

ET Q&A

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MINISTER FOR ELECTRONICS AND IT

## 'Aadhaar is Secure, Concerns Misplaced'

Security concerns pertaining to Aadhaar are misplaced and the system is robust and secure, Union Minister for Electronics and IT Ravi Shankar Prasad said in an interview to ET's **Surabhi Agarwal**. The minister attributed part of the negative campaign around Aadhaar to vested interests and said the Congress party should be happy that the Narendra Modi government is carrying forward its legacy. Prasad said anecdotal evidence suggests the Modi government's stand on triple talaq touched a chord with Muslim women in Uttar Pradesh, many of whom may have voted for the BJP in the recent election. Edited excerpts:



ARINDAM

### **What would you attribute as the genesis of the current controversy around Aadhaar?**

Much of the criticism of Aadhaar is misplaced. Aadhaar as a platform is completely safe and secure and respects completely the privacy element. That is entirely inbuilt in the Aadhaar Act passed by the Parliament. The world is today appreciating Aadhaar and in a very short period of time, it has established its utility for good governance. Today, almost 113 crore Indians have Aadhaar and 99% of the adult population of India is on Aadhaar. We have saved Rs 49,000 crore in various subsidies. It has given a concrete response to the concern raised by former PM Rajiv Gandhi when he said that I send Rs 100 from Delhi and only Rs 15 reaches on ground. Here, the complete entitlement without any misappropriation reaches the common man. Aadhaar is showing results and vested interests are

getting affected. I have every respect for those who criticise and we will respond to their concerns. But we have serious apprehensions that vested interests are troubled because Aadhaar is bringing in transparency.

### **Do you think there is a campaign being run against Aadhaar?**

What is important is that no beneficiary is asking any question. Because poor people are happy with money being directly transferred into their account, be it MGNREGA payment, gas subsidy or ration subsidy. Therefore, the big group of poor people getting targeted benefit are happy about it. In a democracy, everyone has a right to have an opinion. But a lot of concerns are misplaced. And I am more worried about some of the Congress friends. It was started in their government. We refined, we polished, we improved, and today we have made it a big success story of India's development.

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In fact, through you I wish to compliment Nandan Nilekani – he has done a great job. If Narendra Modi government is doing a good job of something started by them, they should be happy about it.

But some of the concerns regarding Aadhaar data being posted online are legitimate. What is the government doing to mitigate the concerns?

In the government, we will undertake a sensitisation programme that you have to ensure that no personal information – be it Aadhaar number or bank account – should be revealed. One incident occurred and instant action has been taken.

And the parameters of the Act are binding on all, including government officers, which means that government officers have to be equally careful. Some of the controls about sharing of Aadhaar information are tougher than those of the phone tapping principles laid down by the Supreme Court. I have also asked the authority to undertake an awareness and sensitisation campaign about it (data privacy).

## Would bringing a privacy bill settle some of the data security debate?

That idea is an open idea. We will need to debate. The larger issue of privacy is a different matter altogether in the digital age.

As far as specifically Aadhaar system is concerned, it is safe, it is secure, it is robust with respect to privacy and if anybody breaches, he can suffer criminal consequences.

## NON-DISCRIMINATION

India's Constitution is now 70 years old. And non-discrimination against women is one of the most important attributes of our fundamental rights

### What are the next big plans for digital payments?

The progress of digital payments has been very, very satisfactory and after Ambedkar Jayanti, April 14, and the launch of Aadhaar Pay, we are going to undertake a big campaign in this connection all over the country. All of us will be going in the field.

### There is a big push on Aadhaar Pay, the government has also linked the UID number with multiple things in the last few months which is creating a big brother kind of a perception in the minds of the common man. What is the intent of the government?

The digital identity is only designed to make the system cleaner, and therefore the most minimum information is taken. The core biometrics means fingerprint and the iris and it can't be shared with anyone even with your own consent.

In demographic information, name, date of birth and address is collected. Even your parentage, educational qualification, caste, religion, income

or medical history is not collected, so this will not intrude. Suppose Supreme Court has said that to get a SIM card, Aadhaar can be given. But the Aadhaar database doesn't know what for the verification is being done, whether it is for opening a bank account or a SIM card.

Aadhaar only authenticates, Aadhaar system doesn't know at all for what purpose Aadhaar use is being done by the requesting agency seeking verification. There is a conscious inbuilt system that the legal framework must prohibit any big brotherly information pooling.

Therefore minimum information, no kind of a data pooling for profiling, and secondly, the authentication of the Aadhaar is absolutely insulated from ascertaining the purpose for which the authentication is being done.

The agency seeking verification can also not use it for any other purpose else they can also be prosecuted. That's why the system is very robust.

### Do you think the issue of triple talaq played a role in the UP election win?

I had articulated this in a big way. Many people tell me that many Muslims have voted (for BJP), but this I surely conveyed in all my public interactions across the state that UP has the maximum number of victims of triple talaq in the country and the government of Narendra Modi is standing firmly behind them to get them justice, because of the stand we have taken in Supreme Court.

What is the view of Sonia Gandhi, Mayawati, Priyanka (Vadra) and Dimple (Yadav) – all of them are wo-

men leaders – is a question that has to be asked. Surely, it touched a chord among Muslim women who are victims. I don't know whether they have voted or not, but I have ample evidence that there was a profound sense of respect for Narendra Modi government for the way their lingering deprivation has been articulated.

### What will be the government's next course of action on the issue of triple talaq?

The matter is before the court, therefore, we have already conveyed our position and our position is very clear. The issue has no linkage with religion or faith. The issue simply is gender justice, dignity and equality.

India's Constitution is now 70 years old. And non-discrimination against women is one of the most important attributes of our fundamental rights. Should, after 70 years of India's Independence, a big chunk of India's women suffer rank discrimination only because they have come from a different community? I really appreciate the importance being given to it by the court.

Can a Hindu say that I will undertake untouchability against a Dalit because it is required for my worship? It is unconstitutional.

By legal intervention, many other instruments of oppression were contained. If more than 20 Muslim-dominated countries including Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh have regulated or altogether abolished talaq and were not found foul of Sharia, how can this issue be raised in a secular country like India?