

2. A Hundred Small Steps

Context:

- ▶▶ The Ministry for Food and Public Distribution has commenced pilots of “**One Nation, One Ration Card**” between Maharashtra-Gujarat and Andhra-Telangana, and has committed to a **national rollout by June 30, 2020**.
- ▶▶ Families who have *food security cards* can buy subsidized rice and wheat from any ration shop in these states but their ration cards should be linked with Aadhar Number to avail this service.

What is PDS?

- ▶▶ The Public distribution system (PDS) is an Indian food Security System established under the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food, and Public Distribution.
- ▶▶ PDS evolved as a system of management of scarcity through distribution of food grains at affordable prices

Why this Scheme?

- ▶▶ The economic survey 2017 estimated that over nine million Indians change their state every year. For them, the “One Nation, One Ration Card” is a game changer because it makes their rations “portable”, allowing them to pick up food grains from any ration shop in the country.
- ▶▶ It also benefits non migrants by allowing them to transact at better-performing shops locally. This local “choice effect” is extremely popular in Andhra Pradesh, which has introduced such portability within the state since October 2015.
- ▶▶ Benefits: No poor person is deprived of getting subsidised food grains under the food security scheme when they shift from one place to another. It also aims to remove the chance of anyone holding more than one ration card to avail benefits from different states.

Why roll out of the scheme should be done with Utmost Caution?

- ▶▶ We must approach this bold vision with utmost caution because PDS is a crucial lifeline for many of the 800 million Indians it reaches. It provides them with at least 5 kg of grain per person per month, equivalent to 25 per cent of an individual’s recommended calorie intake.
- ▶▶ Even well-intentioned changes that shock the system can therefore have potentially catastrophic outcomes for some.

- ▶▶ In 2017, it was reported that a 11-year old Dalit girl named Santoshi Kumari from Jharkhand died when her family was unable to access rations in the aftermath of large-scale revisions in the beneficiary list. Over 18 starvation deaths have been reported in the state since September 2017.
- ▶▶ Such tragedies must be prevented at all costs and we should therefore be cautious while restructuring the program.

What Needs to be done for effective roll out the Scheme?

- ▶▶ Three considerations are important to keep in mind while thinking about the “One Nation, One Ration Card” initiative:

1. Redesigning the Fundamentals:

- ▶▶ The fundamental processes related to the PDS need to be redesigned to empower every individual. The State of Aadhar Survey 2017-18 found that nearly 6.5 per cent of PDS beneficiaries in Rajasthan were denied ration because the shop owner claimed to be out of food grain. This translates to over 3.5 million people in Rajasthan alone.
- ▶▶ A beneficiary has no mechanism to question whether the shop owner is telling the truth or diverting rations. Portability and biometrics will not solve this problem completely.
- ▶▶ Portability in Andhra Pradesh does well because it exists in an environment of accountability of ration shops. The state government collects feedback in real time through a mobile-based system. The central government should use this opportunity to make PDS more user-centric. It should track denial of service on a real-time basis through mobile-based surveys. It should enable beneficiaries to track the amount of food at nearby ration shops using their mobile phones.

2. Leveraging Portability:

- ▶▶ Second, **the operational backbone of the PDS needs to be restructured to promote portability.** The system should enable real time tracking of inventories and rapid response to low stock situations.

3. Addressing Privacy and Exclusion Risks

- ▶▶ Thirdly, while leveraging the power of Aadhaar for PDS, the government should actively address privacy and exclusion risks that the use of Aadhaar and a centralised PDS platform can lead to.
- ▶▶ In early 2018, the UIDAI introduced privacy protecting features such as virtual ID and tokenisation. However, few actually use them. The government should enable every section of society to understand and use these features through both online and offline methods.

- ▶▶ The government should also acknowledge that authentication failures will happen in any biometric system. To prevent denial of service, the government should ensure availability of non-biometric means of authentication (such as OTP or PIN), as well as manual overrides.

Conclusion:

- ▶▶ The central government should try to adopt a patient path of “a hundred small steps” while implementing this vision.
- ▶▶ It should start by encouraging all states to roll out within-state portability. This will also increase their operational and technical capacity. Such a gradual rollout will prevent transition glitches.

