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Slumdweller get APL cards instead of Antyodaya benefits

Slum dwellers and homeless beggars evacuated from their original settlements and shifted to new areas in Ahmedabad 'no longer live below poverty line', if their ration cards and government records are to be believed, which show belonging to the Above Poverty Line (APL) category.

Consider these: Shaligram and Jhumar Tayde are an old homeless beggar couple who live under a tree at Piplag in Ahmedabad, after they were driven out from Khodiyarnagar. But the government gave them an APL ration card.

Fatema Sheikh (85), a vagrant, homeless widow, sleeps beside a tea stall at night and begs in the day. She was shifted from Santoshnagar to Khodiyarnagar and then to Piplag. Despite being entitled for a card under the Antyodaya Ann Yojana (AAY), due to her extremely poor condition, she has an APL card.

They are not alone. Many of the 2,500 to 3,000 people relocated from Khodiyarnagar, Kankaria, Dhor Bazar, Danilimbda, Kalupur, Paldi, Gulbai Tekra, Mangal Talavdi and the Shah Alam slum areas are poorer after their re-settlement, but have been given only APL cards. The rest do not have any card.

Besides, at a time when the state government is moving towards Mobile Ration Cards for poor migrants, the slum dwellers evacuated to suit the city's growth plans are refused ration at ration stores.

Constant shuffling denies these poor families foodgrains and other items available on ration rates. The Tayde family, for instance, makes around Rs 50 a day from begging and gets only kerosene with their APL card. Shaligram said: "My wife goes begging everyday and in the evening we manage a meal with whatever she earns. Before we were evacuated from Khodiyarnagar, we used to get ration with our BPL card. But now, with this APL card, we get only kerosene. Many a times we survive on leftovers dumped in the nearby areas."

Many evacuees in Piplag have now left their traditional occupations to engage in manual labour. They earn about Rs 100 a day; have no pucca house, land, or other things which can qualify them for APL; but for the government they fall in the APL category.

Besides, the Antyodaya category meant for the poorest lot — widows, disabled, ones without family and others— are not issued AAY cards easily. Fatema Sheikh, who had applied for an AAY card, has been waiting for one for the last 15 years. She was asked to get a double stamp on the BPL card to come under the AAY category. But after she was shifted to Piplag, she was told she no longer belonged to the BPL category.

The state government records show 7,133 people in the AAY category, 78,722 in the BPL category and 218,811 in the APL category.

Explaining how their cards change, Mazhar Pathan from Gomtipur Chapra said: “We were first evacuated from Gulbai Tekra to Odhav and then to Sorainagar. We were denied ration at stores in Sorainagar and were asked to go to the old PDS store and fill a form for renewing the cards. We got a card six months after filling the form (sogandnamu), but when we went to use it, we were told that we have been shifted to the APL category and are entitled to get only kerosene.”

Many others driven out of their original hutments and shifted to other settlements have the same story to tell.

The situation worsens for evacuees as ration stores in new areas refuse to accept their new APL cards. Manecklal Navkar from Piplag said: “We travel thrice a week to Khodiyarnagar and others go to Danilimda or Behrampur, nearly 20 to 25 kms away, to get day-to-day commodities from ration stores. We are refused ration at stores in the neighborhood areas and are asked to go to PDS stores in our previous settlements. It costs us Rs 300 to 500 every month. Piplag, which is an industrial area, has no ration store anyway.”

Municipal Commissioner I P Gautam said he had no clue about this. “When we shifted them, we also got their ration stores transferred. But if the people are not getting ration from the stores, I will ask the Deputy

Municipal Commissioner to look into the matter.”

Hareet Shukla, Collector, Ahmedabad, said he cannot comment on the discrepancies and only the Food and Supplies Department can fix the problem.

According to the Central government regulations, BPL families are entitled to 9 kg wheat, 3.5 kg rice, 1 kg sugar, and 10 litre kerosene.

Baburam Patel, a BPL card holder said, the ration stores give far less than the quantity fixed, and also refuse to give them the bills of purchase.

“Even with the BPL cards, we used to get only 7.5 kg wheat instead of 9 kg, 1 kg rice instead of 3.5 kg and 6 to 7 litre kerosene instead of the quantity allotted to us. When we demanded ration on the quantity fixed by the government we were threatened that we won’t get any.”