Aadhaar is not a surveillance tool

It empowers 1.2bn people without compromising privacy. It can't turn the State into Big Brother
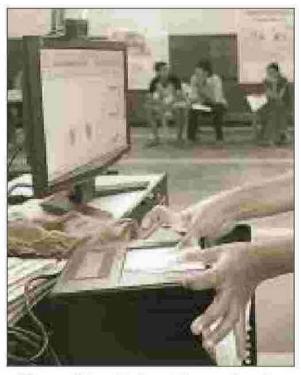
AJAY BHUSHAN PANDEY

A report published on April 8 in The New York Times — India's 'Big Brother' Program—tries to create an impression that Aadhaar is turning India into an Orwellian State. This is untrue. Aadhaar, the world's largest biometric technology platform, empowers 1.2 billion people to establish their identity online, enables them to receive entitlements and exercise their rights. It has brought about transparency in governance and the delivery system by eliminating middlemen and cleaning the databases of fakes, duplicates and intermediaries. In the last three years, it has saved $13 billion public money. Furthermore, it helps check tax evasion, money laundering and terror financing besides creating a trusted eco-environ.

Aadhaar is a game changer for the poor and hence it is being attacked by vested interests, including the beneficiaries of the erstwhile leaky system because they can't siphon off resources meant for the poor. No doubt, Aadhaar has enhanced the State's ability to reach the people. Unfortunately, this is being seen as an increase in State power and an instrument of surveillance. But in reality, Aadhaar empowers people, not the State.

Other developed democracies have also used unique identification numbers. The US introduced Social Security Number (SSN) in 1935 for providing social security benefits during the Great Depression. In 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt expanded its scope, which mandated all federal agencies to exclusively use SSN in their programmes. In 1962, SSN was adopted as the official Tax Identification Number for income-tax purposes. The Social Security Act and other laws were amended to say that any state may, in the administration of taxes, public assistance (food stamps, scholarships, license, or motor vehicle registration law) utilise SSN for establishing identity. The courts held that the mandatory use of SSN is constitutional. SSN was made compulsory for opening bank and investment accounts, and birth and death registrations. In Britain too, important services such as applying for work permits, opening of bank accounts, paying taxes, receiving child benefits, and getting voting rights require a National Insurance Number. Critics say SSN and NIN are not based on biometrics. Are they objecting to the collection of biometrics or the system of a central number, which, they claim, can potentially link all the databases, or both?

The collection of biometrics for a legitimate purpose is an established practice sanctioned by law even in the West. Has the mandatory usage of SSN, which potentially empowers the State to track citizens, turned the US into a

■ **A boy registers his thumb impression at an Aadhaar camp**
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surveillance State? When the US and Britain clean their databases with SSN or NIN, it's not considered Orwellian. But when India does the same, it is being accused of being Big Brother. How fair is it for the NYT to accuse India of becoming a surveillance State?

One may argue that there are safeguards in the US and Britain that prevent such possibilities. India too has a strong legislature, an independent judiciary and a free press, which can prevent any overreach by the executive. We should have confidence in these pillars of democracy. The Aadhaar Act, 2016 eliminates the possibility of any State surveillance. The Act is based on the principle of privacy by design — minimal data, federated databases and optimal ignorance, which in turn ensures that no agency — UIDAI, the government or private — can trail or profile any individual. During enrolment, UIDAI collects minimal data (name, address, date of birth, gender and biometrics) and not family details, contact lists and 'likes and dislikes', which many social media platforms collect.

The NYT report speaks about data leakage from 210 government websites. What it fails to see is that the information published was drawn from public records, containing details such as name, address, bank account number, Aadhaar number, of beneficiaries who receive assistance from government programmes. It was published as a measure of transparency and so can by no imagination be termed a leak. If someone has received assistance from public funds, why shouldn't he reveal details?

In any case, how can name, address, age, etc be confidential? Most of this information is available on the voters' lists, telephone directories, and even on Wikipedia. So far as the Aadhaar number is concerned, it's not confidential; but unlike SSN, it requires biometrics for authentication and so the number alone cannot lead to identity theft. One also needs to compare it with the kind of public information available on the websites of US counties. Can it be said that these websites are leaking personal information of every home owner in the US? Websites such as www.beenverified.com, www.usidentify.com and www.searchbug.com can provide (for a nominal fee) information of any person in the US—much more that what is displayed on the 210 GoI websites. Aadhaar empowers its 1.2 billion people without compromising their privacy, and thus it can't turn India into a surveillance State.

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The views expressed are personal