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I have sleepless nights over these hacking threats to Aadhaar system: UIDAI CEO

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CEO of UIDAI, Ajay Bhushan Pandey with Shekhar Gupta and Ruhi Tewari on Off The Cuff | ThePrint

As the SC hears the Aadhaar case, Ajay Bhushan Pandey is happy that fundamental issues such as privacy and data security are now part of the national agenda.

New Delhi: Attempts are made from all around the world almost every day to hack into the Aadhaar unique identification system but none have been successful so far, the CEO of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), Ajay Bhushan Pandey, has revealed.

His comments come at a time when fears over data breaches and misuse of Aadhaar have sparked a national debate and the Supreme Court has begun hearing the constitutional challenge to the unique id project ahead of the 31 March deadline to

mandatorily link the number to bank accounts and other financial products.

"I have sleepless nights every third day over these (hacking) threats," Pandey said at ThePrint's 'Off The Cuff' event in the capital Thursday, adding that these threats emanate from across the world and not any one particular country. "But I am willing to have many sleepless nights to make sure that the data remains safe, secure and functional."

As he addressed and sought to allay a range of concerns about Aadhaar, Pandey said that he was, in fact, happy that the world's largest biometric ID system has brought fundamental issues such as privacy and data security to the national agenda. "Through Aadhaar many national priorities are being debated," he told the event that was moderated by ThePrint Editor-in-Chief Shekhar Gupta and Associate Editor Ruhi Tewari.

An electrical engineer from IIT-Kanpur, a computer science PhD from the US and an IAS officer for 30 years, Pandey has been steering Aadhaar for the last eight years and has regularly tackled the criticism it has faced.

On the question of privacy, he said the government was invested in ensuring privacy even before the judiciary declared it to be a fundamental right last year. When the Aadhaar Act, 2016 was being drafted, Pandey said there was no definitive word from the court on privacy. "In spite of that we considered privacy to be a fundamental right. The finance minister said that the Aadhaar Bill is made on the premise of privacy," he said.

The information that Aadhaar requires remains limited to biometric, demographic and gender details. The entire system is based on "minimal information and optimum ignorance," he said, adding that Aadhaar is the identity that evokes the maximum trust among Indians today.

Aadhaar would not make other domain identity proofs such as the driving licence or the passport redundant, he said. But their linkage to Aadhaar will rule out fakes, he added.

On the FIR registered against The Tribune newspaper and its reporter following her report on anonymous agents allegedly providing access to Aadhaar numbers over WhatsApp for a fee, Pandey said that there is no criminal case against The Tribune or the reporter but an FIR was filed as all such incidents are taken seriously.

Explaining what constitutes a data breach, the UIDAI CEO said that while leaking of Aadhaar numbers, for example, would indeed violate the law it would not constitute a data breach since Aadhaar number is not a secret number. "Your Aadhaar number is a part of your identity which you have to share, it does not constitute data breach," he said.

Yet given how "seamlessly" Aadhaar has been implemented, it has given rise to concerns about the extent to which technology can penetrate people's lives, he said. Drawing a parallel with the Social Security Number in the US, Pandey said that "there is an international trend towards a unique number so that it becomes hard for someone to dupe."