DIGITIZING THE IDENTITY OF BILLIONS : AADHAR
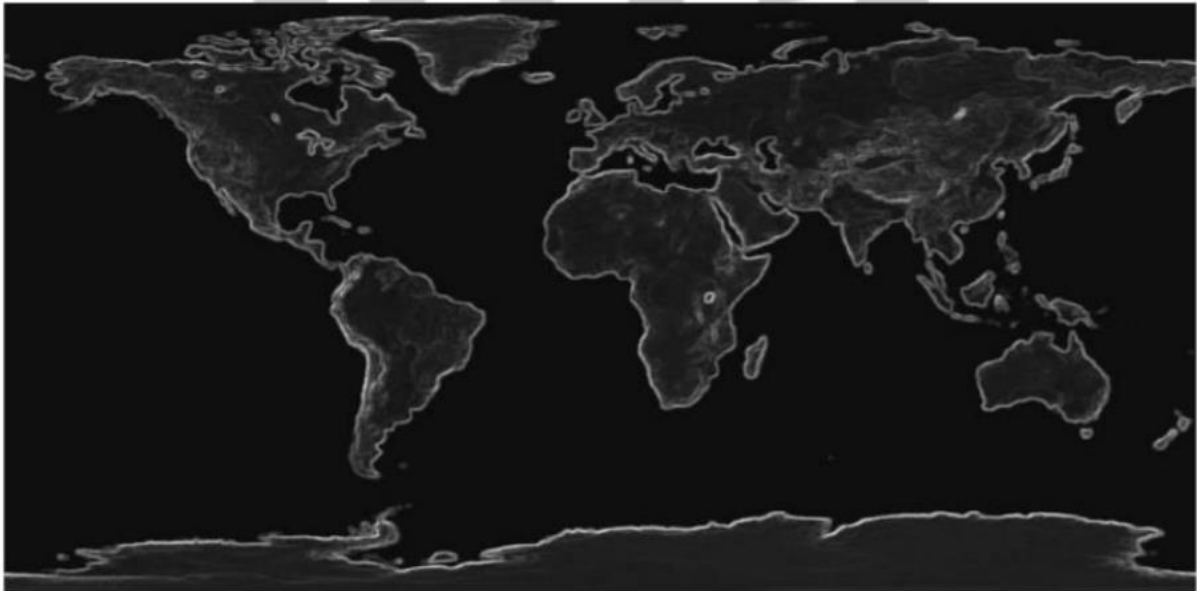
Exploring the importance of Aadhar and the way forward

Veritas et Aequitas

Oxford dictionary defines identification as the "process of showing, providing, or recognizing who or what someone or something is." In India, the word identity has now become almost synonymous with the word "Aadhaar." Aadhar can be roughly translated to mean 'support' or 'foundation' in many Indian languages. If you utter the word Aadhar anywhere across India, you will certainly evoke India's national biometric identification program. The Aadhar program is the world's largest human identification number scheme, storing in its database the biometric details of over 17.7% of the world population.

What is Aadhar?

"It is a 12-digit number linked to the biometric and demographic identity of an individual. Out of the 12 digits, 11 digits are randomly generated while the 12th digit is used to check for data entry errors. Given the Aadhar's random number, no one can really tell anything about a person by just looking at these numbers. What makes this significant is the fact that it was the very first time in India that an ID system came into existence that was designed to be portable and adaptable."

Before the existence of Aadhar, the identification was limited to those numbers issued by certain authorities for specific purposes only. Take the example of a driving license that would be valid only while driving or a Permanent Account Number (PAN) which would be valid merely for taxation purposes in India. Some identification formats were so systematically tainted that half of the names on it were fake. Other identity systems failed to serve a cross-functional purpose and as a result, could not be used by individuals across government services. Most importantly, those who were the neediest, the very people for whom social programs were designed to help, were excluded.

Importance of Aadhar

However, Aadhar is unique for two primary reasons. Firstly, it is a card, not a number. Secondly, for the first time in India, biometrics have been used to uniquely identify a person. This drastically reduces the chances of an unknown person claiming benefits from a system – something which was quite common in former IDs.

Today, more than 1.2 billion Indians have what Paul Romer calls "the most sophisticated ID program in the world." This was only possible because Aadhar was able to reach everyone, everywhere, from large cities to small and remote villages. A lot of problems were encountered in the process but Aadhar implementers developed a fix for most of them ranging from getting the iris scanner for the elderly to the fingerprint scanning for a manual laborer.

65% of the population in India lives in rural areas. Previously, a large number of rural people not having an identity was a serious problem. Without identification, a poor rural farmer could not own a bank account or rent a house or have any of the aspects of life considered as necessities by a vast majority of the urban population. This gap has been bridged because of the digital identity provided by Aadhar.

Imagine the smiling face of a poor MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) worker who was forced to run from one place to another just to get what he was entitled to. This digital identity has ensured that wages are directly deposited into the bank

accounts of such workers without the need for any middlemen. Because of Aadhar, access to public services has become easy for the poor.

Whenever you link your Aadhaar to your school, bank, payment gateways, and schools you can take a step towards linking your identity digitally in the spheres ranging from finance to education and everything else.

With Aadhar, India entered into the league of the developed nations in terms of the advanced identification system. Along with this technological leapfrogging, the government also entered into a debate about the ownership and safety of the large data being stored.

Issues around Aadhar

However, with this great power comes greater responsibility for the nation. There have been fierce debates around privacy and security issues revolving around the Aadhar. A government official had posted his Aadhar number challenging the hackers to create havoc and at the same time reassuring people that Aadhar was 100% safe. Within hours there were many hackers who posted his contact number, address, and date of birth. This was a great blow to the virtual identification system.

Such questions around safety continued to a posed time and again. But in each and every case, the government has tried to assuage the fears of the public by providing them with assurances. Now, for people to trust the government and support the idea of digital identity, the government has to bring stringent laws promoting the safety and security of this platform to the best possible extent.

The Way Forward

Indian government should move immediately to designate UID as critical infrastructure and set up a dedicated Computer Emergency Response Team to detect any kinds of attacks or intrusion on the database. This would only be possible by crafting an encryption policy that addresses encryption for Aadhar enabled apps. Additionally, there is a need to work with the private sector forums like International Electronic and Electrical Engineers to create interoperable security standards for platforms replying to national identity databases.

It is clear that the public will not welcome an intrusive, coercive government and that the right to privacy and sovereignty over personal data cannot be taken lightly. Aadhar should establish its position as an identity and dignity for the marginalized and citizens should not be viewed with suspicion by default.

This would be possible when India figures out how to balance the benefits of digital identity and the privacy concerns that arise with it.