

# 'Aadhaar is a definite step forward despite security concerns'

India cannot escape the digital revolution, says **SOUMITRA DUTTA**, founding dean of Cornell SC Johnson College of Business at Cornell University, a well-known economist and the co-editor and author of two influential reports on technology and innovation — the Global Information Technology Report (co-published with the World Economic Forum) and the Global Innovation Index. Digital India has to be the way forward for the country and one should move beyond technology to assess the impact of the government's move, Dutta tells Khalid Anzar in an interview. Edited excerpts:

**There is a lot of buzz around Digital India these days. Are we ready to move towards a digital economy?**

India has no choice but to be ready to be a digital economy. There are three aspects to understanding what a digital economy means. The first one is readiness. Then second aspect is 'usage' and the third, and the most important, is 'impact'. If you think of Digital India in terms of readiness, usage and impact, you start understanding that you have to work on all these dimensions for key stakeholders — private citizens, businesses and the government. All these three stakeholders should be working on all the three dimensions.

**There is a dark side to technology as well — security. How ready are we to address such issues?**

Security and privacy are very difficult issues. There are no good solutions to these anywhere in the world. This is because of the way technology is developing. You have to have this balance between security, trust, privacy and access. Certainly, in an environment where national security has been the top priority, many governments

have found good reasons to actually control and increase that dominance on security elements.

**If we take Aadhaar as an example with regard to security and privacy, do you think it is a step forward? Also, do you think Aadhaar is safe?**

Aadhaar is definitely a move forward. Leaving aside any privacy and security concerns for a moment, India is a country that needs to have efficient government services. Without Aadhaar, it would be very difficult to put in place many basic services. It would also make it more difficult to digitise government services, and allow the providers to interact with citizens. Otherwise, there are all kinds of frauds and corruption in the system. Aadhaar is a necessity and a positive thing. That is one reason why the Narendra Modi government has retained it. However, safety is an important issue; cyber threats are widespread. In principle, everything can be hacked. There is a huge issue of safety of records of financial transactions, medical transactions and other personal data on the web. I hope the government is taking the



best precautions possible to try and safeguard data. There is always a risk in technology. The benefits of Aadhaar far outweigh the risks in my view.

**The core technology used in Aadhaar is to identify individuals based on their biometrics and retina scans. These are identities unique to every individual. While debit or credit cards can be replaced and passwords reset, how will you weigh the risk of putting a unique identity of the citizens — biometrics and retina — out there for people to gain access to?** Biometric safeguards are becoming increasingly common. Increasingly, biometric information is being used in higher security applications. So, there is indeed a risk and there is no question about that. But the question here is what sort of a balance is there between risk and benefits.

