General Studies-2; Topic: Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation

Aadhaar-based Biometric Authentication (ABBA)

1) Introduction

- Aadhaar-based Biometric Authentication (ABBA) system uses an electronic point of sale (PoS) machine to authenticate each transaction
- The Central government has been insisting on 100% Aadhaar "seeding" for PDS, MGNREGA and pensions
- For successful ABBA transaction, Seeding of Aadhaar numbers, PoS machines, Internet connection, Remote Aadhaar servers and Fingerprint recognition must work simultaneously.

2) Advantages

- ABBA helps reduce corruption
- Eliminate identity fraud (for example, duplicate or bogus beneficiaries)
- Reduce siphoning of grains by the dealers, thereby improving the delivery of welfare schemes to the benefit of the poor.

3) Reasons for Exclusions

- Many are unaware of the seeding requirement.
- In some cases, the middlemen had seeded it wrongly.
- Seeding process is not as simple as it sounds.
- ABBA requires power supply, a functional PoS machine, mobile and Internet connectivity and fingerprint authentication which may not work at times.
- Study shows high biometric failure rates.

4) Problems with Aadhaar Seeding

- Recent events in Jharkhand shed some light on the damage done by compulsory biometric authentication in the Public Distribution System (PDS).
- ABBA requires Aadhaar seeding. Seeding often creates inconsistencies between ration-cards database and the Aadhaar database.
- For instance, names may be spelt differently in the two databases.
- There was a similar hassle of Aadhaar seeding in the context of the PAN-Aadhaar linkage.
- For underprivileged people, many of them depend heavily on middlemen, who extract a price at every step.
- Biometric authentication at ration shop requires successful fingerprint recognition. There are elderly persons and manual labourers with rough fingerprints.
- Even those for whom ABBA eventually works, face much inconvenience, anxiety and waste of time.

5) Present Issues / Challenges

- Neither seeding nor the ABBA can stop quantity fraud.
- PDS dealer gives people a little less than their due — say 23 kg of food grain per month instead of 25 kg.
- If dealers give people less than their due, biometric authentication does not help.
- ABBA has minimum role in reducing corruption in the short time.

- Many poor people do not know the rules of Aadhaar seeding and biometric authentication.
- Inclusion errors increase the financial burden of the state, exclusion errors can often leave poor families vulnerable to hunger.
- Lack of an Aadhaar number automatically disqualifies eligible individuals
- It raises Privacy issues.
- It is flexibility (an elderly person asking a neighbour to fetch their grain) that is lost when the ABBA is made mandatory.
- Cases of deaths due to hunger as people could not collect rations because of a biometric mismatch at the PDS shop.
- Disenfranchisement of the elderly and the disabled, as ABBA requires beneficiaries to visit the PDS outlet personally for fingerprint authentication.
- Biometric systems around the world have largely failed to provide their intended benefits.

6) Way Forward

- Inconsistencies need to be resolved for successful Aadhaar seeding.
- The transitional phase should be flexible
- It is essential to deal with issues of duplication, use less disruptive methods than Aadhaar such as food coupons, smart cards, and last-mile tracking
- Using other technology to curb corruption like computerisation, SMS alerts, online availability of official records, toll-free help lines and so on