

Manufacturing Confusion

BPL Lists in Uttar Pradesh

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Multiplicity of ration cardholder lists has been found to be a cause for exclusion of the needy from access to subsidised food. A report from Allahabad district of Uttar Pradesh.

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This article summarises the findings of a study undertaken in Allahabad district in July-August 2012 to evaluate the consistency between the actual distribution of ration cards, especially “below poverty line” (BPL) cards, and the corresponding lists maintained by the local administration. We were also interested in understanding the extent to which the distribution of ration cards is complete (i.e., how many households do not have ration cards) and how “fair” the distribution of the ration cards is.

The main findings pertain to Bashara Uparhar gram panchayat (Shankargarh block, Allahabad district), or “Bashara” for short. Bashara is one of the smaller gram panchayats in Shankargarh block, the poorest block in the district. There is

diversity both in terms of caste and economic status. The village has a high proportion of Patels and Kurmis, followed by the Kols. There are quite a few brahmins also. The Kols and other lower castes usually work as casual labourers in local mines and farms. The landowners are mostly Patels, brahmins and Thakurs. The village *pradhan* (headman) is a Kurmi, elected on a reserved seat. The local public distribution system (PDS) dealer, or *kotedar*, is a brahmin.

The article also presents some observations from visits to other gram panchayats of Shankargarh block (Benipur, Gadha Katra and Dhara) and Bahadurpur block (Bahadurpur Kachhar and Kotari) in Allahabad district. The purpose of these informal visits was to check the wider relevance of the issues that emerged in Bashara.

We interviewed the local residents, the *pradhan* and the *kotedar* of the villages visited. We conducted door-to-door surveys in a number of villages in Bahadurpur and Shankargarh blocks and tallied them against the various lists

we had. We also had discussions with the concerned officials at the block and district levels. At the block, we spoke to the additional development officer, panchayat (ADO, panchayat), the supply officers, the *lekhpal* (revenue official who inspects the PDS stock), and the marketing inspector; at the district level we spoke to the district supply officer (DSO). The lists and registers that are used for the PDS were also collected from these officials.

Multiplicity of Lists

“Targeting” of the PDS was introduced in 1997, based on the distinction between BPL and above poverty line (APL) households. Special support for BPL households had already started earlier, for example, under the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP). In 1997, BPL households became the main target of the PDS. This requires periodic preparation of BPL lists, which are also used for other programmes such as the Indira Awaas Yojana (subsidised housing) and the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (subsidised health insurance). Ideally there should be a single, up-to-date, transparent BPL list, accessible on the internet among other sources.

In Allahabad district, however, we found three different BPL lists. One list, hereafter the “2002 District List”, is maintained on the Allahabad district website (<http://allahabad.nic.in/bpllist.htm>) and is supposed to be based on the all-India 2002 BPL Census. Officials (including the ADO panchayat, Shankargarh) told us that the 2002 District List is not used for the purpose of the PDS. Its purpose is still unclear to us. Further, this list did not contain important information such as father’s name and ration card number. This made it difficult to check the consistency between the 2002 District List and the other lists mentioned below. What is easy to see is that there are major discrepancies between the lists, including stark differences between the numbers of people covered under each list.

The other two lists did have a connection with the PDS. The “2005 Block List” is maintained by the block office and was prepared in 2005 for the purpose of the PDS. The ADO and district supplies office told us that it was prepared

through a decentralised process handled by the pradhan and the gram panchayat secretary (and possibly the Lekhpal). Interestingly, they were unable to explain the indicators used for the classification of households as BPL for this list. Moreover, the physical copies are poorly maintained and some lists are not there in the block office anymore (or with any of the PDS functionaries).

A third list, hereafter the “2005 Digitised List”, is available on the Food and Civil Supplies Department website (<http://fcs.up.nic.in/upfood/helpline/Default.aspx>). This list is supposed to be a digitised copy of the 2005 Block List. However, there are large discrepancies between the digitised version and the physical copy of it at the block office.

In spite of much probing, we were unable to find out how the different lists came into existence and the purpose of each version. The DSO could not give a clear reason for the multiplicity of lists. On the mismatch between the last two, used for the PDS, he said that there might have been minor errors in computerisation or data collection. This sounds unconvincing, considering the degree of mismatch (see below). While he said that the information comes from the block, the block office in Shankargarh denied sending the lists.

Further, the actual distribution of ration cards did not match with any of these three lists. There were discrepancies in terms of the number of people on the lists as well as details of ration cardholders (for example, ration card number). Tables 1 and 2 record the inconsistencies in relation to Bashara. Compared with the actual distribution of ration cards, the discrepancies are greater for the 2005 Digitised List than for the 2005 Block List. Many names are missing from the 2005 Digitised List.

Table 1: Bashara: Number of Cards as Per Different Lists

Source	Number of Cards		
	Antyodaya	BPL	APL
2002 District list	NA	131 ^a	NA
2005 Digitised list	64	96	289
2005 Block list	67	109	NA
Block official	67	108	300
FPS wall and register	67	108	355

FPS = Fair Price Shop

^a Possibly including Antyodaya households (and also including two cardholders from Bairi village).

Table 2: Bashara: Actual Cards vs Digitised List

Type of Card	Number of Cards Verified	Number of Cases Where the Card Type Does Not Match the Digitised List ^a	Number of Cases Where the Card Number Does Not Match the Digitised List ^b
Antyodaya	49	8	0(41)
BPL	84	17	6(67)
APL	227	35	57(185)
No card/not listed	31	4	NA
All	391	64	63(293)

A total of 391 households were surveyed in Bashara village. Approximately 70 households could not be met because they were not available on any of the days we visited Bashara. According to the 2005 Block List, there should be 475 households and according to the Digitised List there are 449 households. Among those surveyed eight APL, 10 BPL and four Antyodaya households did not have their ration card in hand (for example, because it was lost or had not been given to them).

^a For instance, a household has an Antyodaya card but is listed as having a BPL card. This figure also represents the number of people who have a card but do not have their names on the Digitised List.

^b Not counting cases where the number could not be verified (for example, due to illegible digits or untraceable ration card). In brackets, the number of cases that could be verified.

Similar discrepancies were found in other villages of Bahadurpur and Shankargarh blocks. For instance, many people whose names were on the 2005 Digitised List said that they had no ration cards. In Gadha Katra panchayat (Shankargarh), there is a huge difference between the block list and the digitised list: the latter also has names of people from a place called “Givdoda”, which is actually uninhabited. Officials in the block deny that there are people in Givdoda or that anyone having such card numbers exists. The problem of mismatch in card numbers was very common across all the gram panchayats we visited, especially in the case of APL lists.

In short, there is an urgent need to streamline the data and prepare one reliable list for each category (Antyodaya, BPL and APL), to be updated regularly. There is complete chaos around these lists, with each level of the administration following a different list. This leads to improper distribution of PDS commodities, deprives many people of their entitlements, and opens the door for corruption.

Misclassification of Households

In Bashara we found serious problems in the classification of households as BPL, APL or Antyodaya. Many families that were really poor (like labourers or the elderly) were classified as APL. Aside from these

“exclusion errors”, there were also “inclusion errors” – cases of well-off households having a BPL or Antyodaya card. For example, one villager who owned a *pucca* house and a motorcycle, and appeared fairly well to do, possessed an Antyodaya card. An old widow with no land and no particular source of income, living in a *kaccha* house, had an APL card. Oddly, some people with the same occupation, living in the same kind of houses, and owning no land had different types of ration cards.

According to the DSO, the classification of households is a decentralised process carried out by the gram panchayat. Each gram panchayat is allotted a fixed number of cards, and the panchayat members suggest names of people for the BPL list. He claimed that the selection is done in an open gram sabha meeting. He failed to provide us any details or objective criteria by which such selections are made. On probing further, he told us that the gram sabha drew up a list of all people who were “eligible poor” and then cards were given to those on the list until the cap set for the gram panchayat is reached. He also pointed out that this cap cannot be exceeded. Once the cap has been reached, new BPL and Antyodaya cards cannot be issued.

Issues Related to APL

Two issues with respect to APL households are worth highlighting. First, there is an extreme lack of transparency in the APL list. In Shankargarh block, no APL list is maintained at the panchayat, block or tehsil offices. The only available list is the digitised list on the Food and Civil Supplies Department website, which is not accurate as discussed earlier. In contrast with BPL and Antyodaya lists, no APL list is painted on the wall of the Fair Price Shop (FPS). The gram panchayat secretary and pradhan in Bashara said that they were not there when these lists were prepared, and had not been handed any records. Though the digitised APL list in Bahadurpur block seemed more reliable and closer to the distribution of cards, even there the FPS dealers did not have APL lists.

The second issue is a serious lack of clarity about APL entitlements. APL

cardholders do not know what commodities they are entitled to or what price they are supposed to pay. In Bahadurpur block, people do not even think of the APL card as a “ration card”. Some APL households get wheat from the PDS, but the distribution of APL wheat is very erratic. In Bashara as well as in almost all villages we visited, wheat was not distributed at all or (according to a few respondents) had been distributed four to six months earlier.

On probing why only some people in the APL category get wheat, the ADO panchayat in Shankargarh and the kotedar in Bashara said “this is because there is not enough wheat for all APL households. No official at the gram panchayat, block or tehsil level could tell us how this subgroup is identified”.

One consequence of the lack of clarity regarding APL entitlements (and the APL list) is the diversion of APL grain. Distribution is very erratic and more often than not the majority of APL cardholders do not get any wheat at all – most of the APL quota is sold in the open market. In Bashara we found that, according to the records maintained at the local godown, the entire quota of APL wheat (22.2 quintals) had been lifted by the FPS dealer every month in 2013. Yet none of the APL households in Bashara had received any wheat at all. This suggests that the entire APL quota had been diverted.

The dealer maintained that he is compelled to sell some APL wheat in the open market just to recover his costs, because he loses money in the distribution to BPL and Antyodaya families. Calculations show that the dealer’s commissions are indeed too low to cover his full costs (Annexure 1, p 24). This lacuna can of course be easily used as an excuse to siphon off much more than is required to cover costs. Immediate attention needs to be given to this particular issue as low commissions give dealers a strong incentive as well as an excuse to sell PDS commodities in the open market.

Conclusions

There is no consistency between the actual distribution of ration cards and the various BPL lists maintained by the administration in Allahabad district for

the purpose of the PDS. In fact, the lists of ration cards are in a mess, with multiple lists, each differing from the others. A BPL Census was conducted in 2002 and a list was prepared. However, this is not used for the PDS. A different list, primarily for the purpose of the PDS, was prepared in 2005 at the block level but is poorly maintained. A digitised version of this 2005 Block List is available on the website of the Food and Civil Supplies Department, but it does not match the information available at the block level.

The “2002 District List” and the “2005 Digitised List” could not be compared as the 2002 District List had insufficient details (such as father’s name and ration card number were missing). There is an urgent need to remove these inconsistencies and come up with one reliable list which is updated regularly. The multiplicity of lists leads to improper distribution of PDS grain, opens the door to corruption, and reduces administrative accountability as each office claims to be using a different list. Our survey also highlighted a number of problems with the entire targeting approach, including large exclusion as well as inclusion errors in the classification of households.

There are also serious problems in relation to the APL category. To start with, there is a complete lack of transparency in the APL list. In Shankargarh, no APL list is maintained at the panchayat, block or tehsil level. The kotedar simply distributes to the persons who he “knows” are APL. A second problem is that there is a tremendous lack of clarity about APL entitlements. APL cardholders do not know what commodities they are entitled to and what prices they are

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supposed to pay. Distribution of subsidised commodities (mainly wheat and kerosene) to the APL category is erratic, and a large amount of wheat is being diverted into the open market by FPS dealers. The dealers claim that they are compelled to do this to recover the losses they face in the distribution of commodities to BPL and Antyodaya households due to low commissions. In short, there is complete chaos around the APL quota, which a number of corrupt officials and dealers are taking advantage of.

Two initiatives, currently under way, can contribute to resolving many of the issues highlighted in this article. The first is computerisation of the list of PDS ration cards, which is close to completion according to the department of food and civil supplies. More importantly, the

National Food Security Act is an opportunity for the Government of Uttar Pradesh to put the entire system on a new footing, and indeed, to move away from the targeting approach which has proved so problematic.

Annexure 1

The kotedar for Bashara gave the following account of the costs, bribes and other legal or illegal charges that have to be paid for each quintal of APL grain sold through the PDS¹

Payment for loading and unloading	Rs 9
Payment for transport	Rs 63
Payment for <i>chowkidari</i> (security) at the godown	Rs 2
Payment to the marketing inspector	Rs 10
Payment to the supply inspector	Rs 30
Payment to the pradhan	Rs 45
Total	Rs 159

¹ Some of these costs (for example, transportation and payment to the pradhan) are lump sum costs, and were divided by the relevant quantity (22.2 quintals per month, the APL quota for Bashara) to estimate the cost per quintal.

As against this total transaction cost of Rs 159 per quintal, the FPS dealers are paid an official commission of Rs 6 per quintal for APL grain according to the kotedar, and Rs 12 per quintal according to the Marketing Inspector. This implies a loss of about Rs 150 per quintal on the APL quota. To recover this loss, the dealer must sell nearly three quintals of wheat in the open market (assuming he sells at Rs 1,200/quintal which was the prevalent market rate then), out of a monthly quota of 22.2 quintals. The figure may be even higher as this calculation is limited to the costs and earnings from APL wheat and does not include some commissions paid to functionaries like the Lekhpal.

All dealers in the Shankargarh area indulge in overcharging and diversion of wheat to the open market due to the low profitability of ration shops if they were to follow the rules. These problems have been brought to the notice of the district magistrate by the FPS dealers (this was confirmed by the marketing officer of Shankargarh). The DSO also admitted that dealers are not reimbursed for rental and labour costs.