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Constraints in the Public Distribution System: Beneficiary and Fair Price Shop Owner Perspectives from Selected Districts of Assam

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Abstract: ***Beneficiaries of India's Public Distribution System (PDS) rank the usefulness of the grain above access problems, while Fair Price Shop (FPS) owners rank the economics of running the shop above administrative ones, according to primary data from two Assam districts. Study surveyed 400 ration-card households in eight villages of Kamrup (Rural) and Barpeta, and interviewed 24 FPS owners. Constraints identified in a pilot (11 for beneficiaries, 6 for owners) were ranked using Garrett's technique. Quality dissatisfaction (83.25% of households), mismatch between entitlement and need, and non-availability of items are the top three demand-side constraints in both districts. Short delivery (35.5% of households), informal payments for ration cards (25.25%) and weak grievance redressal are concentrated in particular villages. Among owners, delayed commission (6–7 months or more, at rates from ₹110 to ₹180 per quintal), inadequate storage and unreimbursed operating costs rank highest. Households attribute short delivery mainly to diversion (82.6%), while owners report timely grain supply and financial strain, which is consistent with a link between shop economics and leakage that the data cannot test. The study discusses locally targeted reforms, including timely commission payment and shop-level monitoring.***

Keywords: Public Distribution System; Fair Price Shops; Garrett ranking; food security; leakage; Assam

1. Introduction

India's Public Distribution System (PDS) is among the largest food-security programmes in the world, and its effectiveness depends on what happens at the last mile: whether households receive the grain they are entitled to, and whether the Fair Price Shops (FPS) that deliver it can operate viably. Under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) 2013, each person in a Priority Household (PHH) is entitled to 5 kg of foodgrains per month, and each Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) household to 35 kg per month, at subsidised prices. Despite this coverage, the system continues to face structural and operational problems (Raj et al., 2024). Recent estimates suggest that a large share of PDS grain does not reach intended beneficiaries; Das, Roy and Gulati (2024) put national leakage at about 28 per cent of allocated foodgrains and the 2022–23 figure for Assam at 22.9 per cent.

Most studies of these problems take the beneficiary's point of view. Far fewer examine the FPS owner, who is the last link in the supply chain, who is paid by commission, and who is held responsible by households for problems that may originate upstream. Few studies examine both sides of the system in the same locality, and the North-East has received comparatively little attention. Assam is predominantly rural, with about 86 per cent of its population living in rural areas (Government of Assam, Directorate of Economics and Statistics), and it combines extensive PDS coverage with persistent food-security and nutrition challenges. This article addresses that gap using primary data from two districts of Assam, Kamrup (Rural) and Barpeta. It asks three questions:

1) Which demand-side constraints do PDS beneficiaries consider most serious, and how does their ranking differ across districts and development blocks?
2) Which supply-side constraints do FPS owners consider most serious?
3) What do the two sets of findings say, taken together, about where the system is failing at the last mile?

The article makes three contributions. First, it places a ranking of beneficiary constraints (11 items, 400 households) beside a ranking of FPS-owner constraints (6 items, 24 owners) collected in the same sampled villages. Second, it shows that the constraints beneficiaries rank highest, which concern the quality and adequacy of grain, differ from those that dominate in particular blocks, such as short delivery in Chamaria and Bezera and distance in Boko. This points to the need for locally targeted reform. Third, it documents FPS-owner accounts of delayed commission, uncovered operating costs and weak storage, which sit alongside beneficiary reports of short delivery and informal payments. The data do not allow us to test whether one causes the other, but they suggest that the way FPS owners are paid deserves attention in the debate on leakage.

2. Background and Literature

The PDS supply chain: The PDS is run jointly by the Centre and the states. The Centre procures foodgrains at the Minimum Support Price and manages bulk storage through the Food Corporation of India. State civil supplies departments then move grain through state, district and block godowns to Fair Price Shops. The FPS owner stores the grain, verifies the beneficiary (through electronic Point of Sale devices) and distributes the entitlement. The FPS is thus the last-mile service provider, directly answerable to households, and its viability shapes how the whole system performs.

Leakage and short delivery: The best-known concern is diversion of subsidised grain. Gulati and Jain (2013) estimated that more than 40 per cent of subsidised rice and wheat meant for distribution through fair price shops was diverted to the open market. A more recent ICRIER study (Das, Roy and Gulati, 2024) found that about 28 per cent of allocated grain, roughly 20 million tons, did not reach intended beneficiaries, with a leakage rate of 22.9 per cent for Assam in 2022–23. Beneficiary-level studies report related problems: short delivery, which FPS dealers often justify by claiming insufficient stock (Jadhav et al., 2022), and informal payments and the role of middlemen in ration-card services (Jadhav et al., 2023).

Quality and use of PDS grain: Poor grain quality is a recurrent complaint. Press reports from Telangana suggest that only about half of targeted beneficiaries actually consumed the subsidised rice they bought, with many selling it in the open market (Reddy, 2018), and Shrinivas et al. (2018) similarly note that households sell or trade rations when higher-quality grain is available outside the system. Dutta (2023) finds that PDS supplies are often insufficient for household requirements, leading to partial reliance on the open market.

Access, technology and exclusion: Biometric and Aadhaar-based authentication has increased transparency but also created access barriers for genuine beneficiaries (Masiero, 2020). Fingerprint failure is especially common among elderly people and manual workers (Jakhar, 2024), and delays in e-KYC and ration-card issuance have excluded eligible households in several states (CLRA, 2024; Ngullie, 2025). Long queues and irregular opening hours are also widely reported (Garg and Sundar, 2013; Verma, 2018; The Economics Society, SRCC, 2022).

The FPS owner's side: The supply side has received much less empirical attention. FPS owners earn commission on the quantity distributed, and their operations depend on timely payment, adequate storage and working equipment. Chakraborty and Sarmah (2020) analyse supply and transportation disruptions at Indian fair price shops, and Gupta et al. (2025) assess the public distribution network on economic, social and environmental criteria.

Evidence on how FPS owners themselves rank their problems, and how those rankings compare with households' views in the same locality, remains limited. Existing work is mostly national or from other states, and focuses on beneficiaries. We found few studies that rank constraints separately for beneficiaries and FPS owners in Assam. This article fills that gap with a ranking by both groups across two districts.

3. Study Area, Data and Methods

3.1 Study area

Assam has about 31.2 million people (Census 2011), of whom roughly 86 per cent live in rural areas, against an all-India rural share of 69 per cent. The study covers two districts, Kamrup (Rural) and Barpeta, chosen purposively because both rank among the districts with the most ration cards and NFSA beneficiaries in the state.

3.2 Sampling

The study used a multistage sampling design. In the first stage, the two districts were selected as above. In the second stage, development blocks were chosen according to the number of ration cards issued: in Kamrup (Rural) two blocks with the highest and two with the lowest number of cards, and in Barpeta three blocks (the block of Mandia contributed both a highest-card and a lowest-card village). In the third stage, one village was selected from each block on the same criterion, giving eight villages. From each village, 50 ration-card households (AAY or PHH) were selected at random, for a total of 400 households.

Table 1: Sample design: selected development blocks, villages and households in Kamrup (Rural) and Barpeta

District	Development block	Village	Selection basis	Households
Kamrup (R)	Sualkuchi	Bongshar	Highest ration cards	50
Kamrup (R)	Chamaria	Sontoli	Highest ration cards	50
Kamrup (R)	Boko	Bekeli	Lowest ration cards	50
Kamrup (R)	Bezera	Saraighat	Lowest ration cards	50
Barpeta	Mandia	Jania	Highest ration cards	50
Barpeta	Mandia	Baghbar	Lowest ration cards	50
Barpeta	Ruposhi	Titapani	Highest ration cards	50
Barpeta	Gobardhana	Howly	Lowest ration cards	50

Source: author's compilation from district Food, Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs department.

Sample size was set using Cochran's formula with p = 0.5, a 95 per cent confidence level (Z = 1.96) and a 5 per cent margin of error, giving n_0 = 385. A finite population correction for N = 116,147 ration-card households in the selected area gave about 384, and the sample was rounded up to 400. On the other hand, capture the supply side, 24 FPS owners were interviewed, drawn from the sampled villages.

3.3 Data collection and ranking of constraints

Primary data were collected between July 2024 and July 2025 using structured interview schedules, one for beneficiary households and a separate one for FPS owners. A pilot with 20 households, purposively chosen from Bezera and Boko blocks, was used to test the instrument. Analysis used SPSS and MS Excel, and open-ended responses and field remarks were used to interpret the results. Based on the pilot, 11 demand-side and 6 supply-side constraints were identified.

Table 2: Constraints identified in the pilot survey

Demand-side (beneficiaries)	Supply-side (FPS owners)
Quality-related dissatisfaction	Financial constraints and delayed settlements
Mismatch between demand and supply	Inadequate storage and infrastructure
Non-availability of items specified under the scheme	High operational costs
Distance to FPS	Quality-related issues in PDS commodities
Long hours spent in queues	Administrative and procedural barriers
Weak grievance redressal mechanism	Challenges in beneficiary verification and authentication
Receiving less than the entitled quantity	
Improper behaviour of PDS staff	
Delay in getting and reissuing ration cards	
Unauthorised payments for ration-card issuance	
Biometric authentication problems	

Source: field survey, 2024–25.

To analyse and prioritise the identified constraints, Garrett's Ranking Technique was used separately for the demand-side for each of the selected districts and on the other hand, supply-side constraints were analysed together for both districts, as the number of FPS owners included in the sample was relatively smaller compared to the number of beneficiary households. Garrett's Ranking Technique allows conversion of respondents' ordinal rankings into quantitative scores and helps meaningful comparison and aggregation of individual observations. It is widely used in social science and agricultural economics research to rank factors/ constraints based on respondents' observations (Garrett and Woodworth, 1969).

Under this method, respondents were asked to rank the identified constraints according to the severity of the problems faced by them. The ranks assigned by each respondent were then converted into per cent position values using the following formula:

$$\text{Percent Position} = \frac{100 \times (R_{ij} - 0.50)}{N_j}$$

Where, R_{ij} = Rank given for the i^{th} constraint by the j^{th} respondent

N_j = Total number of constraints ranked by the j^{th} respondent

Then, the calculated per cent position values were converted into Garrett scores by referring to the Garrett conversion table. For each constraint, the scores found from all respondents were added and then divided by the number of respondents to obtain the mean Garrett score. The constraint with the highest mean score was considered the most severe problem, while those with lower scores were ranked accordingly.

4. Results: Demand-Side Constraints

Beneficiaries rank grain quality and the adequacy of the entitlement as their most serious problems in both districts, ahead of access barriers such as distance, queues and biometric failure. Short delivery, informal payments and weak grievance handling are concentrated in particular villages rather than spread evenly.

4.1 How common is each problem?

Survey responses from the 400 households show the following prevalence (Table 3):

Table 3: Prevalence of demand-side constraints

Constraint	Share of households	Detail
Dissatisfied with grain quality	83.25%	11.75% neutral, 5.0% satisfied, none "very satisfied"
Received less than entitlement	35.5%	18.5% "always", 17.0% "often"; 64.5% "never"
Delay in obtaining or reissuing ration card	69%	Most beneficiary waits of 3–6 months or more
Paid for a card issue or renewal	25.25%	All payers did not receive any receipt for payment; amounts from about ₹200 to ₹3,000, about ₹500 per added member
Identification problems	15%	13.25% biometric failure, 1.75% Aadhaar-linking; separately, about 28% report errors in card details
FPS more than 2 km away	30%	68 households at 2–3 km and 52 beyond 3 km; 280 within 2 km

Source: field survey, 2024–25.

Quality: Respondents describe the rice as old, unclean and take longer time to cook, and some call it "plastic rice". Some households feed it to animals or sell it at a low price, and many avoid buying FPS wheat, which is only distributed in two villages (Howly and Titapani) out of 8 villages of study area, which they also find inferior. Selling or trading rations when better grain is available outside the system is a pattern noted also in other work (Shrinivas et al., 2018).

Short delivery: The usual shortfall is 2–3 kg per household per month, for both PHH and AAY cards. Among households that reported receiving less than their entitlement, most (82.6%) attributed it to corruption or diversion of supplies by the FPS, and only 1.45% to insufficient government allocation. These are households' perceptions, not audited stock records.

Entitlement versus need: Households were asked how their monthly need compared with what they receive. The gap is far larger for PHH households (mean shortfall 21.4 kg, with 79.8% reporting a moderate or severe shortfall of more than 10 kg) than for AAY households (mean 4.95 kg, with 27%

reporting a surplus). This is consistent with PHH entitlements, which are fixed per person, and not sufficient for larger households, whereas AAY gets a flat 35 kg per household. Because "need" is self-reported, the gap measures perceived adequacy, not a verified nutritional shortfall.

Table 4: Gap between household requirement and PDS entitlement, by card type

Card type	Surplus	No gap	Mild (1–10 kg)	Moderate (11–20 kg)	Severe (>20 kg)	Households	Mean gap (kg)
AAY	17 (27.0%)	12 (19.0%)	16 (25.4%)	14 (22.2%)	4 (6.3%)	63	4.95
PHH	0	2 (0.6%)	66 (19.6%)	115 (34.1%)	154 (45.7%)	337	21.41
All	17 (4.3%)	14 (3.5%)	82 (20.5%)	129 (32.3%)	158 (39.5%)	400	18.82

Source: field survey, 2024–25.

Informal payments: Among the households that paid, 74.49% paid the FPS owner and 25.51% a local middleman. The payments were called "processing fee" (63.27%) or "official fee" (36.73%), but none came with an official receipt. Beneficiaries said the problem was mainly found in Chamaria, Mandia and Bezera blocks, and that forms are often unavailable at the FPS but available through middlemen.

Other constraints: Staff behaviour (18.25% of all respondents) and non-availability of items (18.50%) are the leading reasons for dissatisfaction with the overall service of the FPS, ahead of waiting time (8.25%). Households want better grain quality (41.75%), a larger quantity (26.5%) and better grievance redressal (21.5%), while 6.5% want easier access to shops and 3.75% more variety. Many respondents said grievance mechanisms are absent or hard to reach, even though the NFSA mandate a District Grievance Redressal Office in every district.

4.2 Priority ranking by district

Table 5 reports mean Garrett scores for the 11 constraints. The first three ranks are identical in both districts: quality, mismatch between need and supply, and non-availability of items.

Table 5: Garrett scores and ranks of demand-side constraints, by district

Constraint	Kamrup (R) score	Rank	Barpeta score	Rank
Quality-related dissatisfaction	73.32	1	68.71	1
Mismatch between demand and supply	64.56	2	67.35	2
Non-availability of items specified under the scheme	54.28	3	63.37	3
Distance to FPS	53.07	4	45.65	7
Long hours in queue	49.82	5	37.49	10
Weak grievance redressal mechanism	49.35	6	53.70	4
Received less than entitled quantity	49.23	7	40.10	9
Improper PDS staff behaviour	43.13	8	43.44	8
Delay in getting and reissuing ration card	40.62	9	46.95	6
Unauthorised payments for ration-card issuance	36.74	10	50.56	5
Biometric authentication problem	34.85	11	31.65	11

Source: field survey, 2024–25.

The pattern separates two groups. Households put the usefulness of the grain (is it edible, and is there enough of it?) first in both districts. Access and process problems, such as distance, queues, card delays, informal payments and biometrics, come lower, though they still affect a sizeable minority. The main differences between districts are that distance (rank 4 against 7) and queues (rank 5 against 10) matter more in Kamrup, while informal payments (rank 5 against 10), grievance redressal (rank 4 against 6) and card delays (rank 6 against 9) matter more in Barpeta.

4.3 Village-level differences

Table 6: Highest-ranked demand-side constraint in each sampled village

District	Block (village)	Top constraint	Score	Second constraint	Score
Kamrup (R)	Sualkuchi (Bongshar)	Mismatch between demand and supply	80.80	Quality-related dissatisfaction	74.20
Kamrup (R)	Chamaria (Sontoli)	Received less than entitled quantity	83.00	Quality-related dissatisfaction	72.00
Kamrup (R)	Boko (Bekeli)	Distance to FPS	75.30	Quality-related dissatisfaction	72.00
Kamrup (R)	Bezera (Saraighat)	Received less than entitled quantity	79.92	Quality-related dissatisfaction	75.08
Barpeta	Mandia (Jania)	Received less than entitled quantity	83.00	Mismatch between demand and supply	66.22
Barpeta	Mandia (Baghbar)	Weak grievance redressal mechanism	75.80	Quality-related dissatisfaction	66.80
Barpeta	Ruposhi (Titapani)	Quality-related dissatisfaction	78.82	Non-availability of items specified under the scheme	71.84
Barpeta	Gobardhana (Howly)	Non-availability of items specified under the scheme	79.76	Mismatch between demand and supply	69.66

Source: field survey, 2024–25.

Quality ranks first or second in six of the eight villages and mismatch ranks first, second or third in six, so these two are systemic. By contrast, the leading constraint in the other villages differs: short delivery in Sontoli, Saraighat and Jania, distance in Bekeli, grievance handling in Baghbar, and non-availability in Howley. Short delivery is especially

localised. Its score is exactly 83.0 in Sontoli and Jania (the top of the scale for an 11-item list) and exactly 17.0 in four villages (Bongshar, Bekeli, Titapani and Howly), which shows that households in these villages all rank it as the worst problem and all rank it as the least or no problem respectively. This is consistent with short delivery being a feature of particular shops rather than of the districts or blocks as a whole. The full 11-constraint scores for each village are in the Appendix.

5. Results: Supply-Side Constraints

FPS owners reported no problems in receiving grain from the government. Their main difficulties are financial: their commission is paid late and at varying rates, and they must meet storage and running costs from their own pockets.

5.1 What FPS owners did not report

The 24 FPS owners interviewed reported no problems with receiving grain from the state. They said stock is delivered in the first ten days of each month, in quantities based on the number of beneficiaries registered with the shop, and that transport (including vehicles and its cost) is arranged by the government. They did not report insufficient supply, damaged or poorly packed goods, mismatched quantities or delays in delivery. This matters for the interpretation of the demand-side results: owners do not cite shortage of allocation as the reason for short delivery.

5.2 Constraints owners do report

1) **Financial constraints and delayed settlements:** FPS owners receive no salary. They earn commission on the quantity distributed, which depends on the number of registered AAY and PHH beneficiaries. In one sampled shop in Chamaria block, 62 AAY and 527 PHH cardholders (589 in all) were allotted 21.35 quintals and 107.60 quintals of rice, a total of 128.95 quintals. At the reported rate of ₹143 per quintal, the monthly commission would be ₹18,439.85. Owners said payment is supposed to be monthly but arrives irregularly, with delays of 6–7 months or more, and no incentive is given for efficient operation. The rate itself also varies: owners reported ₹140, ₹143 and ₹145 per quintal, ₹110 in some villages and up to ₹180 in Howly. On the same 128.95 quintals, ₹110 would yield ₹14,185 and ₹180 would yield ₹23,211. No financial support is given for stock maintenance or infrastructure.
2) **Inadequate storage and infrastructure:** Because each FPS serves many cardholders, the monthly allotment is large. Several owners have no separate storage and keep grain in a small shop, which leads to overcrowding, poor handling and difficulty maintaining stock quality. They cannot afford to improve storage.
3) **High operational costs:** Electricity, repair of weighing machines and e-PoS devices, rent or repair of the premises and wages for helpers are not covered by the scheme. With late payments, many owners use personal funds for daily expenses, which affects the sustainability of the shop.
4) **Quality of commodities:** Owners acknowledged complaints about broken grain, dust, stones and rice that looks like plastic and takes longer to cook. They said these complaints create tension with households, because the shopkeeper is blamed for the poor quality even though it is beyond his or her control.
5) **Administrative and procedural barriers:** Resolving quality complaints, documentation errors, identification problems and demand gaps with officials is slow, requires repeated visits and costs time and money.
6) **Beneficiary verification and authentication:** Owners reported difficulty identifying genuine beneficiaries during ration-card applications, including both inclusion of ineligible and exclusion of eligible households. Many households lack awareness of documents and Aadhaar linkage. Later, biometric authentication is slow because of poor connectivity and device limits, and fails frequently for elderly people.

5.3 Priority ranking

Table 7: Garrett scores and ranks of supply-side constraints (24 FPS owners, both districts pooled)

Supply-side constraint	Garrett score	Rank
Financial constraints and delayed settlements	74.29	1
Inadequate storage and infrastructure facilities	58.54	2
High operational costs	54.08	3
Quality-related issues in PDS commodities	50.92	4
Administrative and procedural barriers	33.71	5
Challenges in beneficiary verification and authentication	28.17	6

Source: field survey, 2024–25.

Finance and infrastructure dominate: the three top-ranked constraints (delayed commission, storage, operating costs) all concern the economics of running a shop. Quality, administration and verification rank lower, even though owners acknowledged them. The ranking pools both districts and rests on 24 interviews, so it should be read as an indication of priorities, not as a precise ordering. Differences between adjacent ranks, such as quality (50.92) and operating costs (54.08), are small.

6. Discussion

Placing the two rankings side by side shows where beneficiaries and FPS owners agree, where they disagree, and which links the data suggest but cannot confirm.

Both groups see quality as a problem but assign responsibility differently: Beneficiaries rank quality first in both districts (73.32 in Kamrup and 68.71 in Barpeta), and 83.25% are dissatisfied with it. FPS owners acknowledge the same complaints but rank them fourth, and say they are blamed for problems that begin upstream. Both accounts can be true: the grain is of poor quality when it reaches the shop, and the household sees only the shop. The consequence is friction at the point of delivery, with the owner as the face of a failure he or she did not cause.

Short delivery and owner finances may be linked: Households that reported short delivery overwhelmingly attributed it to corruption or diversion by the FPS (82.6%) and not to insufficient allocation (1.45%). FPS owners, for

their part, report that stock arrives on time and in the quantity registered, and that they work for commission that is paid months late (6–7 months or more), at rates that vary from ₹110 to ₹180 per quintal, while carrying storage, electricity, equipment and staff costs from their own funds. Short delivery is also strongly concentrated: it is the top-ranked constraint in three of the eight villages (by every respondent in Sontoli and Jania), while in four others (Bongshar, Bekeli, Titapani and Howley) every respondent ranks it last. If shops were uniformly short-changing households, we would expect the problem to be spread more evenly. Its concentration points to shop-level behaviour, and it is a reasonable hypothesis that shops under greater financial strain are the ones more likely to withhold grain. One suggestive observation is that Howley, where an owner reported the highest commission rate (₹180 per quintal), is one of the villages with no reported short delivery. This is a single case and should not be over-read. A shop-level comparison of commission rate, payment delay and household-reported shortfall would test the hypothesis directly, and we identify it as a priority for further research.

Informal payments and the gatekeeping role: One in four households paid to obtain or renew a ration card or to add a member's name. Owners, on their side, describe the application process as time-consuming and note that households lack documents. Where the shop is the point of access to card services, forms are unavailable at the FPS but available through middlemen, and owners' income is delayed, informal payments may be a predictable result of the arrangement even though they are unauthorised. The data show the pattern, not the motive. Their concentration in Chamaria, Mandia and Bezera blocks again suggests local variation in enforcement and practice.

Authentication matters less than expected: Biometric problems rank last for beneficiaries in both districts (scores 34.85 and 31.65), and verification ranks last for owners (28.17). About 15% of households report identification problems, so the issue is real for a minority, notably the elderly and manual workers (Masiero, 2020; Jakhar, 2024), but it is a lower priority than grain quality, sufficiency and the economics of the shop.

Adequacy is a policy question, not a shop-level one: The second-ranked constraint in both districts is the mismatch between entitlement and need, which is especially severe for PHH households (mean gap of 21.4 kg). No FPS owner can resolve this, since it follows from the per-person entitlement in the NFSA and from household size. It also helps explain why households place adequacy above access.

Local variation: Rankings diverge across villages: distance in Bekeli, grievance redressal in Baghbar, quality in Titapani and non-availability in Howly. A uniform district-level response would therefore miss the main problem in several places, which supports the case for targeting reform by locality.

7. Policy Implications

The findings suggest five priorities. Each is tied to the evidence above and is offered for discussion, since the study cannot assess costs or feasibility.

1) **Pay FPS commission on time and review the rate.** The top-ranked supply-side constraint is delayed settlement (6–7 months or more), and reported rates differ by village from ₹110 to ₹180 per quintal against a rate owners described as ₹143. A fixed monthly payment date, with direct transfer to the owner's bank account, and a check that the notified rate is being paid, would address a problem that both raises costs for owners and may contribute to leakage.
2) **Cover or share the costs of running the shop.** Storage, electricity, weighing machines, e-PoS devices and helper wages are not covered. A small fixed allowance or support for storage in shops serving large numbers of cardholders would reduce owners' reliance on personal funds.
3) **Target monitoring where short delivery is concentrated.** Short delivery is a village- and shop-level problem in this sample. Shop-specific measures, such as social audits, displaying monthly entitlements and stock at the shop, and a verifiable quantity record at each transaction, are better suited than district-wide campaigns.
4) **Make card services free in practice.** One in four households paid for card issue or renewal and none received a receipt. Making application forms available at the block office and online, publishing a service timeline.
5) **Make grievance redressal reachable and visible.** The NFSA requires a District Grievance Redressal Officer and internal grievance systems, but households describe them as absent or hard to use, and grievance handling is the top constraint in Baghbar. A helpline, a village-level contact and feedback to complainants would help.

Two further points go beyond the shop. Grain quality, ranked first by households, originates upstream and needs quality checks before grain reaches the FPS. And the mismatch between entitlement and need for PHH households, together with households' willingness to pay for a wider range of subsidised items, is a question for national entitlement design, not for local administration.

8. Conclusion

In two Assam districts, beneficiaries rank the usefulness of the grain (quality and adequacy) above access problems, while FPS owners rank the economics of running the shop (late commission, storage and operating costs) above administrative and verification problems. Short delivery, informal payments and weak grievance redressal are concentrated in particular villages, which calls for locally targeted responses, and the evidence is consistent with a link between owners' financial strain and household-reported leakage. Testing that link with shop-level data on commission, payment delays and delivered quantities is the most useful next step for research on last-mile delivery in the PDS. For policy, the findings support timely and uniform payment of FPS commission, support for shop running costs,

targeted monitoring of shops with high short delivery, free and receipted card services, and a visible grievance system.

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