

Approach:

- Briefly discuss the scenario and list the issues faced by various stakeholders in the case.
- State the steps you can take as the officer-in-charge in the given situation.
- Briefly comment on the extent of digital exclusion in India and its consequences.

Answer:

In the above scenario, the officer-in-charge has to ensure that the deserving families get allotted foodgrains under PDS scheme on time despite non-linkage of Aadhar and BPL cards, whilst following the prescribed rules. It is a case that seemingly pits the values of empathy and objectivity/acting according to rules against each other.

(a) Issues faced by various parties in the case are as follows:

- **Protesting families-** As they are not able to procure allotted foodgrains due to non-linkage of Aadhar and BPL cards. They are the prime stakeholders in the case whose concerns need to be addressed on priority basis.
- **Larger society-** Including people in various parts of the country who are denied foodgrains due to a similar situation. Withholding their PDS entitlements amounts to negation of their legal entitlements altogether.
- **Concerned Citizens, informed through media-** There may also be partially informed citizens who may add fuel to the fire without knowing the administrative actions taken. Vested interests who benefit by leakages in PDS may be one such group. This trend may also end up distorting the true facts and eventually turning the tide against the state.
- **Government-** As it is responsible for providing a minimum quantity of foodgrains to BPL families under PDS scheme. Non-provision of grains within the stipulated time limit translates into erosion of trust in the eyes of people.
- **Officer-in-charge (me)-** As the families need foodgrains to sustain themselves, however, they do not possess the necessary documents.

(b) The measures I can take in this situation are:

- I will request an official who has discretionary authority to grant allotment of foodgrains to the protesting families as a temporary measure based on the past PDS records, since they are dependent on state support for meeting their daily basic needs. Meanwhile, I will ask the families to immediately link their BPL cards with Aadhar cards, so that they are not in a similar conundrum in the future. For executing this step smoothly, I will ask for more human and financial resources from other departments up the hierarchy on immediate basis so as to clear all the impending concerns of the people.
- I will also carry out a door-to-door and social media awareness programmes by taking the help of other department officials and reminding and educating them about the benefits of linking their BPL cards with Aadhar cards
- I will discuss all probable alternate courses and lessons learnt from my district with officers-in-charge of other districts in the state so that similar situation can be handled more effectively in a time bound manner

Hunger related death in any district is the direct responsibility of the district administrator. Want of certain documents cannot be a pretext to deny the basic necessities required for survival. The rules have been made to ease the functioning of the system. However, during the time that people, especially the vulnerable ones, come to terms with the new rules, alternative arrangements must be made and the document making process must be expedited.

(c) Apart from facing economic and social exclusion, poor in India are also facing digital exclusion owing to high cost of mobile and Internet services which deters many low-income households from accessing the information and knowledge, both necessary and desirable.. Most people suffer from information asymmetry which widens the divide between haves and have-nots- culturally, educationally, financially, socially. Internet is an empowering tool as it has the power to bring in equality, equity, transparency and accountability. However, due to digital divide, poor people especially in rural areas have no means to access information that could empower them to avail rights, entitlements and opportunities. These include benefits under the PDS scheme, wages under MNREGA, other Direct Benefit Transfers that they are entitled to receive.. Therefore in the pursuit of achieving a truly inclusive information society, digital infrastructure in rural areas should be improved and expanded in order to bridge the existing digital divide and adequate training be provided to avail the potential benefits that can be reaped.