

Show me even one example of data theft. Aadhaar is very, very secure

*Aadhaar is in the eye of a storm following the government's decision to link it to everything from PAN cards to driving licences. Issues about privacy and data breach have been raised. In an interview, **Nandan Nilekani**, former chairman of UIDAI and the father of Aadhaar, tells **Asha Rai** that he is all for privacy and data protection but against the attempt to demonise Aadhaar*

■ **What's with the new momentum to Aadhaar? A host of new services are being linked to it.**

Initially Aadhaar played a big role in streamlining benefit

delivery — LPG, kerosene, pensions, scholarships, etc — which proved to be very successful. For an investment of about Rs 8,000/9,000 crore on Aadhaar infrastructure, the government has already saved Rs 50,000 crore by its own estimate, and every year you will get savings. These savings can then be used to give genuine people more benefits like the Ujjwala scheme to give subsidised LPG to the poor. What's happened in the last few weeks — they are a few unrelated things but they all came together. First, the Supreme Court asked the government to come up with a proper verification strategy for mobile SIM cards and the government's answer was Aadhaar e-KYC which the SC accepted.

For PAN cards, the basic idea is to ensure everybody has one PAN card. Today, we have 25 crore PAN numbers issued and only four crore taxpayers. Some are genuine cards but many others are duplicate PANs. Today, because you have to give your PAN number for high-value purchase, you can use one PAN number to file your IT returns and another to buy expensive bags and jewellery. In the IPO allotment, people use multiple PANs to get more shares allotted. Aadhaar was used to clean up the beneficiary list for government schemes. Using the same argument, if it's linked, duplicate PANs will go away and tax evasion will reduce. The issue with driving licences is again their multiplicity. In all these cases, Aadhaar is being

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used to eliminate various kinds of fraud and misuse.

■ **Is the government running too fast with Aadhaar?**

The government is moving very purposefully. The fact also is that maturity has come. A brand new, sophisticated platform like this takes several years to reach maturity. When I stepped down we had 60 crore people with Aadhaar. Now there are 110 crore.

■ **Issues about privacy and data protection are a huge concern...**

Let's just step back a bit. Privacy is an all-encompassing issue because of the rapid rate of digitisation the world is seeing. Your smartphone has sensors, GPS and is generating more and more information about everything; voice-activated devices could also be recording your conversations. There's a profusion of CCTV cameras at malls, restaurants, ATMs recording your movements. We have a broader issue on how people retain their privacy in this world. I am all for a comprehensive data protection and privacy law. I wrote a letter to Dr Manmohan Singh in 2010 saying that we should start the process of creating this law. To single out and de-

monise Aadhaar when we have an across-the-board issue with mobile phones, voice recognition systems, CCTV cameras, Internet of things (IoT), I think that is a motivated campaign.

International companies are coming here and collecting data. People are giving their data, agreeing to terms and conditions which are quite one-sided, that data is sitting in some unaccounted server abroad and is being shared with foreign governments. How come nobody is talking about that?

If you really want a privacy law, let's look at the whole thing. Why are you singling out one thing? I will support any effort to create a modern privacy and data protection law.

■ **How secure is Aadhaar data?**

Very secure. The agency collecting the data has no access to it as it uses the most advanced encryption technology. The data packet is encrypted at source. Even before the data you have given is written onto the disk, it is encrypted. You can't open it. It's a very, very secure system. The level of encryption that Aadhaar has is way above any other system today, including in the private sector. Plus, security keeps getting enhanced.

Nobody has given me a single example of data theft from Aadhaar. Show me one. Let someone say they took out this packet and opened it. He can't. It's all this hand-waving kind of stuff. I can categorically say that it's the most secure system in India and among the most secure systems in the world.

■ **Aadhaar is getting a lot of global attention...**

Yes. It has got a lot of appreciation. Globally, identity as a public good is now becoming a big topic. In the West, the identity business was privatised. That's a much more unsafe model than when a government issues an ID. Our colonised guys don't understand this!

