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# Serious issue if 3 cr. ration cards were cancelled, says SC

Revoked for no Aadhaar link, says plea

KRISHNADAS RAJAGOPAL  
 NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Wednesday said it was a "very serious" matter if the Centre had really cancelled around three crore ration cards, even those of tribal people and the poor, solely because they could not be biometrically linked with Aadhaar.

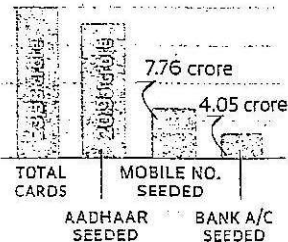
A Bench, led by Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde, asked the Centre to respond to the allegation made in a petition by Koili Devi, represented by senior advocate Colin Gonsalves, that such cancellations had led to starvation deaths across the country.

### Technological issues

"The insistence on Aadhaar and biometric authentication had led to the cancellation of nearly four crore ration cards in the country, according to the Union of India. The Union of India casually gives an explanation that these cancelled cards were bogus. The real

### High Aadhaar linkage

Of the 23.58 crore ration cards (RCs) issued in India, 89% are Aadhaar-seeded, while 33% use mobile numbers and 17% bank accounts too



SOURCE: NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY PORTAL

reason is that the technological system based on iris identification, thumb prints, non-possession of Aadhaar, non-functioning of the Internet in rural and remote areas, etc., led to largescale cancellation of ration cards, without notice to the family concerned," said a report submitted by the petitioner.

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# Serious issue if 3 cr. ration cards were cancelled: SC

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Mr. Gonsalves said the "petition is based on reports that an estimated two to four crore ration cards have been cancelled in the country without prior notice to the beneficiaries". Right to food, which the ration card symbolised, cannot be curbed or cancelled because of lack of Aadhaar.

Ms. Koili Devi's 11-year-old daughter, Santhoshi Kumari, was allegedly a victim of hunger death in Jharkhand in 2017. She said the family's ration card was cancelled due to non-linkage with Aadhaar. She sought an independent investigation into the starvation deaths, restoration of the cancelled ration cards and compensation for the death of her daughter.

Mr. Gonsalves said the government's continued emphasis on Aadhaar was unfortunate as the Supreme Court had laid down in clear terms that "no insistence on Aadhaar can be done for statutory entitlements".

"Tribals either do not have Aadhaar cards or the identification does not work in tribal and rural areas. Because of this reliance on Aadhaar cards, can you imagine three crore cards are gone..." he submitted.

"Three crore cards have gone?" the Chief Justice asked incredulously.

"Yes, starvation deaths are taking place. Three crore ration cards have gone... I can show the Union of India's declaration. It is an announcement of the Prime Minister," Mr. Gon-

salves responded.

He argued that the States were in a denial mode, blaming the deaths on diarrhoea and malaria.

"In fact, anything but lack of food. This cruel exercise deprived millions of Indians living below the poverty line of food and led to starvation deaths in Jharkhand, U.P., Odisha, Karnataka, M.P., Maharashtra, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and other States," the petitioner's side said in a report prepared after going through the responses obtained from the States.

Additional Solicitor General Aman Lekhi said the statements made by the petitioner side were misplaced. Issuance of ration card was not dependent on the Aadhaar card. Alternative mechanisms were in place. Besides, the issuance of ration cards was primarily the responsibility of the State governments.

Mr. Lekhi said the petitioners should ideally move the respective High Court, rather than file an omnibus petition in the apex court. He said the petitioners had come directly to the apex court without raising their issue with the grievance redressal mechanism under the National Food Security Act.

"We are persuaded to consider this case because of their [petitioners'] statement that ration cards have been cancelled... That is a very serious matter," Chief Justice Bobde said in response to Mr. Lekhi's submissions for the Centre.