York Centre for Asian Research

Asia Research Brief

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Digitizing Ration Cards: Curbing Corruption or Securing Food Security for All?

In 2013, the president of India, Pranab Mukherjee, ratified the National Food Security Act (NFSA), which enshrines in the Indian Constitution the state's roles and functions in ensuring food security. The NFSA emerged after more than a decade of democratic debates on the topic. This legislation was drafted as a set of four programs designed to help people combat chronic hunger on their own: a school lunch program, maternity entitlements, the provision of daily meals for children aged 0-6 years old and their mothers, and the monthly distribution of food entitlements to two thirds of the Indian population—800 million people.

To curb corruption, one of the NFSA's key directives was the overhaul the country's rationing infrastructure, known as the targeted public distribution system (TPDS). Since the Second World War, this system has distributed monthly entitlements of food rations to poor households across the country. However, practices of corruption and bureaucratic apathy have historically crippled the state's ability to allocate monthly rations to the rightful recipients. The NFSA gave decision-makers an opportunity to modernize the TPDS and digitize the ration cards in order to better police practices of corruption and exert bureaucratic command over the distribution of food rations.

The digitization of ration cards has played a key role in governmental efforts to curb practices of corruption in the TPDS. In order to access food rations, eligible households must obtain ration cards and present them at points of ration distribution. These ration cards, previously made from paper, were redesigned as plastic documents that are much more difficult to counterfeit. The new cards are also embedded with a digital technology of authentication called *aadhaar* (foundation), which enables the state to crosscheck the cardholder's identity with an online database of fingerprints and other biometric information. Thus the new digitized ration cards enable greater bureaucratic surveillance over the governmental process.

Early on during my fieldwork in 2014–15, the Indian state deployed these digitized ration cards for the first time with the intent to render food welfare practices transparent and accountable. These digitized ration cards were designed to keep ration shop owners from doctoring their records and diverting subsidized food rations to the black market for profit. Later, the state implemented a pilot project in some ration shops where handheld machines were used to authenticate cardholders' identities. These machines were equipped with sensors that could read fingerprints and scan the aadhaar database of registered cardholders. In cases when these handheld machines could not positively link a ration cardholder's fingerprints to the database, that cardholder would be denied their rations.

Guillaume Dandurand photograph

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More often than not, linking the aadhaar technology with the digital ration cards works as planned: it allows ration shop owners to authenticate rightful cardholders and prevent the diversion of subsidized food rations. However, this technology of authentication does not always function as intended. More importantly, it has not secured access to all rightful cardholders. When people present fingertips that are injured, overworked, too small or otherwise atypical, the sensor cannot always produce an accurate reading of their fingerprints and therefore cannot always authenticate their identities. This is problematic, particularly since the poor populations that the NFSA targets are more prone than others to have unreadable fingertips. For instance, individuals engaged in manual labour put their hands at risk of injury and deformity. Young children are more likely than others to have fingerprints that are too small for the sensors, while elderly cardholders are at risk of having fingertips that are too worn to be read. For members of these populations, the new digital infrastructure has made accessing rations more difficult than it was prior to the NFSA.

My 17-month ethnographic work in Delhi led me to conclude that this technology of authentication has been primarily implemented to replace or constrain forms of human agency that are more likely to engage in corruption. In practice, however, the digitization of the TPDS and the ration cards does not secure access to rations for all the rightful recipients. The introduction of the aadhaar technology to the TPDS may have helped alleviate some corruption, but it has done so at the expense of members of the targeted population whose bodies do not perfectly fit the parametres of the aadhaar system.

Notes:
This line of argument was first published in 2019 in "When Biopolitics Turn Digital: Transparency, Corruption, and Erasures from the Infrastructure of Rationing in Delhi." *PoLAR: Political and Anthropology Review*, 42 (2): 268–282.