

Aadhaar is not any ordinary ID- Don't Trivialize it as One

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23/01/2018



We are on the verge of killing an idea that could have meant so much more. We are treating Aadhaar as the sole identity document while it shouldn't have been that way. The information that is available on the Aadhaar cards is no different from what is available on other IDs that were issued by the Government. So, what does Aadhaar achieve which other IDs do not? So why mustn't we treat Aadhaar as any other ID?

To begin with, let us understand that a photocopy of the Aadhaar or even its original copy is as useless or as useful as any other IDs we possess. What does it mean to 'show' the Aadhaar card for an official verification? The only meaningful verification the officer can do is whether the person who has submitted the Aadhaar card looks identical to the persons' picture on the card. It is entirely subjective. Unless, we mistrust all other IDs issued by the Government, there is little wisdom in insisting upon Aadhaar as the only identity document. The power of Aadhaar on the other hand is in its design-individual

initiated authentication. With biometric authentication, any transaction initiated by Aadhaar establishes that the entity in the data base was present there and had indeed initiated the transaction. So Aadhaar is more for authenticity of a transaction than the authenticity of the person himself! Thus, it is gradually becoming our proof of existence as, in the digital world, our existence is determined by our transactions! We must be careful when we ask the citizens to prove their existence very frequently. What can go wrong if we are not discrete?

When Government asks, we do not contest. This is the unwritten code we follow mostly because Government is an entity designed by us whom we have entrusted with certain duties and responsibilities. This is part of the social contract that the citizens have designed. This social contract designed by the citizens are binding on all although not requiring consent by all. The generation before us designed a contract that made us give up some of our rights and we are designing contracts which in turn will be binding on the generations to come. Hence, given that Aadhaar, that defines our existence, needs to be handled cautiously. What if this is misused? We then ponder about the dangers posed by identity theft.

There are two types of identity theft I need to worry about. The first one pertains to the case when my identity is stolen and hence the 'thief' steals some part or perhaps the entire benefits that should have accrued to me. The second one is perhaps more sinister. In this case, someone with my stolen identity creates 'another me' and carries out illegal activities through this new identity. The crucial question is therefore, how does the society safeguard against both?

The first type of identity theft can usually be fixed with better data security. This is where the current criticisms, debates and most improvements are concentrated. The latest proposal is to have a two-stage authentication where the number given out by individuals to someone is a scrambled form of what the UID is. This certainly will make the data more secure than the status quo. However, an improved security system will achieve little to prevent the other form of identity theft. All that we can do about the second type of misuse is to

limit the damages by limiting the scope of Aadhaar and this is where we are slipping. Currently it is mandatory to produce the Aadhar card before opening any new bank account. So, nothing stops an unscrupulous bank manager to open another account using a photocopy of a UID that belongs to someone else. Illegal money can be transferred in this account, operated fully by individuals in my name without my knowledge and if ever things go wrong the onus will be on me to prove that I had no connection with that account. This is a much scarier scenario than the one we are currently trying to fix. There are estimates that almost Rs 2 billion has flowed into approximately 3 million such fraudulent accounts. The Aadhaar was designed to prevent such frauds as no account could have been opened without me starting the process-that is initiating the process with my biometric authentication. Doing away with this part meant, any one can use any Aadhaar number to open an account as long as few of the key players are part of the evil design! In our haste to push Aadhaar as an identity, we are destroying the very foundation of it. Increasingly, it appears Aadhaar is now being used to make a huge data base that connects all transactions by an individual-the Orwellian nightmare! This is where the ultimate danger lies. Aadhaar, by its design had no business to link all my transactions-with the Government or with any private party as it was designed to ensure a Government, who has limited resources, can use it best without wasting.

So what can be done? Let us start with some basics. Let us look all the transactions between the Government and the citizens and within those let us divide all transactions into two categories-ones those where the total number of transactions is fixed for the society and the others where they aren't. The first type includes those where, each time I do a transaction, somebody somewhere will be denied the right to do an additional transaction. An example of this is the transaction in a PDS shop. The other type of transaction involves those where whether I have transacted will have little or no bearing on what others can do-me buying insurance cover for example. For transactions of the first kind, it is must that we prevent transactions that shouldn't have been allowed, either by individuals who are not entitled to do such transactions or individuals who are doing more transactions than what they are entitled to.

These are the cases where Aadhaar is needed as Aadhaar based authentication is an authentication of the transaction and not the person! This was originally why Aadhaar was designed, to ensure minimizing leakages regarding scarce resources of the Government. However, there is very little reason to support why Aadhaar must be insisted for all transactions of the other types.

We are at cross roads now. Social contracts in the past has made individuals give up various rights. We may decide to give up some more-even some parts of our right to privacy. But at the same time, we need to collectively think through the possible outcome. Aadhaar is our existence proof. We need to think now how to use it best.

The article can be read online [here](#).