

UID: Game-changer or Hype?

One of the defining attributes of the UPA government has been its almost casual/unaccountable approach to spending public money on “programmes”.

UID aka “Aadhaar” is one such programme—costing the taxpayers thousands of crores so far—but with little thinking on specifics, outcomes, and with extraordinary amounts of hype and rhetoric. Sadly, the hype and rhetoric haven’t been given a chance in all these years to be challenged in Parliament or outside, despite calls for it, thus allowing the hype to go untested on its merits. Despite the lack of debate and the parliamentary standing committee’s serious recommendations on this, the spending on this “flagship programme” has gone on.

Let me say as someone who understands technology, governance and the issue of corruption more than just a little, that Aadhaar, in its current form, is a house of cards and resting primarily on hype, and will not achieve any of the laudable objectives of eradicating corruption. This will become obvious to many, as the layers of hype are peeled off revealing the reality.

Here’s an abridged dose of reality:

Aadhaar does not give identities to Indians: The fundamental claim is that Aadhaar gives an identity to all Indians. This is the most explosive falsehood in the Aadhaar proposition. Aadhaar simply takes an existing ID (real or fake) of anybody (citizen or foreigner or illegal immigrant) and issues a number, i.e., there is no identity verification, and so, there is no identity being issued. All Aadhaar does is link the potentially fake or true ID information to that ID holder’s iris or biometric information. So if Mr. X had a fake ID all these years with his picture and address, he now continues that fake ID, albeit with his iris and biometric instead of his photo. There is no way of knowing how many fake entries are in the Aadhaar database, because Aadhaar does no verification.

Worse, Aadhaar uses a structure that is incentivized to generate fake applications. This structure uses small private firms that almost subjectively decide on identity documentation, with no check on their capability or background for enrolment, and UID/Aadhaar can be legitimately accused of being negligent in exercising no supervision of their activities. I specifically asked in Parliament about instances of fraud in Aadhaar and the government has so far ducked it.

Aadhaar is a national security risk, it’s

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being issued to non-citizens and illegal immigrants: Aadhaar has changed its tagline recently to ‘One India; One Identity’—again dishonest. It makes no effort at separating citizens from non-citizens. Any national identification platform should be able to determine who is a citizen and who isn’t. What emerges here is that taxpayer-funded subsidies and cash transfers will be availed of by non-citizens and illegal immigrants. In a recent meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on finance, I asked the UID-AI “how many non-citizens were given Aadhaar” and I was given an answer of “we don’t know”.

The Aadhaar project is also facing a challenge from the Intelligence Bureau over the UIDAI issuing the card to foreigners and refugees from

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other nations. It comes on the heels of a Supreme Court order on 23.09.2013 that an Aadhaar card can’t be issued to an “illegal immigrant”.

So the bottomline is—given the unverified identities at the enrollment stage, issuance to non-citizens and illegal immigrants, and a technology that has serious question marks—Aadhaar is creating a database that has serious information integrity issues. This, in turn, leads to several dangerous issues that arise—especially when it is bandied about casually as “The Identity”—in terms of national security, citizenship and many issues that flow from that. Citizenship as defined by our Constitution has to be verified and not accepted on declaration.

Aadhaar does not improve targeting of benefits and subsidies; increases costs: The fundamental use of Aadhaar, i.e., of identifying citizens entitled to specific benefits, falls flat because it continues to use the same historical

data that is causing corruption and leakage—BPL cards and other traditional forms of ID. In fact, the LPG cylinder issue is a clear case where Aadhaar has proved it is not helping leakages. In ATM banking, by insisting that banks upgrade to biometric ATMs whose costs will be passed on to consumers, banking costs will increase.

Aadhaar raises significant privacy issues: Aadhaar involves collection of a large amount of people’s data and centralisation of the data in their databases. Predictably, real issues of privacy arise in a country like ours, where privacy laws are not robust and the issue itself not fully or adequately debated. The privacy issue is even more dangerous given the track record of governments and bureaucrats in India.

And for some unpeeling of the hype:

Aadhaar is an unprecedented effort at Identifying Indians, it is technological innovation: To call Aadhaar “technological leadership” is surely letting the hype get hugely ahead of reality, proving only that its PR machinery has been impressive. Aadhaar is a data collection exercise and creation of a biometric database. That’s it. Further, it uses foreign hardware and software, and technologies that may have question marks. Technologically, it isn’t unique; it has been done before. Even the size and scale of data collection has been done before by Election Commission, Census, National Population Register, which have received none of the publicity Aadhaar has.

Aadhaar is unique and portable: This is saying the obvious, as if other IDs are not! The reality is that ALL IDs are unique and portable, be it passports, driving licences, etc. Actually, while passports can be used in India and all over the world, Aadhaar cannot, since it does not determine citizenship.

Aadhaar started with good intentions, but it is mystifying why it has morphed into this. It could have been a demonstration of technology being deployed in a cost-effective way to improve governance, and deliver benefits through a robust diligent citizen identification process and highly reliable database, instead of what it is. Taxpayers need to ask why this expensive programme has not been discussed in Parliament and why the government is reluctant to accept standing committee’s recommendations. If Aadhaar is a part of the “vision” of the “new” Congress leadership, then hype and rhetoric are no substitute for real targets and outcomes. Both vision and solutions need to be real and money spent on them justifiable. Neither is true in Aadhaar.