

Unique facility, or recipe for trouble?

Jean Drèze

Many questions remain about the Unique Identity Number system that is being rolled out by the Central government.

It is quite likely that a few weeks from now someone will be knocking at your doors and asking for your fingerprints. If you agree, your fingerprints will enter a national database, along with personal characteristics (age, sex, occupation, and so on) that have already been collected from you, unless you were missed in the “Census household listing” earlier this year.

The purpose of this exercise is to build the National Population Register (NPR). In due course, your UID (Unique Identity Number, or “Aadhaar”) will be added to it. This will make it possible to link the NPR with other Aadhaar-enabled databases, from tax returns to bank records and SIM (subscriber identity module) registers. This includes the Home Ministry's National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID), smoothly linking 21 national databases.

For the intelligence agencies, this will be a dream-come-true. Imagine, everyone's fingerprints at the click of a mouse, that too with demographic information and all the rest. Should any suspicious person book a flight, or use a cybercafé, or any of the services that will soon require an Aadhaar number, she will be on their radar. If, say, Arundhati Roy makes another trip to Dantewada, she will be picked up on arrival like a ripe plum. Fantastic!

‘A half-truth’

So, when the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) tells us that the UID data (the “Central Identities Data Repository”) will be safe and confidential, it is a half-truth. The confidentiality of the Repository itself is not a minor issue, considering that UIDAI can

authorise “any entity” to maintain it, and that it can be accessed not only by intelligence agencies but also by any Ministry. But more important, the UID will help integrate vast amounts of personal data, that are available to government agencies with few restrictions.

Confidentiality is not the only half-truth propagated by UIDAI. Another one is that Aadhaar is not compulsory — it is just a voluntary “facility.” UIDAI's concept note stresses that “enrolment will not be mandated.” But there is a catch: “... benefits and services that are linked to the UID will ensure demand for the number.” This is like selling bottled water in a village after poisoning the well, and claiming that people are buying water voluntarily. The next sentence is also ominous: “This will not, however, preclude governments or Registrars from mandating enrolment.”

That UID is, in effect, going to be compulsory is clear from many other documents. For instance, the Planning Commission's proposal for the National Food Security Act argues for “mandatory use of UID numbers which are expected to become operational by the end of 2010” (note the optimistic time-frame). No UID, no food. Similarly, UIDAI's concept note on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) assumes that “each citizen needs to provide his UID before claiming employment.” Thus, Aadhaar will also be a condition for the right to work — so much for its voluntary nature.

Now, if the UID is compulsory, then everyone should have a right to free, convenient and reliable enrolment. The enrolment process, however, is all set to be a hit-or-miss affair, with no guarantee of timely and hassle-free inclusion. UIDAI hopes to enrol 600 million people in the next four years. That is about half of India's population in the next four years. What about the other half?

Nor is there any guarantee of reliability. Anyone familiar with the way things work in rural India would expect the UID database to be

full of errors. There is a sobering lesson here from the Below Poverty Line (BPL) Census. A recent World Bank study found rampant anomalies in the BPL list: "A common problem was erroneous information entered for household members. In one district of Rajasthan, more than 50 per cent of the household members were listed as sisters-in-law."

Will the UID database be more reliable? Don't bet on it. And it is not clear how the errors will be corrected as and when they emerge.

Under the proposed National Identification Authority of India Bill ("NIDAI Bill"), if someone finds that her "identity information" is wrong, she is supposed to "request the Authority" to correct it, upon which the Authority "may, if it is satisfied, make such alteration as may be required." There is a legal obligation to alert the Authority, but no right to correction.

The Aadhaar juggernaut is rolling on regardless (and without any legal safeguards in place), fuelled by mesmerising claims about the social applications of UID. A prime example is UID's invasion of the NREGA. NREGA workers are barely recovering from the chaotic rush to payments of wages through banks. Aadhaar is likely to be the next ordeal. The local administration is going to be hijacked by enrolment drives. NREGA works or payments will come to a standstill where workers are waiting for their Aadhaar number. Others will be the victims of unreliable technology, inadequate information technology facilities, or data errors. And for what? Gradual, people-friendly introduction of innovative technologies would serve the NREGA better than the UID tamasha.

The real game plan, for social policy, seems to be a massive transition to "conditional cash transfers" (CCTs). There is more than a hint of this "revolutionary" plan in Nandan Nilekani's book, *Imagining India*. Since then, CCTs have become the rage in policy circles. A recent Planning Commission document argues that

successful CCTs require “a biometric identification system,” now made possible by “the initiation of a Unique Identification System (UID) for the entire population ...” The same document recommends a string of mega CCTs, including cash transfers to replace the Public Distribution System.

If the backroom boys have their way, India's public services as we know them will soon be history, and every citizen will just have a Smart Card — food stamps, health insurance, school vouchers, conditional maternity entitlements and all that rolled into one. This approach may or may not work (that is incidental), but business at least will prosper. As the Wall Street Journal says about the Rashtriya Swasthya Bhima Yojana (which is a pioneering CCT project, for health insurance), “the plan presents a way for insurance companies to market themselves and develop brand awareness.”

The danger

The biggest danger of UID, however, lies in a restriction of civil liberties. As one observer aptly put it, Aadhaar is creating “the infrastructure of authoritarianism” — an unprecedented degree of state surveillance (and potential control) of citizens. This infrastructure may or may not be used for sinister designs. But can we take a chance, in a country where state agencies have such an awful record of arbitrariness, brutality and impunity?

In fact, I suspect that the drive towards permanent state surveillance of all residents has already begun. UIDAI is no Big Brother, but could others be on the job? Take for instance Captain Raghu Raman (of the Mahindra Special Services Group), who is quietly building NATGRID on behalf of the Home Ministry. His columns in the business media make for chilling reading. Captain Raman believes that growing inequality is a “powder keg waiting for a spark,” and advocates corporate takeover of internal security

(including a “private territorial army”), to enable the “commercial czars” to “protect their empires.” The Maoists sound like choir boys in comparison.

There are equally troubling questions about the “NIDAI Bill,” starting with why it was drafted by UIDAI itself. Not surprisingly, the draft Bill gives enormous powers to UIDAI's successor, NIDAI — and with minimal safeguards. To illustrate, the Bill empowers NIDAI to decide the biometric and demographic information required for an Aadhaar number (Section 23); “specify the usage and applicability of the Aadhaar number for delivery of various benefits and services” (Section 23); authorise whoever it wishes to “maintain the Central Identities Data Repository” (Section 7) or even to exercise any of its own “powers and functions” (Section 51); and dictate all the relevant “regulations” (Section 54).

Ordinary citizens, for their part, are powerless: they have no right to a UID number except on NIDAI's terms, no right to correction of inaccurate data, and — last but not least — no specific means to redress grievances. In fact, believe it or not, the Bill states (in Section 46) that “no court shall take cognisance of any offence punishable under this Act” except based on a complaint authorised by NIDAI.

So, is UID a facility or a calamity? It depends for whom. For the intelligence agencies, bank managers, the corporate sector, and NIDAI, it will be a facility and a blessing. For ordinary citizens, especially the poor and marginalised, it could well be a calamity.

(The author is Visiting Professor at the Department of Economics, University of Allahabad and Member of the National Advisory Council.)

Have trouble controlling your gambling. Once you start gambling, can you walk away? Or are you compelled to gamble until you've spent your last dollar, upping your bets in a bid to win lost money back? Gamble even when you don't have the money. You may gamble until you've spent your last dollar, and then move on to money you don't have—money to pay bills, credit cards, or things for your children. You may feel pushed to borrow, sell, or even steal things for gambling money. But it's important to remember that every gambler is unique so you need a recovery program tailored specifically to your needs and situation. Talk to your doctor or mental health professional about different treatment options, including: Inpatient or residential treatment and rehab programs.