

Aadhaar Guarantees Personal Freedom

Why trusting the State with protecting data is no big deal

:: Aman Singh

It is de rigueur to advocate right to privacy and ridicule the state and its instrumentalities. Aadhaar, too, has become a victim of this neoliberalism as it risks becoming an epic boondoggle. No wonder, there are many takers for Frederick Forsyth's quote: "Political correctness is indeed the new fascism." It is unfortunate that collection, storage, collation, distribution and usage of data are being confused with the infringement of right to privacy of the people.

One of the tools every state craftsman and executive from Plato to Marx, Chanakya to Machiavelli has relied upon and advocated, is an overarching information and feedback superstructure to protect and serve citizens. As democracies have evolved over centuries, the underlying sentiment of a welfare state has become stronger with technological advances aiding its progress. From manual collection of data, door-to-door census, ration cards, passports, early computerised identity cards to Aadhaar, the process has reached a stage from where it is not just irreversible but a fait accompli. Technology, like the genie, once out of the bottle, cannot ever be put back again.

If reaching the last person with state welfare schemes is the idea, then it is best to know that last person better and everyone else along the way. MGNREGA payments, pensions, social benefit amounts, subsidies are now directly paid into bank accounts of the beneficiaries, eliminating the need for middlemen and babus. Who can object to de-duplication and elimination of ghost beneficiaries? Union government estimates a saving of ₹57,000 crore simply through enhanced use of Aadhaar cards. That only "15 paise reaches the end beneficiary" statement is now history.

Yes, people have a right to privacy, but in most cases they happily and voluntarily give it up when they join the social media or even search on Google for something as simple as the nearest tailor. Big Daddy Google knows anything and everything about you, your address, your family, your dog, bank accounts, driving and shopping preferences and even your early morning habits. That's not too different from what Aadhaar is storing, besides biometric detail which, in any case, can't be accessed without following the due process of law.

The trinity of JAM (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and Mobile) is a game-changer in providing good, efficient, transparent governance and targeted delivery of subsidies, benefits



The trinity of JAM (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and Mobile) is a game-changer in providing efficient, transparent governance and targeted delivery of subsidies and services. The benefits of Aadhaar are not only in improving dispensation of services but also in improving revenue

and services. However, a Kafkaesque campaign against Aadhaar as symptomatic of Orwellian state will ensure that it will become the long pole in the tent of JAM. The seeding of Aadhaar with bank account and PAN will make a major dent in undisclosed income. Integration of land records with Aadhaar and PAN will be the tipping point in the fight against black money. So, clearly, the benefits of Aadhaar are not only in improving dispensation of services but also in improving revenue and targeting black money.

There is no such thing as absolute privacy in the social construct of our time. Protection, safeguard and security of data are absolutely non-negotiable and inviolable. The concerns about privacy because of data reaching the wrong hands are genuine and not insuperable and need systematic, technical and procedural address. However,

there is no conflict between Aadhaar and data privacy. While the fate of right to privacy as a fundamental right is still in the legal womb of future, it is a settled law that fundamental rights can be restricted in the interest of public and the security of the state. No doubt, the width and amplitude of a right which is not explicitly recognised by the Constitution have to be detailed through specific legislation. The Aadhaar Act of 2016 is a legislation that addresses privacy issues relating to the collection and use of personal details of individuals linked with UID numbers. The security and confidentiality of data is the bedrock of this act. Violation and misuse of the Aadhaar law is a criminal offence that may result in imprisonment. The argument is not against the idea of privacy itself, but depriving unserved or underserved citizens of key benefits is like throwing the baby with the bathwater. If we depend on the State to protect us against humungous corporations, external and internal threats and our own welfare, then trusting it with protecting data is no big deal. ■



The writer is principal secretary to the chief minister, Chhattisgarh. Views expressed are personal