

● SUBSIDY A/C CASE

Airtel pays fine, to return ₹190 crore

FE BUREAU

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BHARTI AIRTEL WILL be initiating the process in the next few days to return the ₹190 crore that had flowed into the payment bank accounts of 31 lakh mobile subscribers. These Airtel Payments Bank accounts were opened without the consent of the consumers concerned and the cooking gas subsidy due to them had got transferred into them.

Sources said that Bharti Airtel has already communicated that it will refund the amount and inform the customers that their subsidy-linked account is being switched back to the originally-chosen account. However, the process requires some mapping and, therefore, will take a couple of days to complete.

Meanwhile, on Tuesday Bharti Airtel deposited an interim penalty of ₹2.5 crore with the Aadhaar-issuing body Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) in this connection.

Once the entire process is complete, Bharti Airtel will be required to report to UIDAI with compliance and the authority will take "appropriate view" on the matter at that stage.

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In fact, to avoid such cases, UIDAI on Tuesday directed banks to seek an explicit consent of the beneficiary before changing the account to which the government subsidy is being remitted. The banks have also been asked to intimate the beneficiary about the change within 24 hours through SMS and email as well as provide an option to the person to reverse the change.

Till now the process was such that government grants, particularly LPG subsidy, get credited into the last account authenticated using national biometric ID, Aadhaar.

Bharti Airtel had on Monday written to the National Payments Corporation of India

promising to return Rs 190 crore (along with interest) to the consumers' original bank accounts that were linked to the direct benefit transfer scheme.

Both Bharti Airtel and Airtel Payments Bank came under fire after the firm allegedly opened accounts of its mobile phone subscribers without seeking their consent and LPG subsidy worth crores was deposited into these accounts.

The government acted swiftly in the matter and the UIDAI late last week temporarily barred the company from conducting Aadhaar-based SIM verification of mobile customers using eKYC process, and eKYC of payments bank clients. It also ordered PwC to conduct an audit of Bharti Airtel and Airtel Payments Bank to ascertain if their systems and processes are in compliance with the Aadhaar Act.