards are linked with Aadhaar and all the EPOS machines are connected to the Internet, there will be many exclusions as the baseline data on which the ration cards have been issued are not correct.” Given the debate around whether or not these deaths were linked to starvation, he points to the fact that a large number of people live in chronic hunger.

Balram’s words ring true in different parts of State where people living in distress claim they do not have ration cards and are not getting foodgrain under the PDS. The argument of district collectors and officials is that the National Food Security Act only permits 80% of

the population to be covered under the Act, 86% in rural areas and 62% in urban areas, and unless bogus ration cards are removed from the system, no new cards can be issued.

Not far from Budhni Birajia's house lives Kunti Nagasia with her son Rinku Nagasia. Rinku, who is about 10 years old, is the only earning member of the family. He gets ₹20 a day from doing odd jobs in the village. The family has no ration card. For years, they have not been getting any foodgrain under the PDS. Afsana Khatun, a volunteer with the Right to Food campaign, has raised the plight of the family with authorities and has also arranged for some medical help. Kunti has recently returned from a State-run hospital where she was undergoing treatment for tuberculosis. Rinku has also been diagnosed with the same disease. A peek into the single room hut reveals that the family is battling abject poverty. Two or three utensils and a few rags are all they own.

Kunti hurriedly points at a plastic gunny bag kept hidden under the rags. The bag contains rice. As in the case of Budhni's family, the ration dealer has been kind to spare a few kg of rice to Kunti's family as well. The neighbours have also been kind and given her four raw mangoes and half a kg of rice.

"Who will give us anything after this ends? We will eat it slowly," Kunti says. Kunti and Rinku cannot recall the last time they had eaten dal. They turn silent when asked about vegetables. For as long as they can remember, their meal has consisted of rice and salt. "If they die tomorrow, will you say that they died of TB or hunger," Afsana asks.