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## Food racket

### People suspect PDS scam

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THE Maharashtra government recently discovered 2.6 million fake ration cards in the state, including 700,000 fake cards in Mumbai. The state government has assured "strict action" against errant officials and Sunil D Tatakare, minister for food and civil supplies, has announced a ban on sale of commodities from such cards.

Researchers say discovery of bogus ration cards indicated a deeper malaise in the public distribution system (PDS). "Studies show every ration shopkeeper has over 50 fake ration cards. In Mumbai, the figures go up to 150-200 every ration shop. Bogus card holders get subsidized commodities leaving nothing for those who really need it. Ration officials are hand-in-glove with distributors," says Suresh Sawant, centre coordinator, Rationing Kruti Samiti, an umbrella organisation formed out of a group of NGOS working on PDS and right to food, Mumbai.

(Researchers claim fake ration cards became more prevalent since Maharashtra switched to targeted public distribution system (TPDS) in 1997, from universal PDS. TPDS is for people below poverty line, and Maharashtra issues only 0.65 million yellow ration cards for families below the poverty line—those having less than Rs 15,000 as annual income, according to the directions of the centre. Studies by Nasik-based NGO Pragati Abhiyan show, of the Rs 100 that Maharashtra spends on food subsidies, Rs 25 goes to the target group, Rs 31 to non-target group, Rs 16 to state agencies and Rs 28 to black marketeers,

Experts say food stamps—exchangable cash vouchers—should replace the existing public distribution system. Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar have already introduced the coupons. Shopowners can redeem such stamps at post offices or banks.

Maharashtra is currently going digital with its ration cards data. Principal secretary P K Bakshi, the only official authorized to comment, is keeping mum on the issue. •