

Aadhaar vs benami

Linking Aadhaar to property will catch *benami* ownership

OVER THE COURSE of the last few years, despite several people protesting against it, the government has steadily been increasing the usage of Aadhaar. In the initial phases, it was used in relatively low-profile areas like government scholarships, but this was later extended to ration shops and LPG connections. While duplicate and fake accounts were weeded out using Aadhaar in both cases, in the case of ration shops, provisions were also made to ensure—this is not fully complete as yet—that all ration shops had biometric-capture devices to authenticate the person buying rations by querying the Aadhaar database. Over time, the government tried to link Aadhaar numbers to bank accounts, mobile phones and even PAN cards. While people protested, the government correctly argued that while bank accounts and mobile phones had to be linked to some proof of identity anyway, linking them to Aadhaar ensured there were no fake IDs being used for this process. So, if a bank account was linked to a PAN number, and that PAN was a fake, the taxman wasn't going to be able to do much with the information—but if an Aadhaar link was done, there was no question of the PAN card being fake. In other words, even as cases against Aadhaar got filed in various courts, the government was tightening the noose as far as tax thieves were concerned.

This, however, did nothing to catch *benami* properties which was high on the government agenda. Sure, there were tax and other raids and the *benami* properties allegedly held for some politicians were attached, but the process of identifying these properties was long and laborious. In this context, housing minister Hardeep Puri's statement that the government will link all properties across the country with Aadhaar is a significant one. Once this is done, there will be a central database of ownership of each property and it will be relatively easier for the taxman to figure out whether the owner of a particular property is paying taxes, and whether his income is enough to justify ownership of the property. If it is not, it is clear the property is a *benami* one, which can be seized by the government. While the process will be time-consuming and will probably also require to take state governments along, the government would do well to start this process in states that agree to it—all BJP-ruled states are the obvious place to start. Given the role Aadhaar can play in catching tax and other thieves, it is hardly surprising the crescendo against it is so loud.