The New York Times | https://nyti.ms/2GDwoXv

TECHNOLOGY

'Big Brother' in India Requires Fingerprint Scans for Food, Phones and Finances

Leer en español

By VINDU GOEL   APRIL 7, 2018

NEW DELHI — Seeking to build an identification system of unprecedented scope, India is scanning the fingerprints, eyes and faces of its 1.3 billion residents and connecting the data to everything from welfare benefits to mobile phones.

Civil libertarians are horrified, viewing the program, called Aadhaar, as Orwell's Big Brother brought to life. To the government, it's more like "big brother," a term of endearment used by many Indians to address a stranger when asking for help.

For other countries, the technology could provide a model for how to track their residents. And for India's top court, the ID system presents unique legal issues that will define what the constitutional right to privacy means in the digital age.

To Adita Jha, Aadhaar was simply a hassle. The 30-year-old environmental consultant in Delhi waited in line three times to sit in front of a computer that photographed her face, captured her fingerprints and snapped images of her irises. Three times, the data failed to upload. The fourth attempt finally worked,

and she has now been added to the 1.1 billion Indians already included in the program.

Ms. Jha had little choice but to keep at it. The government has made registration mandatory for hundreds of public services and many private ones, from taking school exams to opening bank accounts.

"You almost feel like life is going to stop without an Aadhaar," Ms. Jha said.

Technology has given governments around the world new tools to monitor their citizens. In China, the government is rolling out ways to use facial recognition and big data to track people, aiming to inject itself further into everyday life. Many countries, including Britain, deploy closed-circuit cameras to monitor their populations.

But India's program is in a league of its own, both in the mass collection of biometric data and in the attempt to link it to everything — traffic tickets, bank accounts, pensions, even meals for undernourished schoolchildren.

"No one has approached that scale and that ambition," said Jacqueline Bhabha, a professor and research director of Harvard's FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, who has studied biometric ID systems around the world. "It has been hailed, and justifiably so, as an extraordinary triumph to get everyone registered."

Critics fear that the government will gain unprecedented insight into the lives of all Indians.

In response, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other champions of the program say that Aadhaar is India's ticket to the future, a universal, easy-to-use ID that will reduce this country's endemic corruption and help bring even the most illiterate into the digital age.

"It's the equivalent of building interstate highways," said Nandan Nilekani, the technology billionaire who was tapped by the government in 2009 to build the Aadhaar system. "If the government invested in building a digital public utility and that is made available as a platform, then you actually can create major innovations around that."

The potential uses — from surveillance to managing government benefit programs — have drawn interest elsewhere. Sri Lanka is planning a similar system, and Britain, Russia and the Philippines are studying it, according to the Indian government.

Aadhaar, which means "foundation" in English, was initially intended as a difficult-to-forge ID to reduce fraud and improve the delivery of government welfare programs.

But Mr. Modi, who has promoted a "digital India" vision since his party took power in 2014, has vastly expanded its ambitions.

The poor must scan their fingerprints at the ration shop to get their government allocations of rice. Retirees must do the same to get their pensions. Middle-school students cannot enter the water department's annual painting contest until they submit their identification.

In some cities, newborns cannot leave the hospital until their parents sign them up. Even leprosy patients, whose illness damages their fingers and eyes, have been told they must pass fingerprint or iris scans to get their benefits.

The Modi government has also ordered Indians to link their IDs to their cellphone and bank accounts. States have added their own twists, like using the data to map where people live. Some employers use the ID for background checks on job applicants.

"Aadhaar has added great strength to India's development," Mr. Modi said in a January speech to military cadets. Officials estimate that taxpayers have saved at least $9.4 billion from Aadhaar by weeding out "ghosts" and other improper beneficiaries of government services.

Opponents have filed at least 30 cases against the program in India's Supreme Court. They argue that Aadhaar violates India's Constitution — and, in particular, a unanimous court decision last year that declared for the first time that Indians had a fundamental right to privacy.

Rahul Narayan, one of the lawyers challenging the system, said the government was essentially building one giant database on its citizens. "There has been a sort of mission creep to it all along," he said.

The court has been holding extensive hearings and is expected to make a ruling in the spring.

The government argues that the universal ID is vital in a country where hundreds of millions of people do not have widely accepted identification documents.

"The people themselves are the biggest beneficiaries," said Ajay B. Pandey, the Minnesota-trained engineer who leads the Unique Identification Authority of India, the government agency that oversees the system. "This identity cannot be refused."

Businesses are also using the technology to streamline transactions.

Banks once sent employees to the homes of account applicants to verify their addresses. Now, accounts can be opened online and finished with a fingerprint scan at a branch or other authorized outlet. Reliance Jio, a telecom provider, relies on an Aadhaar fingerprint scan to conduct the government-mandated ID check for purchases of cellphone SIM cards. That allows clerks to activate service immediately instead of forcing buyers to wait a day or two.

But the Aadhar system has also raised practical and legal issues.

Although the system's core fingerprint, iris and face database appears to have remained secure, at least 210 government websites have leaked other personal data — such as name, birth date, address, parents' names, bank account number and Aadhaar number — for millions of Indians. Some of that data is still available with a simple Google search.

As Aadhaar has become mandatory for government benefits, parts of rural India have struggled with the internet connections necessary to make Aadhaar work. After a lifetime of manual labor, many Indians also have no readable prints, making authentication difficult. One recent study found that 20 percent of the households in Jharkand state had failed to get their food rations under Aadhaar-based verification — five times the failure rate of ration cards.

"This is the population that is being passed off as ghosts and bogus by the government," said Reetika Khera, an associate professor of economics at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, who co-wrote the study.

Seeing these problems, some local governments have scaled back the use of Aadhaar for public benefits. In February, the government for the Delhi region announced that it would stop using Aadhaar to deliver food benefits.

Dr. Pandey said that some problems were inevitable but that his agency was trying to fix them. The government is patching security holes and recently added face recognition as an alternative to fingerprint or iris scans to make it easier to verify identities.

Fears that the Indian government could use Aadhaar to turn the country into a surveillance state, he said, are overblown. "There is no central authority that has all the information," he said.

Before Aadhaar, he said, hundreds of millions of Indians could not easily prove who they were.

"If you are not able to prove your identity, you are disenfranchised," he said. "You have no existence."

Correction: April 12, 2018

A picture caption with an earlier version of this article misidentified which of the people shown was undergoing a security check. It was the man in the foreground, not the woman. The caption also misstated what was being scanned. It was the man's irises, not his retinas.

Suhasini Raj contributed reporting.

Follow Vindu Goel on Twitter: @vindugoel.

A version of this article appears in print on April 8, 2018, on Page BU1 of the New York edition with the headline: India's 'Big Brother' Program.