

God, please save India from our upper class Aadhaarophobics

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A person giving biometrics for Aadhaar | Wikimedia Commons

If your *sarkar* wants to keep track of you, it doesn't need Aadhaar. But the poor need it for their rights and that's why they aren't protesting.

There are two aspects to the Aadhaar/*The Tribune* controversy. One is the thoughtlessly stupid FIR which names reporter Rachna Khaira and the newspaper, among others, though not as accused ó a shot fired in anger by an almighty bureaucrat furious at having his weekend ruined. The other is the scare-mongering over Aadhaar, which rivals the Gaul fear of the falling sky in Asterix comics.

Activists of the upper crust, upper class, wine ñn cheese, Netflix-watching social media eliteô mostly of the Left, but some of the Right tooô see a final vindication of their view that Aadhaar is becoming the most diabolical mass threat to India since the bubonic plague was banished. They wouldn't want the two issues, the FIR and ôdangersö of Aadhaar, to be seen as distinct.

Which is precisely what I am going to do. So help me God, from Aadhaarophobic cyber-warriors (I never use the description ôtrollö for any humans).

It's also perfect timing for the activists. The Aadhaar case comes up for its final hearing on the 17th of this month. So the five good judges, watching and reading this, should know what to do. Not to leave it to chance, there's been a flurry of articles by respected activists in equally respected publications over the past few weeks. Again, hoping that the judges would heed these, if not the million dire warnings each day on Twitter.

The first issue is settled easily. The government has tried damage-control on the FIR with a statement by the IT Minister. The honourable thing to do is to amend the FIR to leave out the reporter and the newspaper. They can be summoned later as witnesses if the case progresses. Anything else would be, for want of a stronger yet printable word, idiotic.

The second is the fear-mongering on Aadhaar. The biggest fear is, this will put governments on the inside track of our lives: where we go, what we eat, who we meet, which hotel we checked in, which flight we took, what our political, ideological or sexual orientation is, did we bitch about our bosses, are we cheating on our spouses, and if so with who or whose spouses, what is my blood pressure and cholesterol count, is my pet a dog or a cat and is it neutered, and if so, who's the vet and what does he eat, who is he dating, and so on.

Here's a reality check. And some reasons why elite phobia of Aadhaar as the ultimate surveillance state is 99.99 per cent exaggerated.

All governments are hungry for information on citizens of interest and will misuse it. But surveillance on 134 crore Indians? Any sarkar would need/want to keep track of just some specific categories of citizens - political, bureaucratic, media, intellectual, judicial, activist and the creative elite. I am sure that I am among them and fully work on the presumption that governments keep track of what details they want on me.

That use of the plural, governments, is deliberate. All governments do this. Congress governments were no angels. Would any government need me to have Aadhaar to do this any better? I'd be delusional to think that. If I need to protect a source, I'd be a dangerously incompetent journalist to call her from my phone. I shall borrow someone else's. This is basic hygiene of a journalist's life. Similarly, others must have their rules too.

Does a government need Aadhaar to keep track of our honourable judges? Ask the judges. Every Collegium meeting for years reads an Intelligence Bureau report on each candidate that comes up for judicial appointment. Those Charlies work on õreputationö, pure hearsay, and can make or mar careers or the quality of the judiciary. They never needed Aadhaar.

Top bureaucrats? What is the new õ360-degreeö system of reputational check that the government has set up? It is all about what people say about so and so, so we can decide whether to elevate him/her to a full secretary or not. All hearsay, some of which will also come from party or RSS workers on the ground. Does this need Aadhaar?

Activists? Did Aadhaar enable the government to muck around with Teesta Setalvad's credit card bills? Hotel check-ins? From British times, every hotel has its registers checked by the local police special branch each evening. After recording a ñWalk the Talkø at the Gateway of India one early morning, Sushil Kumar Shinde, then Maharashtra chief minister, took me to the Taj Mahal Palace hotel coffee shop for breakfast, looked almost wistfully at the reception and said: õWhen I was a sub-inspector in special branch, I used to come here every day to copy the guest register.ö

So if you've been up to interesting things lately, and are a person of interest to the government, chances are they already know more than you'd want them to. Not having Aadhaar wouldn't have helped.

Fact is, every time you use your credit card, check into a hotel, take a flight and thereby cut a PNR, make a bank transaction, a phone call, pay tax, send an SMS, write/do/say anything that goes through a server, watch a movie (even on Netflix in your bedroom or somebody else's) you leave an indelible trail.

Each PNR can enable a government to get a track on every flight you have taken at least in the past 7-8 years. This is the reality in a post-9/11 world and a post-26/11 India, hyper-paranoid about terror. If you still want true privacy and anonymity, find yourself one of the 500 uninhabited islands in the Maldives. But hurry, before they drown due to global warming. Or even earlier, before the Chinese get there and build a naval base.

The short point is, if a government wants to keep track of a citizen, it can do so quite easily. It is just that the government does not need to, and cannot keep track of the 119 crore citizens who already have Aadhaar and the rest are coming in at a quick clip of 2.5 lakh per day.

Fear-mongering has reached such fantastic proportions that confirmed nihilists like Julian Assange (who believes there is more democracy in China and Russia than in America and India) and Edward Snowden are being quoted in support. It is touching to believe our judges would be influenced by those hiding from judicial scrutiny in their own democratic countries. Nor do I believe our judges watch tech-phobic British TV series Black Mirror (neither do I). And the poor of this country aren't impressed by any of this. Certainly they do not watch Black Mirror or read Weapons of Math Destruction.

There are three kinds of opposition to Aadhaar.

First, from those who find the very idea of the state revolting. Those we can do nothing about except to say that they should be happy they can say all they want in their own country rather than hide in the Ecuadorean embassy or be the great Gandhian Putin's guests.

Second are those fearing for privacy, whose concerns I have already argued with in detail.

And third, the well-meaning anti-poverty activists who worry that mandatory Aadhaar-linking of subsidies and entitlements would hurt the poor. They also quote cases of misuse, glitches or denial of services often. Unlike the first category which detests the very idea of the state, these love the state, especially a physical, touchy-feely one. How can you leave the poor to technology? The sad fact for them is the poor have moved on. More than 10 crore poor have Aadhaar-linked LPG connections. Rs 75,000 crore has already been delivered to the poor people's Aadhaar-linked bank accounts. Tell them now Aadhaar is their curse.

They should know the greatest curse in a poor Indian's life is a lack of identity. Each time a poor Indian needs something from the government, she has to go to someone, a chhota bureaucrat, sarpanch or MLA for attesting evidence of her identity. Friction and arbitrage is built in the system. The new Aadhaar identity liberates and empowers. Or millions of the 119 crore already with it would have been out on the streets protesting and not leave it to 3,229

(or thereabouts, I just made up that number) social media elites to wage this Great War for their liberty. How come no poor people are out protesting? Or not chucking their Aadhaar cards? Try and take it away from one.

How would the paranoid respond to that? Arrey, these poor gullible *ganwar*villagers, *inko kya pata?* We have to protect them, because we know better, what with our fancy education in great Ivy League and some more revolutionary Indian campuses. We know better, and they need our protection.

So here is my suggestion to this distinguished but gratuitously patronising lot. Go to YouTube, watch *“Saala main to sahab ban gaya...”* from Dilip Kumar-Saira Bano starrer *Sagina*. Then stop at the line: *“Tum langoti waala na badla hai na badlega/tum sab kaala logon ki kismat hum saala badlega.”* Replay it a few times.

Amazing how Majrooh Sultanpuri wrote these lines just for you in 1974.

Postscript: Anti-Aadhaarism is happily a lost cause. Even if the Supreme Court says it isn't compulsory for government services, the poor, a few more numerous than activists (!), won't stop using it. A privacy law is needed, Aadhaar or no Aadhaar. The paranoid rich can go back to paper-tickets for air travel. But remember, even then there will be a PNR and data will be accessible for all aviation security and anti-terror organisations across the world: at the flick of a button on a common database.

Disclosure: Nandan Nilekani, the founder of UIDAI, is among the distinguished founder-investors in ThePrint. Please click here for [details on investors](#).