

Linking India

There can be no argument on the bonafide intention of Aadhaar; over to the top court now

The Supreme Court's indefinite extension of the deadline to link Aadhaar for a host of services including mobile telephony and banking must not be viewed as the end of the Government's aim to expand and strengthen the national identity system. Instead, it should be seen as a welcome temporary relief to the citizens who have been hassled by the numerous and sometimes contradictory statements regarding deadlines to make Aadhaar mandatory for citizens to access various social sector scheme and other services. Through this decision, the top court has made it clear that it is seized of the matter and does not want to keep the citizens in the lurch. And that it wants to take its own time to examine the matter in detail and settle the issue once and for all. Given the complexity of the matter relating to the constitutional validity and implementation of the Aadhaar scheme — the most important of them being the issue of right to privacy — this is understandable. At the same time, by exempting Section 7 of the Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and Other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Act, 2016, which covers benefits and services received by the poor, the top court has respected the Government's stand that Aadhaar is essential to deliver the benefits of social welfare schemes to the deserving in a targeted manner while minimizing both seepage and fraud.



There can be no argument on the bonafide intention of the Aadhaar scheme. A sharp rise in the registration of this unique card stands as proof that it has helped the Government plan its social sector schemes better and has been much more successful in rolling them out than in the past. The extension of deadlines has, however, resulted in a sigh of relief among citizens who were being bombarded by banks and telecom operators on a daily basis to get Aadhaar-linked or face discontinuation of these services. But it is equally true that Aadhaar linkage to these sectors has made the life of citizens in accessing services far easier than before. For instance, earlier, it was a mammoth task

involving heavy documentation for citizens to register for a SIM card. With Aadhaar linkage in order, the process got simple and convenient as there was no need to carry any identification proof or for that matter even a photograph for verification. A fingerprint and a mobile generated OTP sufficed.

It is tragic that ever since inception seven years ago, the Aadhaar Scheme has been facing numerous hurdles. On balance, though, it is to its benefit that it is being reviewed so thoroughly including now by the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court of India, as what emerges after this intense scrutiny will be as close to flawless as humanly possible and will balance the common good with an individual's right to privacy. The good does outweigh the bad, as it were, so a permanent solution to making Aadhaar our national registration number linked to all schemes where the public exchequer is being debited and/or national security is involved for bonafide Indian citizens should be a priority. While Aadhaar was the brainchild of the Congress, it is also the case that ever since coming to power the Narendra Modi Government, on the impassioned insistence of Nandan Nilekani, not only retained the unique identification system card but also embraced some of its excellent aspects and added new dimensions to make it more effective. Linking it to various welfare schemes has been one of the greatest achievements of the Aadhaar system and the results can be seen, such as in the Ujjwala scheme. But it is a long road ahead before the top court gives its verdict to settle the looming uncertainty over Aadhaar's future. In the interim, the Government will do well to iron out all privacy concerns that have been raised vis-à-vis Aadhaar.