

Exclusions in PDS in Tribal Areas of AP

Between 7,000 and 35,000 families have been excluded from the PDS in ITDA areas. We request quick measures to include them during these difficult times.

The recent clampdown of economic activities due to the pandemic has exacerbated vulnerability of tribal communities who were very vulnerable to begin with. As the pandemic continues in 2021, the Public Distribution System (PDS) is an essential support system and it is crucial to ensure that no tribal family is excluded. In this note, we would like to highlight the plight of families that have been excluded from the PDS and request their inclusion urgently. The note is based on a field study in villages from 2 mandals, followed by telephonic interviews with people from 50 GPs across 4 ITDAs.

Field survey

Our field survey was motivated by the observation that the number of ration cards declined by over 7,000 in ITDA areas following the introduction of the six-step verification process. We surveyed 32 families in ten villages whose ration cards were cancelled due to the six-step verification process. Among them 28 did not meet any exclusion criteria but were excluded for wrong reasons.

Box 1: Challenges in fixing wrongful exclusions

Aadhaar

“Gangulamma” is a resident of Pinalovasingi village, Luvasingi Panchayat, Gangaraju Madugula Mandal. She lost both her legs as a child. Until recently, the area was under Maoist control. Since the village has no roads, the villagers need to climb two hills and then cross a crocodile-infested stream to reach a village called Balapam. From Balapam they have to travel about 80 kilometres to reach the Aadhaar centre in Paderu¹. This centre can serve a maximum of 50 people in a day. As such it is a matter of luck if the intended work happens as planned. As a village elder said, reaching the Aadhaar Centre from Pinalovasingi is like reaching the Moon. Now “Gangulamma” is without ration, pension, or for that matter any other social welfare scheme.

Owning 4 wheeler

“Vantala Balanna” of Paderu ITDA belongs to the Kondh tribe, which is classified by the government as a particularly vulnerable tribe. He was denied a ration card because he failed the 6 step validation which recorded that he owns a four-wheeler. His fellow villagers wondered how a person can own a four-wheeler

¹ A few more Aadhaar centres have been set up recently in Paderu ITDA.

in their village that has no roads. The gram volunteer and villagers are ready to testify that Balanna doesn't own any 4 wheeler.

However, the Village secretariat staff said that the problem will not be resolved unless Balanna visits the transport office in Visakhapatnam and changes his online status in that office. This is an unreasonable expectation given that the burden of proof is being transferred from the government to the victim who has to spend Rs 1,000 for a visit just to say that he does not have a four wheeler.

As the stories above indicate, it is not easy for Tribal people to rectify wrongful exclusion. The table below documents the six-step verification and the rectification process for those who are excluded in any step. The last column provides our estimate of whether rectification is easy, moderate or difficult. In our estimate, rectification is easy for 1 of the 6 steps and difficult for 5 out of 6.

S. No	Issue	Department concerned	Resolution process	Our estimate of ease of resolution for Tribal people
1	Government employee of pensioner	CFMS	The person should submit self declaration and certificate from the Panchayat Secretary(PS)	Easy (since PS is located in the mandal)
2	Monthly electricity consumption should be less than 300 units	Electricity Department	Submit certificate from Office of Asst Engineer.	Difficult (Costly, cumbersome and typically requires travel to cluster/Division)
3	No family member should be income tax payee	Income Tax	Submit certificate from Chartered accountant / income tax practitioner. (26A for the last 3 years)	Difficult (Costly, cumbersome and typically requires travel to district)
4	Total land holding of the family should be less than 3 acres (dry) or 10 acres (wet) or 10 acres of both dry and wet land together	Revenue Dept	Submit certificate from Tehsildar's office at Mandal level	Difficult (Tedious and time consuming. The resolution process is not clear in cases where the person's UID is linked with land outside the mandal / district of residence, which seems to be the most prominent reason in the tribal areas.)

5	Family should not own a 4 wheeler (Tractor and Taxi are exempted)	Transport Dept	Submit certificate from Transport Dept.	Difficult (Requires travel to district / division HQ)
6	Family in municipal area owning a house	Municipal and Urban Development	Submit certificate from the office of Municipal commissioner	Difficult

To consolidate the insights from the field survey, we did telephonic interviews with 50 people (23 volunteers, 8 digital assistants and 19 CSO workers). The interviewees were spread across 50 GPs in 4 ITDAs. Each one of them confirmed that there were people in their GP who were wrongly excluded by the six step verification process.

The interviews and the field study indicate that there are significant errors in the six step process leading to the exclusion of thousands of families from the PDS. In addition there are families who had no ration cards even before the verification process. Finally, there are those who are eligible for a separate ration card but are attached to their extended families. Thankfully, by every indication most people are already covered by the PDS in ITDA. If one were to extrapolate from the Nava saksham survey, there were 35,000 more families in the survey compared to the number of ration cards in all ITDAs. One can reasonably assume that it represents the higher end of exclusion from the PDS² and exclusion is likely to be in the range of 7,000-35,000.

While the proportion of people excluded is not high, the numbers are worth paying special attention to in the context of the worsening pandemic. We request you to institute a process urgently in order to address the problem and we believe that the best way of doing so would be to suspend six-step verification in ITDAs. While targeting is important in order to ensure that people who have means do not get government subsidy, it is relatively unimportant in the tribal context given the small number of ineligible people. In other words, the risk of wrongful exclusion is vastly higher than the risk of wrongful inclusion. Expanding coverage by suspending the six-step process in ITDAs will not be costly for the GoAP even at the higher end of the exclusion estimate. Automatic approval will also save bureaucratic energies that are better spent on other issues at this juncture.

² We believe that many of the families documented by the volunteers would have ration cards that have not been split, but are unable to verify that due to the lack of public data.

EXCLUSION REASON	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
7000+ families excluded by the verification process	Reinstate their ration cards immediately and suspend six-step verification in ITDA areas OR Campaign based redressal by volunteers to re-verify and re-issue ration cards to all eligible families.
Families who did not have a ration card even before six-step verification	Ask village volunteers to identify families that have no ration cards and enable temporary access to PDS for six months.
Joint families eligible for splitting ration cards	Proactively split the ration cards using the family data in the ration database. OR Identify joint families with more than two adults and offer enhanced ration OR Ask volunteers to help families split their ration cards

Conclusion

The ration system in AP is highly celebrated for its impact and covers most families in ITDA already. Between 7000 and 35,000 families are likely excluded in ITDAs right now covering who will not add much fiscal burden to the state, while offering much needed support at this difficult time.

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