

The Suno India Show

Can one nation one ration card help migrant workers?

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On July 1 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the 'One Nation, One Ration Card' scheme. The scheme is meant to help millions of people gain access to COVID relief packages. The scheme is specifically targeted towards the migrant worker population which constitutes 38% of our population, as per the 2011 Census.

A year on, the Supreme court in July 2021 pulled up the Centre for delay in setting up a web portal to register migrant and unorganised workers. It called the Centre's lack of action "lackadaisical." The court ordered the states to implement the One Nation One Ration Card scheme. The court also asked the Centre to create a database of unorganised workers by July 31st this year.

One nation one ration is a fairly simple idea. Anyone who migrates out of his or her hometown can avail of ration. But as our speaker, Reetika Khera said, there is a lot more to it than just this simple idea.

Hi I am Kunika Balhotra, Research and Communications Officer for Suno India and your host for this episode of The Suno India Show. To understand the complexities of this scheme I spoke to Reetika Khera. She is an Indian development economist and is currently working as an Associate Professor of Economics at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi. She recently wrote an editorial on Scroll.in on this subject.

The links of all these references can be found in the show notes.

Host: As part of its Covid economic relief package, the government announced the national rollout of One Nation One Ration Card - or ONORC-in all states and Union Territories by March 2021. Could you start by telling our listeners what is one nation one ration card and why did we start talking about it? And what does it seek to do? How will it work and how does it seek to benefit people?

Reetika: Right, so, I guess the first thing to say is that this idea of portability, which is what one nation one ration card is about, has been around for a few years. Now, even before the NDA government came to power portable PDS means that unlike the system today, where I can only buy my rations from the shop in my neighborhood, the new system the portable system is that if I go for six months to work in Bombay, then I can buy my rations even at a Bombay shop and I can buy it at any shop. So, now, in the old system or the current system even the reason why it is the

way it is, is for supply logistics, right, because the shop owner or the PDS dealer needs to know how many people will buy from him in a particular month. And therefore, then the supply to him is based on the number of ration cards that are allotted to him. And of course, it makes sense then to have all the people in the neighborhood attached to a particular ration shop. So portability basically means that you're delinking this fixed aspect of the PDS where you can only go to any particular shop and then you can in the portable system, you will be allowed to go anywhere else. It's a complicated thing to put in place because it will mean that you should be able to anticipate how many people will buy from which ration shop so that there are adequate supplies at that shop at that particular moment of time. So that part hasn't really been talked about in much detail so far. Why has it become such a hot topic right now in the past year or so? It's I think, because of a misplaced understanding, among many so called public intellectuals about the solution to the problem that emerged and hit us in the face last year, when there was a sudden lockdown and people's livelihoods, millions of people's livelihoods lost overnight. At that time, quite rightly so there was, you know, there was a hue and cry, there was public pressure to do something about this kind of horrible situation that millions of fellow human beings and fellow citizens were facing. And at that time, everyone said yes, portability is the answer. It seemed like a great solution. But actually, it's not such a great solution for a bunch of reasons. One is that, see this portable PDS can only help those who have a ration card in the first place. Right? As per the current data that we have only 60% Indians have ration cards, the coverage in urban areas is more than rural areas. So that's one major source of exclusion. And if you don't have a ration card, then whether it is a portable PDS or an old PDS, it doesn't matter to you, right? You can only benefit from portability if you have a ration card in the first place. And, you know, amongst workers who were stuck last year in this manner, we still don't know how many had ration cards in the first place that they could have used in the city had portability existed. The other thing is that the PDS is very different in different states. So for instance, in Tamil Nadu you get free rice but you also get dal oil, rava all kinds of things okay. Now if a worker from Chennai goes to work in Bangalore, in Karnataka, they don't give all these commodities. So what happens to that worker? Well, he only get rice in Karnataka, whatever the remaining commodities. So that's one kind of problem. The other thing of course, is that prices vary across state. So in Tamil Nadu, rice is free, but it's not free in Jharkhand or, you know, Madhya Pradesh etc. And then of course, there is a taste because in Madhya Pradesh, it's primarily wheat. So if a worker goes from Chattisgarh, Orissa to Madhya Pradesh, then they don't want it, they're rice eaters. They all these nitty gritty issues, which nobody is talking about, and how is it going to work out in practice. So I feel that, first of all, if they want to do portability, they should do a smart card based portability pilot and then think about scaling it up. The other reason why it's not a great solution is that the way the central government is thinking about portability, the technology that it is planning to use is Aadhaar based biometric authentication, which we know is a big source of exclusion, and it is error ridden. And over the years we have seen that how the integration of Aadhaar with not just the PDS, but also with our bank accounts, which affects those people who get cash transfers, whether it is pensions or regular wages, or scholarships, or PM Kisan money, all of these cash

transfers from the government have been affected because of integration of Aadhaar with the banking system, which has led to a lot of errors, when it has happened successfully. But for many people, it has not even been possible to link there are numbers in which case they face another set of issues. It is likely to break the PDS even for those who are actually benefiting from it right now. And we have seen that already. This is not a hypothetical thing, right? We know that a bunch of people died in Rajasthan and in Jharkhand because they were excluded from the PDS because of other related reasons.

Host: So you have conducted multiple research studies that talk about how Aadhaar excludes people. Other is the user and technology that is going to be used for one nation, one faction. What do you foresee happening if ONORC is implemented?

Reetika: First see, I think that in principle, portability is not a bad idea. Okay? So it's not that I'm against portability or the PDS, what I am against is portability in the PDS that will ride on the Aadhar technology. Now, as it happens, there is one, one example of portability without Aadhaar. And that comes from Chattisgarh. So I think around 2013-14. In Chattisgarh, the food department there had said we will show you how to do portability without Aadhaar. And actually, they had put in place a really neat system, which they started with just two shops, and then they increased it to 20 shops, then they increased it to other districts. And then they increased it not only to urban centers but also started bringing in some rural shops into that system, the technology that they used as smart cards. And that was a good technology because unlike Aadhaar smart cards don't require real-time connectivity, the way it was done in Chhattisgarh. You could also operate it in offline mode. And number two, those smart cards did not require biometric authentication at all. So basically, you just inserted your PDS card, your food card, into the machine, the POS machine point of sale machine. And if there was real-time connectivity, then it the transaction would be recorded straight off into on the server. But if there was no connectivity, then the transaction would be recorded on the POS machine and on your smart card. And later, when there was connectivity, the data would be uploaded from the POS machine to the food server, right. And then the other thing was that just inserting the card was proof of authentication last mile authentication, you know, I've brought my card and I've inserted it and I've got my rations. Now when you do it with Aadhar then the problem is that some of there's a tiny fraction of people who don't have aadhaar and they happen to be the most vulnerable people. Yeah, so people who have been bedridden for the past decade, or people who who had leprosy and they couldn't enroll even though in theory, there is supposed to be a provision for such people to enroll for other people who have lost their Aadhaar numbers and are not able to retrieve it so then they can't get it linked to this system. The second step that people face difficulties at is you don't only have to possess another card or another number. You have to every time the government makes it compulsory for any particular scheme. You have to know that it has become compulsory for your old age pension to continue that you need to link your Aadhaar number to the relevant department theek hai? And on top of that, you have to also make sure that your bank account is linked with. Now, in the case

of many rural residents, this information may not reach them. And so they don't do the linking. And after a particular deadline set by the government, what the government says is that out of whatever say 100 beneficiaries, we find that only 80 people's names are linked with an Aadhar number. And so for the remaining 20, we are deleting them because they are ghosts. So anyone who doesn't link Aadhaar is deemed a ghost or a fake in the system, and their names are deleted. So there is a very good report by Anumeha Yadav in school from Rajasthan, where she goes reports on precisely this problem in the pension scheme that suddenly these old people stopped getting their pension. And when they took out the records, they found that they were marked as dead, because they had not lived there. And due to some public attention, a few names were reinstated, but many people didn't get their pensions back. So this linking can be a big problem, there are many other problems that can happen in the linking process, including the fact that people rely on middlemen for the linking process. Right. So they have to go to an E kiosk or a pragya kendra or whatever it is called in different states, customer service centers, where those people will help you do the linking, those people might charge you money unnecessarily or more than what is stipulated. But many times it may also fail because there are a lot of errors. So sometimes, you know, the linking fails, because you know, instead of spelling my name, REETTIK, if you put RITIKA, then it fails. Then the third problem is that first some of these programs, especially in the PDS, portable PDS, what they will want is that every month when you go to pick up your rations, you have to put your thumbprint in the machine in the POS machine, and that thumbprint has to be authenticated. Now it sounds very simple. But actually, it's not. Because at that particular moment, what needs to happen is that the food department server has to be up. Because first the message is sent to that server saying this person has presented this ration card, how many kilos is she entitled to. Then after that, after I put my thumbprint, the UIDAI server has to be up so that the authentication can happen saying this is the Aadhaar card number, this is the fingerprint associated with it and now you please check in your server, the image file of the thumbprint or fingerprint that you have for this person. So the Aadhaar server has to be working. But also my fingerprint today has to be the same as my fingerprint on the day that I enrolled in Aadhaar maybe five years or ten years ago. Now this I mean we're told that these things don't change, but actually, they do especially for older people, they may get worn out for workers, you know they may be because of work they might not be able. So you know these authentication failures, biometric authentication failures are also quite well known. So every month basically and then, of course, the electricity has to be there and your POS machine has to be charged. So there can be all kinds of ways reasons for which your authentication doesn't happen. So for these range of reasons, which we have already documented, they will be even more errors. And because there is no pilot. This is one big problem with the portability idea with one nation one ration card is that they have not even tried an intra-state pilot forget doing interstate pilots. And they are trying to you know, scale it up without any experimentation. And that's likely to disrupt the system. Even for those who are sitting in the villages, it may lead to disruptions and even those who are getting benefit from the PDS. They may suffer because of this grand grand plan that people have.

Host: Also what according to you are the effective measures that the government should implement for urban and rural workforces?

Reetika: I think one reason that this debate is happening right now is the supreme court order. I think everyone has, by and large, welcomed it. I think the most important thing in that order, actually, is the fact that one year after these traumatic experiences from the lockdown last year, there is finally a public acknowledgment of the injustice done to India's working people. Right, that this is the first time that in very clear terms, the Supreme Court has said that the government's actions were or in fact it is non action by the government is unpardonable. So I think that itself is quite a big thing. But as far as substantive relief, or support is concerned for workers, for those people, in substantive terms in material terms in economic terms, I'm not sure if there is a whole lot of relief. Okay. So there are seven directions in that order in the judgment. One of them is community kitchens, very welcome idea. And it's great if this gets scaled up as a national scheme, or statewide schemes on a big scale, many states are doing it but not all states are doing it in even in some states where it is happening. It's not on a big enough scale. The second thing that the order says is about one nation one ration card, which I think is actually not a good idea, which is I think, likely to be caused more damage than benefit both not just for workers, but not just for migrant workers, because for migrant workers, we need to know how many of them have a ration card in the first place in order to be able to benefit from it. The third thing, which is I think, actually the most significant part as far as the food relief is concerned, is that the Supreme Court said that the coverage under the PDS, like I said earlier, only 60% have access to the PDS right now. The Supreme Court has said that Section 9 of the National Food Security Act, which determines PDS coverage, determines how many people can have ration cards, and that the central government should revisit those numbers. So I think if the central government, in response to the supreme court order, expands the coverage of the PDS, then that is definitely a very good step ahead. In fact, I think right now, based on what we have seen in the past one year, there is a very strong reason to universalize the PDS in rural areas and in the in urban slums there are two more one is at it has told the state governments to frame schemes for migrant workers. And another one is that the central government should provide any additional grains to the state governments when the state bring such schemes. Right. So out of seven orders, five are mainly about food relief. And of course, this is very important. We have been advocating for an expanded PDS not just in terms of numbers, but also in terms of having more commodities. We feel that the PDS should provide nutritious commodities such as dal, oil, maybe soybean and even other commodities. A handful of states in the country do it. But not everyone does it. And then the last one, which is important in the supreme court orders the registration of workers and even there I think the Supreme Court seems to confuse registration of workers with the creation of a centralized database. So the Supreme Court has imposed a 31st July deadline to complete this national database of unorganized workers. There is actually in the existing labor laws, there are a whole bunch of laws which require the registration of laborers, but that has never been

implemented by the government. So in fact, I think the emphasis should have been on getting the state and central governments to register workers so that relief can be provided to them. Now, so if we think about what can be done, just coming back to your question, finally, what can be done for workers, rural or urban, I feel that the existing labor laws must be implemented in letter and spirit that you know, the protections that are provided, whether it is simple things like payment of minimum wages, even that is violated, it is even violated in the National Rural Employment Guarantee act. Right. So these basic protections to labor regulation of their working hours, in some in urban areas, for instance, the kinds of benefits that they're entitled to all of those things need to be implemented better. If laborers are paid what is rightfully theirs. And they're employed in conditions that are suitable for human beings, then perhaps the role of, you know, social support through the government will be reduced. So I'm not saying there shouldn't be support for them in terms of food or other kinds of provisions. But I think the first thing is to recognize how poorly implemented our labor laws and labor protections are, and to shine a light on that so that they become topics of public debate, rather than just throwing these crumbs at them. Because if you give five kilos per person per month, basically, that's worth maybe, you know, wheat is say 20-25 rupees per kilo, so if it is 125 rupees. So, that's the kind of relief you're providing to a labor or labor who possibly in the urban sector will earn 300-200, even 500 rupees. So, it's not even one day's wage that is being given as relief. So I'm not saying that this relief is not important, but I'm saying it is too little. And therefore, while we think of both relief measures and measures of social support, both in cash and in kind, we should also not forget the very exploitative conditions under which laborers are working.

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