

Asia | Reams of red tape

India is obsessed with giving its people “unique IDs”

The government is entrenching bureaucracy in the guise of cutting it

March 20th 2025



THE PROMISE of Aadhaar, India’s biometrics-based national-identity system, was a glorious one. It was designed to provide a legal identity to those who possessed no papers and to eliminate the stacks of documents required for even minor administrative tasks. It has largely been a success. Fifteen years after the first 12-digit “unique ID” was issued under Aadhaar, nearly every Indian has been enrolled. What used to require bundles of photocopies is today achieved with a photograph or a fingerprint. Aadhaar has helped cut corruption and fraud in the provision of benefits. Opening a bank account or switching mobile operators now takes minutes instead of days. All kinds of services have been built on top of it.

But India's government seems to have forgotten that the system was also meant to reduce duplication. Barely a month goes by without the announcement of another "unique ID" for yet another set of people. Separate digital IDs have been proposed or rolled out for doctors, nurses, patients, organ donors and the disabled. Teachers, pupils and foreign students are all in line to get their own unique IDs. There are unique IDs for athletes, judges, farmers, gig workers and septic-tank cleaners. That is in addition to the existing IDs, which include passports, voter cards, driving licences and an array of tax identifiers.

It does not stop at humans. Plots of land, rural buildings, mobile-phone accounts—nothing is safe from unique identification. "Yet another ID?! Yes, this time it is for a piece of land!!" reads a page on the website of the government's IT-services department. The Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying is allotting unique IDs to every cow and buffalo in India. The IT ministry has mooted what one newspaper dryly described as "One digital ID that links, can access other IDs".

This epidemic of IDs is partly the result of the success of Aadhaar. Its biometric verification guarantees that someone is who they say they are. The principle can be applied to other schemes. Homes built under an affordable-housing programme are geotagged so that it is possible to see the structure on which funds have been spent. Digital oversight cannot eradicate corruption. But it does make it more difficult.

Yet many new IDs lack any such underpinnings. Much of it is branding. Any organisation that deals with people manages its relationships in databases, with each individual assigned a numerical identifier. But after Aadhaar made unique IDs sexy, bureaucrats at obscure departments started bandying the term about and building their own ID systems. "You have to have a unique ID for land parcels, for houses and soon may need a unique ID for a combination of both. The person who occupies the house anyway has a unique ID. It's gone completely berserk," says one expert on tech policy.

Even if many of the new IDs are light on substance, they are not cost-free. They require funding, occupy the energies of officials and techies, and test the patience of citizens. They create more avenues for domestic and foreign spooks to snoop on Indians, and for hackers to poke at vulnerabilities. In

2023 data about people who had taken the covid-19 vaccine were leaked on Telegram, a messaging app. Though biometric data held by Aadhaar are not known to have been compromised, other data it holds have been leaked on several occasions. Meanwhile, constant demands from banks and mobile operators to comply with government-mandated “know your customer” regulations have been a boon for cyber fraudsters. Repeated requests for personal data to set up new IDs are similarly conditioning Indians to hand over information to anyone who asks.

Nandan Nilekani, Aadhaar’s architect, envisioned it as “an open identity-verification system that can be plugged into any application”. Officials have taken from it the opposite lesson: that their department must have its own Aadhaar. They are thereby recreating the very problems it was meant to solve: government wastage, duplicative demands for data and a baffling array of IDs to keep track of. In the guise of cutting bureaucracy, the Indian state is instead entrenching it. ■

Stay on top of our India coverage by [signing up to Essential India](#), our free weekly newsletter.