

Aadhaar linking exposes 4.4 lakh ghost schoolkids

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NEW DELHI: The 12-digit Aadhaar number has helped states strike off 4.4 lakh "ghost students" from schools across Jharkhand, Manipur and Andhra Pradesh, for whom the government had been earmarking funds under the mid-day meal scheme.

The government provides free lunch to students from class one to eight on working days under the mid-day meal scheme.

This month, the Union human resource development (HRD) ministry made the unique identification number mandatory for students to obtain mid-day meals. This evoked a strong reaction from activists, who claimed the move would result in many beneficiaries being excluded from the scheme.

However, data for 2015-16 and 2016-17 shared by the three states

with the HRD ministry revealed that many government schools in the three states had been showing non-existent students on their rolls to claim additional funds from the mid-day meal scheme allocation. For instance, Andhra Pradesh — which linked all its 29 lakh government school students to Aadhaar — had 2.1 lakh claimants who existed only on paper. Their enrolment was cancelled after the anomaly was brought to the government's notice, an official said.

"We are still in the process of collating data from states, but available figures show fake enrolment of students in government schools. The number of fake students may go up further once all the states share data," an HRD official said.

In Jharkhand, the names of 2.2 lakh non-existent students have been deleted from school records.

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4.4 lakh ghost schoolkids

So far, 89% of the 48 lakh students enrolled in the state's government schools have availed of Aadhaar numbers. The number of ghost students discovered in Manipur schools stood at 1,500.

Most states in India share the financial burden for the mid-day meal scheme with the Centre at a 40:60 ratio. The ratio for north-eastern states is 90:10, with the Centre paying the bulk of the funds.

Of the 13.16 crore children enrolled in 11.5 lakh schools across India, as many as 10.03 crore students availed of mid-day meals in 2015-16. "We are yet to calculate the money saved through the elimination of fake beneficiaries," an HRD ministry official said.

The problem is not confined to ghost students. A pilot study conducted by Kerala's department of general education in 2014, after Aadhaar numbers were integrated with the student database, found its schools to have an excess of 3,892 teachers. The state sanctions one teacher for every 45 students.

"Due to this exercise, no new teaching posts have been sanctioned in the state for the last two years. On the other hand, the notional savings achieved is estimated at ₹540 crore per annum," said a source.

At present, only 30% of the 11 crore students enrolled in class

one to eight at government schools across India possess Aadhaar cards. The government plans to bring all students and teachers under the scheme by June this year.

ABP Pandey, CEO, Unique Identification Authority of India, said there was more to the 12-digit number than just weeding out bogus beneficiaries. "It will also ensure that benefits meant for a particular student do not fail to reach him/her. Money that was earlier siphoned away through the submission of false enrolment figures will be checked. The state will have more resources at its disposal to improve school facilities," he told HT.

According to a government statement issued on March 7, Aadhaar linkage has helped save as much as ₹49,000 crore by plugging leakages in LPG, scholarship, MNREGA and pension schemes over the last two-and-a-half years.

Pandey said it would be wrong to assume that students without Aadhaar cards will be denied mid-day meal benefits.

"Section 7 of the Aadhaar Act clearly states that until the number is assigned to an individual, he or she can continue to avail them on the basis of alternative identification documents," he added.

In August 2015, the Supreme Court had ruled that while Aadhaar can be used for five public distribution schemes, it cannot be made mandatory. Even as the case lay pending, the government decided to notify the Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Act in March 2016 after getting it cleared in Parliament.

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