

ASSIGNMENT FOR EXPERIENCE DAY, BA DIGITAL SOCIETY

ADHAAR: DIGITALIZING THE WELFARE SYSTEM

In 2009 India began building what would become the world's largest biometric database. Aadhaar's stated goal and overall aim was to provide identification to each resident of India, and specifically to those 400 million residents who had no formal identification documents and who could thereby not access government services, such as ration cards for subsidized food. If you cannot prove who you are, you basically do not exist, and certainly cannot participate in the formal economy. The project would help make India's welfare schemes more efficient by ensuring help reached the right people. What is more, it would become a shining beacon of technological achievement for the rest of the world. Each resident was given a 12-digit number, linking to personal information: name, address, date of birth, gender, and biometric information, including all ten fingerprints and iris scans of both eyes. Verifying one's identity would become as easy as scanning a fingerprint.

Enrolling in the Aadhaar system is not mandatory, and an order of the Indian Supreme Court in 2016 made it clear that no one should be disadvantaged for not having an Aadhaar card. Yet since its inception, more and more aspects of daily life, including filing tax returns, renting a home, receiving one's salary, getting a phone connection, applying for a passport, and voting, have become dependent on Aadhaar enrollment. In addition, many jurisdictions have linked the delivery of subsidies and goods to possession of an Aadhaar number, making the Aadhaar system a source of frustration and abuse more than a development tool for those it set out to help. It has become, in the words of one commentator, a "massive surveillance apparatus" – a panopticon. In 2017, a group of concerned citizens petitioned the Indian Supreme Court to challenge the implementation of Aadhaar and its resulting invasion of privacy. The government, in an ongoing process, is denying any constitutional right to privacy. Attorney General Venugopal, for example, has claimed "[privacy] cannot be elevated to the status of a fundamental right. It is an elitist right for people in developed countries. India is a poor developing country (and hence cannot dream of such 'elitist' rights)".

The image of Bentham's famous prison panopticon may only somewhat apply to Aadhaar, however. Bentham's watchtower was not intended to have any commercial use. The Indian government has, however, recently granted some companies access to the system: Microsoft uses it to confirm the identity of people using a version of Skype designed for the Indian market; Amazon has begun demanding Aadhaar numbers for online shopping; Airbnb is looking into Aadhaar as a means of verifying hosts; and Uber has also been linked to the system. This may not come as a surprise, since the system's creator, Nandan Nilekani, is a billionaire and former CEO of IT services giant Infosys. Nor were the targets of Bentham's panoptic gaze expected to benefit economically themselves! Yet Nilekani has recently said that Aadhaar is generating data that Indians will be able to sell or barter for benefits, and that this can benefit poor Indians. Speaking at a conference organized by the Kerala government to promote the state to IT companies and entrepreneurs, he explained that there are important differences between India and the West when it comes to handling data. While in the West data is concentrated by a handful of people, in India data belongs to small players,

such as mobile companies and individuals, who will be able to barter their data for economic benefits, such as healthcare.

Readings and preparation

Ramanathan, U. (2015). Considering social implications of biometric registration. *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, 34(1), 10-16. <https://doi-10.1109/MTS.2015.2396113>