Data Systems in Welfare: Impact of the JAM Trinity on Pension & PDS in Odisha during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The study tries to understand the integration of data and digital systems in welfare delivery in Odisha.
It brings out the impact of digitalisation on beneficiaries through primary data collected in November 2020.
The study also delves into the impact of COVID-19, particularly on the lives of marginalised groups including women.
Fieldwork was undertaken in three panchayats of Bhawanipatna block of Kalahandi district, Odisha.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAY	Anatodaya Anna Yojana
AEPS	Aadhaar–enabled Payments System
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CSP	Consumer Service Point
DBT	Direct Benefit Transfer
EPIC	Electors Photo Identity Number
FPS	Fair Price Shop
HCM	Hot Cooked Meal
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Scheme
ILO	International Labour Organisation
JAM	Jan Dhan– Aadhaar– Mobile
MBPY	Madhu Babu Pension Yojana
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NFSA	National Food Security Act
NSAP	National Social Assistance Programme
PDS	Public Distribution System
PHH	Priority Household
PMGKAY	Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyana Anna Yojana
PMGKY	Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyana Yojana
PMJDY	Pradhan Mantri Jan DhanYojana
PMUY	Pradhan Mantri UjjawalaYojana
POS	Point of Sale
RTFWN	Right to Food and Work, West Bengal
SFSS	State Food Security Scheme
SSEPD	Social Security and Empowerment of People with Disability
THR	Take Home Ration
TPDS	Targeted Public Distribution System

1
COVID-19 Pandemic & Economic Distress: Increased Significance of Social Welfare Programmes

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated flaws in social institutions as never before – threatening food security, public health systems, and livelihood in the informal sector. At the time of writing this report, India is the second-worst affected country in the world with over 9.8 million confirmed cases and more than 1.4 hundred thousand deaths.[1] Unemployment has been increasing at an alarming rate, from 6.67 to 7 percent in October.[2]

The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) global wage report estimates the wage loss in the informal sector to be one of the sharpest in the world at 22.6 percent.[3] The report further estimates a wage-loss 63,550 crore INR in the informal sector, while the total estimated wage-loss in the economy was estimated at 86,448 crores INR. Informal sector workers bore the brunt of the economic slowdown, with the wage-loss in the formal sector at 3.6 percent.[4]

Following the national lockdown, many families belonging to low-income groups and daily wage earners found themselves stranded without money, food or credit from their employers. During the strict lockdown of the economy between March to June 2020 lakhs of migrants faced starvation in cities and walked back home. The government responded with some urgent measures, although inadequate.

To cope with the food and economic crisis the Government of India and state governments initiated several social protection schemes. In Odisha, The central government provided two kinds of support, cash transfer through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) MGNREGS, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) and Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUJ), advance release of pension in cash to existing beneficiaries and cash support of Rs. 1000. The Odisha government provided cash support of Rs. 1000 to ration card holding families. Beneficiaries of the Public Distribution System also received free-of-cost food grain under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana.

Table-1 enlists social welfare schemes aimed at providing food and cash support during the crisis triggered by COVID-19. It also includes the eligibility criteria to enroll for these schemes, which is similar to the requirements to access additional support during COVID-19.

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1 India: WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard. (n.d.). *https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/in*

2 Moneycontrol. (2020, November 06). Nearly 5.5 Lakh Jobs Lost In October 2020, First Sharp Spike In Jobless Rate Since Recovery Began In May: CMIE. *https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/economy/nearly-5-5-lakh-jobs-lost-in-october-2020-first-sharp-spike-in-jobless-rate-since-recovery-began-in-may-cmie-6076311.html*

3 Nahata, P. (2020, December 03). Wage Cuts For India's Informal Workers May Have Been Among The Sharpest: ILO Report. *https://www.bloombergquint.com/business/wage-cuts-for-indias-informal-workers-may-have-been-among-the-sharpest-ilo-report*

4 ibid

TABLE–1 COVID–19 ASSISTANCE AND JAM

GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE	BENEFICIARIES	DOCUMENTS
Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (5 KG food grain for every individual beneficiary and 1 kg daal for every family free of cost)	To all Ration Cardholders	Aadhaar and Ration card
Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (Cash support of Rs. 500 every month for three months)	To women Jan Dhan account holders	Aadhaar and a linked bank account
Advance payment of Social Security Pension Scheme	To all existing beneficiaries of the pension programme	Aadhaar
Wage increase under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee	All job card holders who working during a specific period	Job card, Aadhaar, and linked bank account
Cash benefit of Rs. 1000 for each family enrolled in the PDS	To all Ration card holder	Aadhaar seeded to the Ration card
Pradhan Mantri Ujjawala Yojana (Cash assistance for refilling of three cylinders)	All PMUY beneficiaries	Aadhaar and linked bank account
State food security scheme (5 KG of food grain for every individual and 1 kg daal for every family free–of–cost)	All state ration card holder	Ration card and linked Aadhaar
Home delivery of Hot Cooked Meal (HCM) in the form of dry ration such as rice, pulses, oil, condiments, salt, etc.	All pre-school beneficiaries	No documents required
Cash transfer against Mid-Day Meal	All students till elementary level in public and subsidised schools	Bank account

In spite of the announcement of multiple schemes, many marginalised people around the country faced starvation because of wage loss. Millions of households [5] remain excluded from the PDS due to a range of factors, including technical issues and poor grievance redressal.

Several people died as a result of starvation. One such case was of Dukhi Majhi, a single woman from a tribal community, allegedly due to chronic hunger. She was denied rice from the PDS due to non-seeding of the Aadhaar [6].

Despite ample evidence that making Aadhaar and other officials documents mandatory leads to the exclusion of eligible beneficiaries the government continued insisting on these requirements to access COVID-19 relief support. Table 1 clearly indicates that all schemes require the Aadhaar and a linked bank account, other than the initiatives under the Integrated Child Development Scheme. The tragic death of Dukhi Majhi points out how making certain documents like Aadhaar mandatory can lead to exclusion from critical welfare schemes.

Over the last couple of years, along with making the Aadhaar mandatory, the government has also been working towards linking mobile numbers and bank accounts of beneficiaries. An increasing number of schemes are shifting to Direct Benefit Transfer from in-kind or cash benefits – 324 schemes under 51 ministries of the Government of India. Such schemes are relying on the linkage of Jan Dhan accounts, the Aadhaar, and mobile numbers (the "JAM trinity") to facilitate access to Direct Benefit Transfers. The Economic Survey 2015-16 has pointed out that without improving mobile penetration and rural banking infrastructure making the JAM trinity mandatory would continue to lead to exclusions [7]. The issues with each of the components of the JAM trinity worsened during the COVID-19 crisis with restrictions on physical movement, difficulties in topping up mobile phone accounts, and enrolling for the Aadhaar or addressing other technical issues.

This report assesses the role of the data system in welfare delivery. It focuses on the impact of the three components of the JAM trinity – Jan Dhan Account, mobile numbers and the Aadhaar on Direct Benefit Transfer, social security pension and the Public Distribution System. The objective of this study is to understand the challenges faced by beneficiaries in accessing PDS and pension as a result of digitisation processes. This includes failures in Direct Benefit Transfers and exclusions from databases, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study focuses on gender as a key component shaping the impact of digitisation on beneficiaries. The sample includes both men and women beneficiaries in order to identify such gendered differences. It will also identify infrastructural constraints in Odisha that impact the implementation of digital systems in welfare. Also, it will analyse policy frameworks at central and state levels, to compare their discourse with the impact on the ground.

5 India Spend (2020, April 16) More than 100mn excluded from PDS as govt uses outdated Census 2011 data from *https://www.indiaspend.com/more-than-100mn-excluded-from-pds-as-govt-uses-outdated-census-2011-data/*

6 Rethink Aadhaar, (2020, July 15) Press Statement: Call for enquiry in to Aadhaar related starvation death in Odisha *https://rethinkaadhaar.in/blog/2020/7/14/press-statement-aadhaar-related-starvation-death-in-odisha*

7 Economic Survey 2015-16, Spreading JAM across India's economy *https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/budget2016-2017/es2015-16/echapvol1-03.pdf*

2
Datafication & Digitization of Welfare Schemes

2.1. "DIGITIZED" TARGETED PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEMS

The Supreme Court in 2011 directed state governments to computerize the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) on the recommendation of the Central Vigilance Committee chaired by Justice D.P. Wadhwa. This was one of the core reforms of the TDPS proposed under the National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA). The application of technological tools including end-to-end computerisation was prescribed to ensure transparency and prevent diversion of funds. Odisha initiated the pilot to digitize the beneficiary database in Balangir Block in 2011, even before the enactment of the NFSA. Under this pilot, the existing ration card database was mapped to the National Population Register list in order to de-duplicate and eliminate bogus cards, as well as to understand the extent of exclusion errors in the block.

Digitization of the Beneficiary Database: The process of digitization, which started with the implementation of the NFSA in 2015, is dynamic and continuous, aiming at accommodating updates and corrections in beneficiary data. A digitized database of all beneficiaries was created to ensure addition, deletion and modification in ration cards as and when required. During enrolment under the NFSA, each beneficiary submitted their information through a paper-based form, following which it is fed into the portal of the Food and Supply Department of the Government of Odisha to digitize beneficiaries' details. Laminated bar-coded ration cards were issued to each beneficiary after enrolment. Beneficiaries were required to submit their Electors Photo Identity Number (EPIC) number, Aadhaar Number, bank account details and mobile number but none of these were mandatory.

Automation of Fair Price Shops (FPS): The FPS serves as a focal point for PDS, and automation of transaction at FPS was meant to check leakages and ensure transparency. The Point of Sale (PoS) system enabled transaction and biometric authentication to identify beneficiaries was installed in all FPS in Odisha. In 2016, a Directive from the Food and Supply Department was issued mandating Aadhaar-based biometric authentication for distribution of food grain at all FPS [8]. By 2017, all FPS were using fingerprint scanners connected to e-PoS devices for this purpose, while some have also installed iris scanners.

Mandatory Aadhaar Seeding: The Aadhaar has been promoted as the single facilitating component to link various facets of the data system in the PDS. This includes digitization of the beneficiary database, automation of FPS and portability of beneficiary data under One Nation One Ration Card scheme. When the PDS was first being digitized in 2015, Aadhaar seeding with the ration card was not mandatory in Odisha. After the installation of the e-PoS, in 2019 all FPS were forced to adopt biometric authentication because Aadhaar seeding was made mandatory, In addition, beneficiaries were asked to submit their bank account details for enrollment. The integration of PDS and One Nation One Ration Card schemes by the Central government further pushed the Government of Odisha to ensure seeding of all beneficiaries. Those who were unable to complete seeding were deleted from the database as ineligible or fake beneficiaries. The last date set by the Government of Odisha for linking the Aadhaar with ration cards was 15 September 2019, after which almost 19 lakh beneficiaries were deleted from the PDS database on account of non-seeding.

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8 National Herald (2019, October 21) Aadhaar failure: Several thousands in three districts in Odisha denied ration for two months *https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/aadhaar-failure-35-people-in-three-districts-in-odisha-denied-ration-for-two-months*

2.2. DIGITISATION OF PENSION SCHEME

The digitisation of the pension scheme started in 2009 after the launch of the widow pension scheme, with the objective of increasing transparency and accountability. The National Informatics Centre was entrusted to carry out the digitisation process. Beneficiary details were made available online on the national [9] and state dashboards [10].

Key information captured about each beneficiary includes bank account details, post account details, and Aadhaar number and mobile number As per the state dashboard for Odisha, the database captures the bank account details of 26.63 percent beneficiaries and Aadhaar numbers of 85.8 percent beneficiaries of which 81.5 percent have already been verified. 21.32 percent beneficiaries have linked their Aadhaar with their bank account.

There is an additional process for people with physical and mental impairments. They are required to submit an online application for a disability ID [11] The submission of a mobile number is mandatory in this process.

The department has also initiated the online application [12] process for pensioners after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Eligible individuals for pension schemes are being encouraged to apply through the page. Each application for pension now has to be mandatorily filled up in the online portal by either the beneficiary or the department.

9 National Social Assistance Programme, National Dashboard of NSAP, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India
https://nsap.nic.in/nationalleveldashboardNew.do?methodName=nationalLevelInitial&val=temp&schemeCategory=ALL

10 National Social Assistance Programme State Dashboard for Odisha, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India
https://nsap.nic.in/statedashboard.do?method=showDashboarbPage&stateCode=24

11 Online Application Format for persons with disability, SSEPD department, Government of Odisha
https://ssepd.gov.in:8443/swp/applyFreshApplicationForOtherDisabledCandidates.htm?categoryOfBeneficiary=PWD

12 Online Application format for persons eligible for social security pension, SSEPD department, Government of Odisha
https://ssepd.gov.in:8443/swp/applyBeneficiaryApplication.htm?lang=en

3
Methodology

TABLE–2: SITES OF FIELD RESEARCH

GRAM PANCHAYAT	VILLAGE	DATE OF VISIT
Sagra	Sargriguda Dakibundel	1st December 2020
Chacher	Padangguda Pidingguda Gudang	2nd December 2020
Talbelgaon	Khutruguda Karndihaper Talbelgaon Budhipader	3rd December 2020

The study used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gather empirical data on the impact of various policy measures, especially those initiated by the government of Odisha, that aim to integrate data systems into welfare programmes. It also documents the efforts of civil society groups in the state, especially the Odisha chapter of the Right to Food Campaign in highlighting these issues.

Between 15 to 16 November 2020, 3 semi-structured interviews and 1 focus group discussion were done in a slum in Bhubneshwar, "VIP Basti", as the pilot phase to test the questionnaire and assumptions made on the basis of the literature review. After making necessary changes in the questionnaire detailed semi-structured interviews were conducted in 9 villages of Bhawanipatna block of Kalahandi district in Odisha. where 30 personal interviews and 9 group discussions were undertaken.

Picture: Madna Majhi

Bhawanipatna was selected due to its remoteness and the availability of a local resource person. Three panchayats of Kalahandi's Bhawanipatna block were shortlisted for the study, in each panchayat; two to three villages were taken as a sample for the study. All three Panchayats were close to 15 kilometres from the district headquarter town.

Purposive sampling method was used for the collection of data. Eligibility criteria for selection of participants was as follows:

1. The participant should be the resident of a rural area.

2. They must be eligible for welfare schemes under focus.

3. They have been excluded from the government programme because of technical challenges.

Consent of all participants was taken for various stages of the study. The purpose of the study, format and interview guides were shared with all local resource persons, who accompanied the primary researcher to ensure that participants were informed of the purpose of the research in an accessible manner and were comfortable at the outset of each interview. The researcher also conducted one focus group discussion each in the nine villages that were included in the sample.

4
Impact of JAM Trinity on Welfare Schemes

This section examines the impact of the JAM trinity in welfare schemes especially the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, the Public Distribution System, and social security pension. For each scheme three broad categories will be addressed: coverage and access to schemes especially among women beneficiaries, digitisation of welfare delivery processes, and the role and impact of the JAM trinity in the same. The analysis is based on the data from the field survey.

4.1 DIRECT BENEFIT TRANSFER – PRADHAN MANTRI JAN DHAN YOJANA

According to the DBT [13] mission, direct benefit transfer to the bank account of beneficiaries, as opposed to cash support, was created to ensure simpler and faster transfer of funds and information and to ensure accurate targeting of beneficiaries, de-duplication and reduction of fraud. Nationally, DBTs were first started on 1st January 2013. The DBT mission attributed the Jan Dhan Account, the Aadhaar and mobile numbers as enablers of DBT. There are presently 32.41 crore Jan Dhan accounts, 100 crore mobile numbers and more than 100 crore Aadhaar registrations across India. There are 324 schemes that offer DBT under 51 ministries in the country. In case of Odisha [14] 28.88 lakh beneficiaries have benefitted through DBT under 67 schemes which are both central and state government sponsored schemes. A total sum of rupees 17,859 crore rupees transferred through DBT in the state.

However, PMJDY is the only scheme under the scope of the study which offered COVID-19 relief support of Rs. 500 per month to existing women beneficiaries between the months of April to June 2020. 20.5 crore women Jan Dhan account holders received support under the scheme. State-level data for Odisha is not available in public domain, although the government claims to be covering 99 percent of households [15].

4.1.1.BANKING PENETRATION AND CHALLENGES

The push towards financial inclusion of the rural population has thrown up multiple challenges in Odisha related to the banking sector. Half of the Panchayats in Odisha are unbanked, implying that no bank branches are present in that Panchayat area. This includes the three Panchayats [16] included in the study. However, two panchayats, Sagada and Chancher, have customer service points (CSP) of Utkal Gramin Bank, a nationalised rural bank.

Of the 33 persons interviewed in the study, 31 had at least one bank account. 11 respondents (all women) had a Jan Dhan bank account. Among the 11 PMJDY account holders only 6 received benefits under PMGKY (Rs. 500 per month between April to June 2020). 3 account holders hadn't received a single instalment and 2 respondents were unsure about whether they had received the payment.

13 Website of DBT mission, Government of India *https://dbtbharat.gov.in/page/frontcontentview/?id=MTc=*

14 Odisha page of the DBT portal *https://dbtbharat.gov.in/stateut/?sid=MjE=*

15 Website of PMJDY, state wise statistics *https://www.pmjdy.gov.in/statewise-statistics*

16 Information regarding brick and mortar branches and BC?CSP at GP level *https://slbcorissa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/TOTAL-6798-New-GP-171219.pdf*

Further, the group discussion revealed that most participants were unclear whether their bank account was a regular savings account or a Jan Dhan Account. This implied that they were unaware of whether or not they had received the DBT of Rs. 1500 extended by the central government during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Low levels of financial literacy thus obstructed access to DBTs.

4.1.2. MOBILE NUMBER AND AADHAAR LINKAGES WITH BANK ACCOUNT

To open a bank account, customers have to submit their Aadhaar details and address proof, along with their mobile number to be linked with the bank account. Out of the 33 households included in the study, only 16 had access to at least one mobile phone. 17 households did not have a mobile phone connection. Mobile phone access and literacy among women respondents was negligible — only one woman among those interviewed owned a personal mobile phone, and even then was unable to read or send SMSs.

Out of the 33 respondents, only 5 had their bank account linked with a mobile number. In all 5 cases, the number linked to their account was primarily operated by one of their family members. One respondent, Subhashree Majhi, informed us that the mobile number linked to the bank account had been deactivated. Across the 16 families who owned at least one mobile phone, 14 could read text messages but only in Odia. Most were unable to comprehend English which was the language of communication used by the banks. Across all mobile-owning families, the device was primarily operated by male members with very limited access for female members.

Picture: Subhashree Majhi

There were also instances of additional encumbrances being placed upon respondents with regards to their Aadhaar cards, making it more difficult for them to access their bank accounts. The focus group discussion further revealed that each time respondents visited the nearest bank branch, they were asked to submit a photocopy of their Aadhaar. They were never informed of the reasons behind why they were being asked to submit the same multiple times.

Case study 1: Subhashree Majhi is a 23-year-old woman, living in Talabelgaon village of Bhawanipatna block of Kalahandi district. She is an account holder in the Bhawanipatna branch of the Oriental Bank of Commerce since June 2018. At the time of opening her account, she had a mobile phone and number, using which she registered her account. As she couldn't afford to recharge her number regularly, her number became dysfunctional subsequently. Even after a year of her number being disconnected, it continues to be seeded with her bank account and the bank continues to charge her a fee for the SMS service. Given that the number could now be issued to a new customer, this places Subhashree at immense risk of losing her life's savings because of an error by the bank.

4.1.3. CHALLENGES FACED IN ACCESSING BANKING

Accessing banking facilities without incurring much cost and wage loss remains a distant dream for most people in rural India. On average, respondents had to travel around 10-15 KMs to access banking services. The average cost incurred for visiting the nearest bank branch was around Rs. 80-100 per person. Most respondents took almost a day on average to complete necessary transactions. Of the 31 respondents who had bank accounts, 26 had ever been to the bank to withdraw money, while had never withdrawn money.

None of the respondents had a functional debit card to use nearby ATMs. Only 2 of 33 respondents were issued an ATM/debit card by the bank. Even the two respondents who received the card were unable to activate it as they were never issued the necessary PIN code. During group discussions, many respondents revealed that bank employees demanded a bribe to issue PINs for activating ATM cards.

Women respondents faced additional challenges as they were dependent on male members of the family to take them to the bank. This was also seen as resulting in loss of wages and was discouraged.

The CSP which acts as last-mile banking access was available in Sagada and Chancher Panchayats. Even though the banks were claiming that CSPs provide services free of cost, the ground reality was different. Most respondents who had visited the CSP claimed that it charged 20 INR for withdrawal and other services they availed. For these reasons, CSPs were in low use, as they provided limited services, and charged a fee for the same. Respondents preferred to visit their home branch for cash withdrawal and updating their passbook rather than going to the CSP.

The group discussion also revealed that most people, especially women paid a sum of Rs. 10 for assistance in filling up forms by unauthorised personnel around the bank premises. This demonstrated the poor levels of financial literacy and the presence of unofficial intermediaries who could further place account holders at risk.

Out of the nine villages in the study, only one village, Dakibundel had a banking correspondent that the residents were aware of. The availability of a banking correspondent is very necessary as they act as a bridge between customers and the bank, which is a necessity for areas in which literacy levels or mean years of schooling are low.

Picture: Nikas Majhi

Case study 2: Nikas Majhi is a 55-year-old woman living in Dakibundel village of Bhawanipatna block of Kalahandi. She is an account holder in the Utkal Grameen Bank in Bhawanipatna since December 2019. She was forced by her family members to open a bank account so that they could apply for government schemes as she didn't have any financial knowledge. Despite her account being opened under the PMJDY, she was unsure if she had received any of the monthly instalments of Rs. 500 between April to June 2020. Her bank passbook was blank, which meant it had not been updated in between 2019-2020. Given her complete lack of financial literacy, updating the bank passbook would also not have ensured access to welfare schemes.

Understanding banking communications and official documents is a major concern for people living in rural or remote areas, as most such documents tend to be in English which very few people are able to comprehend. None of the respondents except one could follow English.
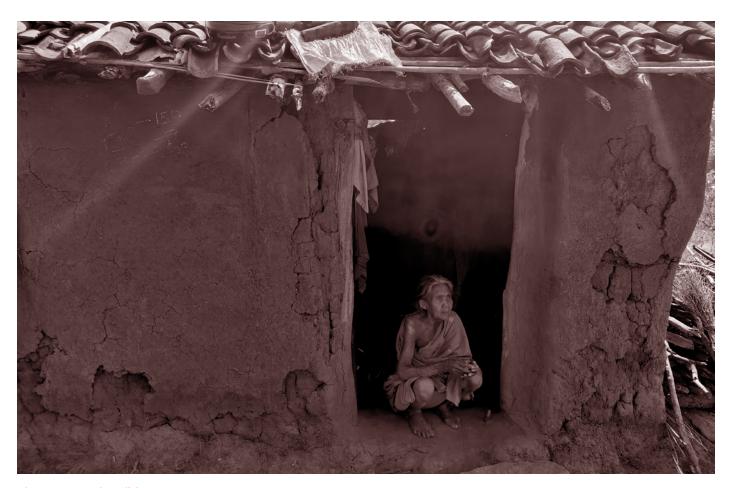
Most respondents felt that banking services in general and DBT in particular had remained a hassle. Women especially were more appreciative of the cash support provided by the state government under the pension scheme, as well as the one-time cash support provided under the PDS over DBT-based schemes.

SCHEME	PENSION SCHEME UNDER NATIONAL SOCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME IN ODISHA	MADHU BABU PENSION YOJNA
Category	Aged (60 and above), widow (40 and above), differently abled	Aged (60 and above), widows (any age), disabled, single women (above 30 years), transgender people, leprosy patients, AIDS patients, widows of AIDS patients and transgender people
Requirement	BPL household	Family income below Rs. 24000 per year
Pension amount	Rs. 200 per month till 79 years and Rs. 500 after that. Odisha govt tops up rest Rs 300 per month for pensioners up to 79 years and Rs 200 for pensioners above 80 years	Rs. 500 per month till 79 years and Rs. 700 after that
Coverage	2063133	2825766

4.2. SOCIAL SECURITY PENSION

The social security pension scheme is part of the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) administered by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. It was initiated on 15th August 1995. Initially it only covered old age pension for those aged above 65 years and falling below the Poverty Line. The widow pension and disability pension schemes were added in 2009. Widows between 40-64 years are eligible for the widow pension, and people with any disability between 18-64 years for the disability pension.

The pension schemes under NSAP only cover eligible individuals from Below Poverty Line (BPL) households which limits the numbers of persons that can avail of the scheme. To address this bottleneck and increase access for individuals in need, the Government of Odisha launched the Madhu Babu Pension Yojana[17] (MBPY) in January 2008. The Government of India contributes Rs. 200 per month per beneficiary under the NSAP, and the Government of Odisha provides Rs. 500 (and Rs. 700 for those above 79) for each beneficiary. The pension is distributed in the form of cash at the Panchayat headquarters in rural areas and at designated places in urban areas on the 15th of every month (labelled the Jana Seva Divas). At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Odisha released the pension amount for April to July 2020 to all beneficiaries in the month of April, and August to November in the month of August.

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[17] Portal of SSEPD department describing MadhuBabu Pension Yojna *https://ssepd.gov.in/index.php?route=catalog/subschemedetails&subscheme_id=10*

Picture: Laxmi Majhi

4.2.1. RECENT PUSH FOR MANDATORY AADHAAR FOR PENSION BENEFICIARIES IN THE STATE

In July and August, the Odisha Government's Department of Social Security & Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (SSEPD) issued two circulars[18] (on 17.7.2020, and 5.8.2020) specifying that the pensions and "ex gratia" amount were to be disbursed (in cash) only to those who carried Aadhaar cards as proof of identity, and only to those accounts which had been "Aadhaar verified".

The Government of Odisha had originally opposed[19] linking the Aadhaar with pensioners' accounts in 2017 on the grounds that it would cause hardships to beneficiaries. Contrary to its earlier position, in January 2020, it announced[20] that pension accounts would have to be linked with the Aadhaar for "verification" and seeding.

The Odisha Right to Food Campaign[21] issued a statement against the move and claimed that since only 83% of the NSAP accounts in Odisha had been "verified" by Aadhaar and only 74% have been verified for the MBPY scheme in July 2020, more than 11 lakh beneficiaries could lose their benefits for lack of Aadhaar verification.

18 Odisha TV (2020, August 5) Odisha Urges Madhu Babu Pension Beneficiaries To Complete Aadhaar Linking *https://odishatv. in/odisha-news/odisha-urges-madhu-babu-pension-beneficiaries-to-complete-aadhaar-linking-467284*

19 Hindustan Times (2020, January 2) Naveen Patnaik govt in 2017, had opposed compulsory link of Aadhaar with pension *https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/odisha-orders-linking-of-pensioners-accounts-with-aadhaar-by-april-2020/ story-iR2TukEOVPdTRHXnNsvnVl.html*

20 Hindustan Times (2020, January 2) Odisha orders linking of pensioners accounts with Aadhaar by April 2020 *https:// www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/odisha-orders-linking-of-pensioners-accounts-with-aadhaar-by-april-2020/story- iR2TukEOVPdTRHXnNsvnVl.html*

21 Reethink Aadhaar (2020, August 11)More than 11 lakh pensioners could lose benefit after Odisha Government's decision to link Aadhaar to Pension *https://rethinkaadhaar.in/blog/2020/8/9/more-than-11-lakh-pensioners-could-lose-benefits-after- odisha-governments-move-to-mandate-aadhaarnbsp-verification-for-pensionsnbsp*

The circular also claimed that Aadhaar seeding and verification processes are shrouded in opacity. Aadhaar seeding or verification can fail for a range of reasons, often without any of the responsible officials being able to diagnose the reasons for such failure or how it can be remedied. The Aadhaar-enabled Payments System [22] (AePS) comes with its own share of failures [23], due to poor design, missing safeguards, and a confusing array of failure codes.

No clear appeal method was offered by the state government in case of exclusion of legitimate beneficiaires. This can result in excluded beneficiaries being left without any recourse. It is close to impossible for those who are not physically mobile, have limited access to transportation, or live in an area far from administrative headquarters to rectify their exclusion. In addition, the pandemic made this process near-impossible.

With the submission of the Aadhaar becoming mandatory, a number of cases of pension beneficiaries being denied their entitlement came to the fore. In this study's sample, a majority of the excluded beneficiaries were women.

The online and offline campaign led by civil society groups successfully led to a change in the state government's position. On 27th August 2020 the state government issued a statement stating that the Aadhaar was not mandatory for pension for that period. It also, however added that they would keep the Aadhaar collection process ongoing.

In the course of the study, beneficiaries were asked about the pension benefits received. It was observed that pension beneficiaries without Aadhaar faced problems in getting their pension after it was made mandatory. However, with change in policy by the state, the pension amount was released to all beneficiaries with the instruction that if the Aadhaar details are not submitted soon their pension may get discontinued. We found three cases in which differently abled persons were not able to get their pension since their application was not added to the online database. They were not aware of why this was the case.

4.3. TARGETED PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM

Provision of subsidised food grain through the Public Distribution System (PDS) is the national food security programme in India, which became an entitlement after the enactment of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013. The PDS has been modified several times since its inception to improve its functioning and service delivery. This includes the establishment of the Food Corporation of India in the 1960s, initiation of the Revamped Public Distribution System in 1992 and the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) in 1997, the introduction of the Anatodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) in 2000, the Supreme Court intervention through PIL popularly known as the right to food case in 2001, and finally the affirmation of the right to food under National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013. This continuous reform has aimed to address issues such as exclusion and inclusion errors, diversion and leakages, and better targeting of the subsidy.

In Odisha, after implementation of the NFSA from 2015 the coverage of beneficiaries increased substantially. 82.17 percent of the rural population and 55.77 percent of the urban population (totalling 3.26 crore individuals out of a total population of 4.19 crore in the state of Odisha as per the 2011 census) are entitled to receive food grain in PHH and AAY category. Persons belonging to PHH are entitled to receive 5 kilograms of food grains (rice, wheat) per person per month, and AAY households comprising the poorest of the poor are entitled to 35 kilograms per month at the rate of one rupee per kilogram.

22 Kodali S. "COVID-19, Aadhaar-DBT and a Reminder of the Issues With Transaction Failure Data" (The Wire, April 15, 2020) *https://thewire.in/government/covid-19-aadhaar-dbt-and-a-reminder-of-the-issues-with-transaction-failure-data*

23 Raghavan M., Shah S. "Fix the problems in Aadhaar-based cash transactions" (mint, May 8, 2020) *https://www.livemint.com/opinion/columns/fix-the-problems-in-aadhaar-based-cash-transactions-11588930862806.html*

The implementation of the NFSA also triggered a wave of digitisation labelled the 'End-to-End Computerization of TPDS Operations'. This was aimed at improving efficiency and transparency in the operations of the PDS. The initiative includes digitization of ration cards and beneficiary and other databases, online allocation, computerization of supply-chain management, setting up of the transparency portal and online grievance redressal mechanisms.

4.3.1. FIXED TARGET AND EXCLUSION OF ELIGIBLE

When the NFSA was implemented in 2015, the target number of beneficiaries to be included was fixed on the basis of the 2011 census. This meant that exclusions were inherent in the design of the system at the outset itself. In 2018 the Chief Minister of Odisha demanded that the central government increase the target number of beneficiaries, considering the 14 percent decadal growth in population. However, this request was not granted and subsequently Odisha implemented its own State Food Security Scheme (SFSS) to include the additional 25 lakh individuals who were left out of the NFSA. Despite this, the state government recently accepted in an affidavit to the High Court that 22.36 lakh people have been left out [24] of the food security programme. The exclusion of eligible beneficiaries even after digitization of the TPDS raises serious doubts about the efficacy of the technological solutions adopted. The Aadhaar-enabled data system on the one hand excluded existing beneficiaries not having Aadhaar or for errors in their Aadhaar, labelling such beneficiaries fake or duplicate. In addition, the additional requirement which might be difficult to meet for applicants especially in rural and remote areas, mandatory Aadhaar-authentication discouraged eligible individuals from applying.

4.3.2. GROUND REALITIES: CHALLENGES RELATED TO DATA SYSTEMS IN THE TPDS

The impact of digitisation on the PDS has not lived up to the promises of efficiency, but further deprived eligible beneficiaries and centralized information. Instead of enabling the system to reach vulnerable groups and ensure transparency, technology enabled systems have created another barrier in accessing the entitlement without improved transparency.

Non-Availability of Aadhaar: The non-availability of Aadhaar cards or failure in linking the Aadhaar with the ration card database has resulted in discontinuation of essential services for many beneficiaries. Through the interviews and group discussions, we found 5 respondents who had a ration card but not an Aadhaar, due to which they were not able to get their ration entitlements. They had been categorically told that until they submit their Aadhaar they would not be able to avail the same. We also found that women respondents were more vulnerable to such exclusion as they were left completely dependent on male members of the family to procure and update their documents, including the Aadhaar.

Ordeal and expenses in enrolling for the Aadhaar: Almost all of the respondents faced a range of challenges when enrolling for the Aadhaar themselves or their household members. On average, each respondent had paid Rs. 150-200 for registering for the Aadhaar. In group discussions, several respondents reported getting rejected in the first attempt, after which each respondent was forced to make multiple attempts to register. The average cost including transportation charges incurred for such respondents was Rs. 1000-1500, which was a substantial expenditure. In some of these cases, applicants were eventually unsuccessful even after making several attempts. None of the respondents whose Aadhaar application had been rejected had any knowledge about the reasons behind the rejection, and they were forced to frequently visit the Aadhaar centre to try and get any updates. Some respondents also reported not having received an acknowledgement slip after Aadhaar registration. In case of none delivery of Aadhaar or loss of Aadhaar helps in downloading Aadhaar from support centres. Also, since the majority of people don't have mobile phones the acknowledgement slips come as very handy. Group discussions also revealed that most people had no information about grievance redressal mechanisms in case of issues in enrolment or updation.

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24 Cuttack: Food security eludes over 22L in state, Govt data (Times of India, Oct 14, 2020) *https://timesofindia.indiatimes. com/city/cuttack/cuttack-food-security-eludes-over-22l-in-stategovt-data/articleshow/78654150.cms*

Non-Seeding of Aadhaar: Linkage of the Aadhaar with the PDS was found to be very challenging for most respondents. Many reported being denied their ration on this pretext despite having already submitted their Aadhaar at the Panchayat. Santosh Majhi of Piringguda Village in Chancher informed that he had submitted his Aadhaar twice to the Panchayat but has not able to receive the entitlements. This might be due to the inconsistency in his name on the two IDs – on his ration card, his name is "Santash Majhi" and on his Aadhaar card it is "Santosh Majhi". The inability to link the two due to errors or mismatch in beneficiary name, village name, and other details was also discussed frequently in the group discussions.

> **Siru Majhi is a 35–year old man who lives in Dakibundel village of Bhawanipatna block of Kalahandi district. The Aadhaar card he received upon enrolment had a major error – his brother's name was listed instead of his. This was despite his brother never having applied for the Aadhaar. As a result of this error, the ration entitlements for both him and his brother were stopped.**

Biometric authentication failure: Some respondents, mostly senior women, reported that many times they had to try more than once to authenticate their biometrics to receive rice from the PDS shop. They often had to clean their hands with soap so that the scanner could identify their fingerprint. All respondents also reported that they do not get printed receipts which has basic details like quantity of ration brought, price etc from the PoS.

Helplessness among local level officials: The local officials have only shown their helplessness over the centralisation and inflexible nature of the PDS. Even when they know clearly a person deserves the ration support the most and also a genuine one but until the machine approves it they can't help

Transfer of name of married woman form parent's ration card to in law's ration card:
Most women married after 2015, after the implementation of the NFSA, reported that their names were not included in the ration cards of their marital household. They complained that despite this, their name had been struck off the ration card of their natal household. In many cases, married women were asked to change their address in the Aadhaar card and submit it to the panchayat. Parbati Majhi of Karandihapar in Talbelgaon is one of many such women we spoke to. She got married two years ago and now has a 7–month child. Before marriage her name was included in her parents' ration card in Jogsaipatna GP. It was struck off after her marriage. She had applied many times in the Talbelgaon GP to include her name in the ration card held by her in–laws, but her request is still pending. There is no proper provision for the transfer of the names from one household to the other in the PDS, implying that often women are unable to avail their entitlements. We also found that children under the age of six were unable to enrol in the PDS which can result in food insecurity and undernutrition. Major reasons for the exclusion of children are lack of information about the inclusion of names of children among field–level officials, children not having Aadhaar cards, or no further enrollments to the PDS being permitted because targets had been met.

Picture: Pradyumna Majhi with his wife and son

Case study 4: Pradyumna Majhi is a 23–year old young man of Sankariguda village of Bhawanipatna block of Kalahandi district. He got married in 2016 and met with an accident in 2018, which left him physically impaired. He was never able to work properly after the accident as he was engaged in manual labour. His wife Subhasini Majhi supports their family as a daily wage worker. Even after 4 years of marriage, her name has not been included in the household ration card. The name of their child has also not been included. The family is struggling to make ends meet, and have attempted to add their names to the card multiple times without success.

5
Conclusion

The push for the integration of the JAM trinity into welfare programmes precedes the COVID-19 pandemic. It was already negatively affecting the delivery of welfare programmes - ample evidence exists to demonstrate this already. We find that these learnings were not considered while designing welfare programmes for the populations in extreme distress after the onset of the pandemic. Instead, the JAM trinity was pushed through forcefully. Mandating the Aadhaar for social security pensions is an example of this.

This study also found that without increasing banking and mobile infrastructure, DBT-based programmes are causing greater barriers for most beneficiaries, especially women. For these reasons, we found that women beneficiaries were very appreciative of cash delivery under pension schemes and one-time cash support for ration card-holding families.

Across the PDS, social security, and pension, the mandatory requirement for the Aadhaar has led to the exclusion of eligible beneficiaries when they needed these support structures the most. It was evident that those who had been unable to procure Aadhaar cards or had errors they were unable to correct were vulnerable groups including women, migrant workers and daily wagers. Even. We also found that women beneficiaries were likely to be excluded from the PDS entirely after marriage, significantly worsening conditions of food insecurity. Regardless of claims of efficiency, the much-hyped digitisation of the system has not been able to address these issues.

We find that the data system that is replacing existing systems in the name of transparency and efficiency do not have any clear systems of accountability, are over-centralising all processes and further weakening grievance redressal systems. These systems need to be designed with the aim of empowerment and participation rather than the empty rhetoric of efficiency.

Picture: Hema Majhi