



Right to Food Campaign

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Government must immediately halt the E-KYC process of ration cardholders

Reports of intense distress and problems being faced by people across the country

Government must immediately give ration cards to 8 crore migrant/unorganised sector workers as directed by Supreme Court

Press Conference by Right to Food Campaign on August 7, 2024

The Right to Food Campaign is deeply disturbed by reports of the immense distress and problems being faced by people across the country on account of the government undertaking E-KYC verification of all 81 crore people who have ration cards and are entitled to receive foodgrains under the National Food Security Act (NFSA). From different states, the campaign is receiving reports of people rushing back to their villages because they are being informed that failure to get EKYC of the whole family will result in stoppage of ration. At a time when crores of people have been left out of the food security net on account of the government's failure to carry out the census of 2021, it is inexplicable that the energy and resources of the government are being spent on creating further hinderance for existing ration cardholders rather than issuing ration cards to all those excluded from the NFSA.

As per ground reports, SMSes have been received by ration cardholders or they are being informed over the phone to immediately go to the nearest ration shop with their whole family to comply with E-KYC requirements through authentication via the POS machines. Ration shopkeepers are informing cardholders that failure to get E-KYC will result in denial of food grains. Even national media has been carrying news that failure to comply with EKYC will result in stoppage of free rations. Rolling out an authentication exercise in this manner, without providing clear and official information to people about the framework within which the EKYC is being done, the need for EKYC, the timeline and consequences is creating intense distress and anxiety among people. The requirement for the whole family to be present at the ration shop has resulted in the most marginalised sections including migrant workers, elderly and those with disabilities being the most affected and likely to be left out of the EKYC. Further, the campaign is extremely shocked to note that ration shopkeepers have been empowered to carry out the EKYC process thereby allowing them to exercise power and discretion over it. The ration shopkeeper has absolutely no role in issuance and cancellation of ration cards as that is the prerogative of the Food Department. The shopkeepers role is limited to distribution of foodgrains to cardholders. This is a key separation of the roles as it is critical to empower people to seek accountability from shopkeepers in the distribution of grains without fear of facing backlash in the form of cancellation of ration cards. Allowing shopkeepers to carry out EKYC is skewing the power balance and will undermine the capacity of people in raising problems and concerns about irregularities in ration distribution.

Dipa Sinha of the RTF campaign said it is clear that right to adequate and nutritious food is not getting the priority it should. The government's intentions are clear even if one looks at the coverage and budget allocation. The total coverage of NFSA still being determined by census 2011 leading to

exclusion of crores of people. If the government's own population projections are used then as of the 2024 figures, 13 crore additional people should have also been provided ration cards under the NFSA. Instead of addressing this large gap, including through increased budgetary allocation, we find the current budget has slashed the food security budget by Rs. 5,000. Further, the unleashing of the EKYC in this manner, seems to be a conspiracy to cancel ration cards of people. We have seen how in the name of verification, authentication even in the past crores of legible people especially those who are the most marginalised get thrown out of the social security net. Unemployment and unprecedented inflation has made people very vulnerable and many more people need access to rations. Rations and foodgrains are a legal, constitutional right and not some revdi or dole by the government, as it is sought to be projected these days.

Anjali Bhardwaj of the RTF campaign said that anxiety and distress among people is also happening because of the unclear communication by the government. Pointing to the SMS sent by the Food Department in Delhi (pasted at the end of this document), she noted that no proper information is being provided to people regarding the rules, time-frame, necessity and process of EKYC. This coupled with news stories that foodgrains on the ration card will be discontinued if EKYC is not done, has led to this situation where people are spending thousands of rupees to rush to the ration shops, especially migrant workers who are travelling to their home state to do the EKYC process. She spoke of the ongoing case in the Supreme Court in which since 2021 the SC has been giving directions on increasing coverage under NFSA.

In June 2021, the Supreme Court (in xxx) directed the central government to re-determine coverage taking into account the increase in population while the coverage remains stagnant as per 2011 census numbers. Upon the central government stating that re-determination of coverage is not possible in the absence of the census and the census is indefinitely postponed. In 2022, the SC directed the government to consider the population projections figures to increase coverage and finally in April 2023, the SC gave explicit directions that 8 crore people who are registered on the E-shram portal must be immediately issued ration cards. The court has clarified that this should be done irrespective of the quotas defined in the NFSA and the central government must release additional rations to states. In July 2024, the Court took serious note of the slow pace at which states are carrying out the exercise of verifying and issuing ration cards and directed that all states must complete the work within 4 weeks failing which the court would initiate proceedings against concerned officials.

Annie Raja of the RTF Campaign said that a government which claims to be pro women is creating unprecedented havoc in their lives by forcing them to run around for even their most basic entitlement of ration. What is the purpose of this EKYC? Will they cancel ration cards of those who are unable to comply? This is going to be a huge blow for ordinary people. By cancelling ration cards who does the government want to benefit? The government is denying people their right to live with dignity- such high unemployment, and budget for NREGA is also wholly inadequate. Now even right to food is in crisis. Is this the government taking revenge for their reduced numbers in the elections?

Several people spoke of the problems they are facing on account of the EKYC issue.

Sunita hails from UP and is staying on rent in a slum settlement near Malviya Nagar with her family. She has a ration card issued by the government of UP, and she received a call from the ration shopkeeper asking her to come quickly to get her EKYC done. Worried that her ration card may get cancelled she, her husband and 4 children spent around Rs. 6,000 making the round trip from Delhi to UP by bus in order to do the EKYC. Only Sunita, her husband and one child is listed on the ration card and therefore they get only 15 kgs of grain per month. During the EKYC process the shopkeeper

informed her that authentication of her only child listed on the ration card failed as the aadhaar is outdated! She was advised to get the aadhaar updated and try again at a later date. She spent more than 15 days in the village trying to get the aadhaar updated, but was unsuccessful as they were told there are some server and connectivity issues. Other than the verbal communication from the shopkeeper, she has not received any official communication from the department and is unsure of the next steps. Sunita's husband works as a daily wager and had to miss several days of work due to the unexpected emergency travel.

Munish Devi ji currently living on rent in Jagdamba Camp. She is a widow and works as a domestic worker. She is getting calls from her village in Sambhal district, Uttar Pradesh asking her to come for EKYC but she is unable to afford the trip and is worried that she will not get leave. Her family members in the village have been told that if EKYC is not done, Munish and her children's names will be struck off.

Sumaira a domestic worker spent ₹ 8,000 to travel to her village in UP with 7 members of the family for the EKYC process. They ended staying for 15 days and losing their wages as the EKYC of one child was not successful and they had to wait to get it updated.

Sangeeta shared that her husband is bed ridden and there is no way to take him to Ghaziabad for EKYC. She went to the ration shop and failed to get her own EKYC done as it was too crowded.

Similar issues are coming across states- wherein inter state and intra state people are rushing for the EKYC process. From UP there are reports of ration shopkeepers are charging between Rs. 50-200 per person for the updation of EKYC.

The campaign demands that the government immediately halt the EKYC process to prevent further distress among ration cardholders. Further, the government must immediately issue ration cards to all those left out of the purview of the NFSA on account of the failure of the government to carry out the census of 2021.

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