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# Scientifically Right, Socially Wrong

 by **DQI Bureau** — October 12, 2012 in **News**

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*"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"*

*-George Santayana*

Nowadays, the Indian government with all good intentions seems to be embracing anything that is technological or blindly following any scientific/technical proposal offered by scientists or technologists as the solution. Take for example, the Aadhar or UID project. There has been no national debate on this before the government decided to spend thousands of crores on it.

There has not even been a parliamentary debate about this. Many techies seem to think this is the way forward to provide the ultimate id-biometric id to every person residing in India. Since no one seems to be willing to debate it, I thought I will.

**Pros**

**Financial Inclusion:** Nandan Nilekani who heads the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) claims this is for the financial inclusion of poor, basically people without any identities.

**Foolproof Identification:** Techies who back this project believe that giving a person a unique number which includes Biometric identification will be foolproof unlike the US Social Security Number which can be misused.

**Single Card System:** Some others with whom I talked to claim this will make the whole process easier as it will be the Aadhar card which will replace the multiple cards we have to carry as proof like the ration card, voter's id, bank, birth certificate, etc. Basically they believe, a centralized database will be created and multiple cards for accessing different services will now just become one.

**Corruption Free Society:** Others believed that by using the Aadhar card they won't have to incur hassles by approaching government offices like ration card renewal, etc. They believe this will help a large extent in controlling corruption in Indian society, if not completely eradicate it.

## Cons

There are some people who are against the UID project in India though they are very few. The most common reasons why they oppose are listed below-

**Loss of Privacy:** The main objection is the violation of right to privacy implicit in Article 21 of the Indian constitution. Those who object are afraid that the Indian government will become something like the Orwellian nightmare of 1984 with their access to all activities as biometric id tracking and surveillance is not impossible. They fear loss of privacy.

**Identity Theft:** The Aadhar card is not tamper proof and so identity theft is possible. With a corrupt bureaucracy, this is more than possible. Also, there is no surety that Aadhar cards will be destroyed after death. So Aadhar cards invite identity theft.

**Misuse by Corporations:** With corporations, Indian and foreign involved in the data collection stage of the project, that they already have access to the database and misuse of the data by corporations in areas like profiling and tracking behavior to suit their projects.

The very access of the biometric data to these corporations itself is wrong but the UIDAI doesn't seem to care.

**Increase of Corruption:** The problem of corruption will not be solved as it is not a problem of identity. Take the NREGA project which the people at UIDAI claim will be corrected as the Aadhar card will ensure the money reaches the people. But registering for the NREGA alone will require Aadhar card.

The NREGA bureaucrats can easily pocket a majority of the money and work the books to say the

citizens have been paid off in full while they may get less than 1% of the amount or no money at all.

The corruption will only increase in government institutions as the real problem from ration shops to courts is demand of money after the identity is confirmed and hence it will make it easier. Aadhar card will ensure you cannot cheat the government official of a bribe.

**Data Security:** With Ghostnet operations by China and other countries and even the PMO office and Department of Defense not being spared, one wonders at the capacity of the government in ensuring there is no data theft of a database of one billion of its citizens.

**Insourcing Terrorism:** A terrorist who has a baby in India can get the Aadhar card and legitimize his or herself as an Indian and the government is thus sourcing terrorism from abroad future catastrophies.

The majority of Indians just don't seem to care or understand what the whole Aadhar project is about which shows their level of awareness. This is true for most politicians and the media. It is not new that biometric national ID projects have been envisioned in several countries including the US, China, and the UK. But all such projects have been abandoned because governments realized that they were only increasing the chance for invasion of privacy and fraud.

The Indian government, on the other hand, like true-blue, technically illiterate politicians that they are have been dazzling blinded by technology and have dumped thousands of crores of taxpayer money into the project thinking they are bringing about a first of a kind 'technological revolution' which has been praised by the folks at the American Enterprise Institute!

It is a pity that the government didn't think of making the elected representatives in state and center and the bureaucracy computer literate, so they could respond directly to the people instead of wasting the money on UIDAI project.

Last year, around 20 people, most of them techies from Tamil Nadu were held and treated like criminals for 24 hours at a foreign airport and sent back because their local Passport Seva Kendra (PSK) had issued them defective passports, though it has collected all their biometric information-all 10 fingerprints which it doesn't use in the passport that carries only their thumbprint.

This is just one instance as several other horror stories have cropped up since. Since the government has made Regional Passport Offices outsource the issuing of Passport to PSKs to corporations, all sort of problems are cropping up, the most common being defective passports. Missing data, collecting biometric information by these corporations, issuing of passport immediately while police verification comes later, etc.

So, there is no doubt, that the PSKs work faster and issue passports quickly but many passports are riddled with mistakes. In India, those who apply for passports account for around 20% of the

population.

If such problems crop up for issuing a mere passport, when even PSKs are malfunctioning thanks to outsourcing to private Indian corporations, can you imagine the problems that will crop up when issuing the UID-which is your only identity apart from abuse of the system?

### **Worries Galore**

Anyhow, even if we think positively considering the pros and cons of the Aadhar card, what worries me most is once the Aadhar card is issued to the entire population including overcoming the challenge of issuing it to the 5 births per second in our country, it would become a crime if you don't carry your UID on your person at all times.

Assume this scenario, you lost it somewhere or forgot it at home. Does this make you a non-entity? Does it mean you don't exist? You cannot vote without your voter id. But you can always reapply if you lost it using your other identity proofs showing you are who you are. But what if you lost your Aadhar card that contains information from birth to death?

What if it gets burnt up or lost in a natural disaster? Does this mean you cannot access the PDS system or apply for a driver license? What if someone else is using it? How can you prove you are you? So, it becomes a crime if you don't have your 12-digit UID number or Aadhar card with you at all times!

It reminded me of the times when African Americans who had been freed from slavery had to carry documents to show they had been freed by their masters and not escaped slaves! This also reminded me of what happened 105 years ago in South Africa where Mahatma Gandhi started his first Satyagraha in 1907 against this form of profiling and identification.

He burned the identification papers which also included biometric information like the thumbprint, which proved he was an Indian. They had to carry this with them at all times or it was a crime!

When I think about what happened then and what is happening now in India, the Aadhar card means we are no different from slaves to the government. By issuing the Aadhar card, we are slaves from birth to death and we have to prove we are legal and if we lose it, we are criminals and illegal as we are not citizens anymore.

Is this right? We elect the government and so why do we have to prove we are citizens to our own government? Mahatma Gandhi burned the identification papers because it was equivalent to criminalization if you didn't possess the papers when the South African authorities required the papers for basic services or when they demanded it.

By forcefully getting the biometric details of the entire population of India, the Indian government is

doing the same-treating the entire population as criminals! Also, by destroying the multiple sources of identification the Indian citizen becomes a criminal when a mistake is made in any section of the government (like the PSKs) and will be subjected to imprisonment.

This makes the Aadhar project illegal and immoral. If the government insists that it will go ahead by getting the biometric id of the entire population, effectively criminalization of all Indians by the end of this year and make them slaves rather than let them remain free people of the country, it is time for another Satyagraha.

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