



RESEARCH ARTICLE

RIGHT IMPLICATION OF UNIQUE IDENTIFICATION NUMBER

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ABSTRACT

The paper Right Implication of Unique identification Number tries to put the current UID project of India into a perspective to evaluate the set of issues and concerns, as pointed by various entrepreneur and try to understand the degree of criticality of those arguments. In this light, the areas of concerns around the UID project in India are also being pointed out. Given the largest IT project in any globally, the topic is of immense significance besides being timely and the discussion can provide encouragement to a series of research activities in the areas of public policy, information systems planning and execution as well as appreciating the risks that get associated with such large initiatives. This paper also tries to put the current UID project of India into a perspective to evaluate the set of issues and concerns, as pointed by various stakeholders and try to understand the degree of criticality of those arguments, typically in a style of bringing up the perspectives presented. In this light, the areas of concerns around the UID project in India are also being pointed, with reference to information that already exists in the public domain. Given the largest IT project in any government globally, the topic is of immense significance besides being timely and the discussion can provide exhortation to a series of research activities in the areas of public policy, information systems planning and execution as well as appreciating the risks that get associated with such large initiatives.

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INTRODUCTION

The unique identity project in India is a flagship project as being highlighted by the government of India. The project is being portrayed as a panacea for all ills that exist in the country. Although time can only tell about the efficiency and efficacy of the project, but the very launch of this exercise has made it the largest biometric based identity disbursing e-government project in the globe. This paper, tries to put the current UID project of India into a perspective to evaluate the set of issues and concerns, as pointed by various entrepreneur and try to understand the degree of criticality of those arguments. In this light, the areas of concerns around the UID project in India are also being pointed out. Given the largest IT project in any globally, the topic is of immense significance besides being timely and the discussion can provide encouragement to a series of research activities in the areas of public policy, information systems planning and execution as well as appreciating the risks that get associated with such large initiatives. The government of India had announced the creation of the Unique ID Authority of India (UIDAI) to generate the largest IT project of the globe- the Unique ID

(UID) project- with an aim to provide a unique twelve digit number to 1.2 billion residents of India (Business Standard, 2009: A. Sharma, 2010). The governments of various countries across the globe have been considering providing of unique identity to its citizens from time to time. Some countries have already implemented national identity schemes, although varying in "the extent to which their cards are voluntary or compulsory (to obtain, carry, or present the card), the legal frameworks that oversee them, the cost of the card itself, whether they are used for identification purposes only or are intended for wider use in society" (Whitley & Hosein, 2010, p.23). There have been many drivers that have actually led the governments of various nations to take a look into the possibilities of implementing a national ID scheme in some way or the other. According to Davies, Hosien & Whitley (2005 as cited in Dass & Pal, 2010, p.172) "...enhancement of security through detection of fraud, guard against terrorism and illegal immigration are some of the prime objectives for providing unique identification to the citizens." Another important use of national ID cards is authentication of a person's entitlement to government services (Dass & Bajaj, 2008). However, the challenges related to implementing a viable identity management system for a nation are worth considering - most importantly, if citizens do not find value in such cards or the government departments and processes are not scaled up to match the working of such identification, the

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whole effort would be seriously questioned. Outrageous costs, technology gaps, privacy issues, political challenges, and lack of clear vision and mapping of the perceived benefits that can be accrued out of such an exercise are some factors that hinder viable and sustainable implementation of a national identity program. There had been serious debates in nations like Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom about the viability of implementing national identity policy, given that the chances of misuse of data in a centralized system increases by leaps and bounds and becomes the single point of failure. In 2009, India decided to have Unique Identification (UID) for its citizens and hence launched the UID program in the country by creating the Unique Identity Authority of India (UIDAI). The government of India has undertaken an initiative called "Aadhaar" to provide unique identification numbers to all residents of the nation. This paper tries to put the current UID project of India into a perspective to evaluate the set of issues and concerns, as pointed by various stakeholders and try to understand the degree of critically of those arguments, typically in a style of bringing up the perspectives presented. In this light, the areas of concerns around the UID project in India are also being pointed, with reference to information that already exists in the public domain. Given the largest IT project in any government globally, the topic is of immense significance besides being timely and the discussion can provide exhortation to a series of research activities in the areas of public policy, information systems planning and execution as well as appreciating the risks that get associated with such large initiatives.

Background

The concept of national identity scheme is not very new for India as the government had been evaluating various alternatives for an identity scheme since a couple of decades. According to the strategy overview document released by (UIDAI, 2010, p. 1), "...the government of India undertook an effort to provide a clear identity to residents first in 1993, with the issue of photo identity cards by the election commission and subsequently in 2003, when it approved the Multipurpose National Identity Card (MNIC). The Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) was established in January 2009, as an attached office to the planning commission. The purpose of UIDAI is to issue a unique identification number (UID) to all Indian residents that is durable enough to eliminate duplicate and fake identities, and can be verified and authenticated in any easy, cost effective way." The Prime Minister of India, as an exemplary step, had nominated Nandan Nilekani from Infosys to head the Unique ID Authority, posting him with a rank of a cabinet minister (Business Standard, 2009). The UIDAI authority has decided to provide a unique identification number to each resident of India. The process of generating this identification number will start with getting the biometrics of each resident of the country along with certain demographic details, as would be needed for any business (like a bank or a telecom operator) or government organization (like that of the Ministry of Rural Development) to identify a particular Indian resident. Biometrics of all ten fingers, along with the iris scan of both the eyes and the photo of the face has been decided to be taken as identifiers of all residents (uidai.gov.in). The project has been named as Aadhaar, meaning foundation. In an interview (Tripathi & Mukherjee, 2010, para. 5-7), the UIDAI Chairman mentioned the ways to get the UID number.

Evaluating the differences against opportunities

The Wall Street Journal article (A. Sharma, 2010, para.4) states that, "critics question whether the project can have as big an impact as its backers promise, given that identity fraud is but one contributor to India's development struggles. The civil liberties groups complain that the government is collecting too much personal information without sufficient safeguards. The technology requires transferring large amounts of data between the hinterland and an urban database, leading some to question whether the system will succumb to India's rickety internet infrastructure." When a question was raised in the Lok Sabha (Tiwari & Singh, 2010, p. 2) about abounding of UID projects in the other countries like United States of America, United Kingdom, Australia, China, Pakistan, Canada, and Germany, the response stated that, "A number of countries have various forms of identity systems based on the country-specific needs. The motivation and rationale for identity systems in different countries are specific to the country and cannot be generalized. The UID project in India has been envisioned to provide a unique identity to every resident of India which will be the foundations for better delivery of public services and targeted subsidies. The project has a basis in the developmental agenda of promoting more inclusive growth." UIDAI will not enforce any of the organizations or government departments to make the usage of UID mandatory and hence, all the other existing identity cards (e.g. PAN, Ration Card, etc.) will continue in parallel, even after the identity of a particular resident is proved.

National rural employment gurantee scheme (NREGS)

UIDAI proposes to integrate the Aadhaar scheme with NREGS in order to ensure that the benefits of the scheme reach the poor by bringing in more transparency at various levels. According to the proposal, UID would be integrated within the job cards, muster rolls, and bank accounts of the beneficiaries. The UID is expected to be authenticated at various citizen touch points which would ensure tracking of activities at the grass root level and thus allow greater transparency within the system.

Various questions on UID or AADHAAR

The Aadhaar project poses a number of questions, including the constitutional right to privacy and issues of surveillance, on identity, the costs of the project, and many others. It gives an impression that only welfarist objectives animate project but given the scale, costs and what it seeks to achieve in reality, it would be naive to assume that such a system would leave non-citizens untouched especially in the context of the high degree of anxiety over issues of both internal and external national insecurity.

Conclusion

The UID project is a very critical initiative for India and in all possibilities, we would need to be careful that the project neither faces the same fate as similar other large scale exercises in the country nor like the national ID initiatives of some other countries. Hence, it becomes critical to analyze the areas of concerns coming up from whatever has been done in this so far in this initiative.

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