

RAVI SHANKAR PRASAD

Privacy should not be an excuse to halt innovation

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NEWDELHI: Union law and information technology minister, Ravi Shankar Prasad, made a case for the 12-digit biometric Aadhaar number on Friday, saying the privacy argument should not be used to “prohibit innovation” and “shield the corrupt and terrorists”.

The minister’s remarks come at a time critics say Aadhaar is an intrusive tool open to misuse by the government, which has already collected fingerprints, iris scans and personal details of more than 80% of the country’s 1.25 billion people.

“This is my Aadhaar ... It does not contain my caste, my community, my religion, my income. But the system contains my fingerprints and my iris,” he said, showing his Aadhaar card to the audience at the 15th Hindustan Times Leadership Summit.

Allaying fears surrounding Aadhaar and data privacy, the minister said the government will come up with a data-protection law that will be a beacon for the world.

The government is pushing for mandatory use of Aadhaar for various schemes and services, including bank accounts and phone numbers, saying it is necessary to plug leaks in its welfare programmes and

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RAVI SHANKAR PRASAD, Union law minister

curb corruption.

But activists say the law and the government’s decision infringe individual privacy.

“Privacy can’t become the shield of the corrupt and terrorists,” Prasad said in defence of the Aadhaar law. “Aadhaar is the digital identity to supplement the physical identity.”

The Supreme Court ruled recently that individual privacy is a fundamental right, a verdict that many say will test the validity of the biometric identification project already facing legal challenges.

A nine-judge Constitution bench of the top court will hear a clutch of petitions challenging the legality of the Aadhaar law and government notifications of linking the identification number with bank accounts and mobile phone numbers.

The law minister clarified the government’s position on linking bank accounts with Aadhaar.

He said, “Fifty crore people have voluntarily linked 81 crore bank accounts to Aadhaar cards. I don’t understand why there’s opposition to the government initiative from certain other people.”

Prasad spoke about Digital India, the Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government’s signature programme that aims to build synergy between good governance and the use of information technology.

“We don’t want to miss the digital revolution ... Digital India is more for the poor and underprivileged, and designed to bring in digital inclusion ... Let us bring in technology which is affordable, which is inclusive,” Prasad said and added that these are the basic themes of the Digital India scheme.

Prasad said the government’s target is to push India’s digital economy to \$1 trillion “in five to eight years”.



■ Union law minister Ravi Shankar Prasad.

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