The demonisation of Aadhaar

It is unfortunate that many sincere social workers, activists, and economists are not able to see through it

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THE ARTICLE BY Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey ('Excluded by Aadhaar,' IE, June 5) and a few other recent pieces in *The Indian Express* have criticised Aadhaar on the ground that it is leading to large-scale exclusion of the needy and deserving from the benefits of several schemes. With due respect to the critics of Aadhaar, their claim is neither based on legal positions nor on the facts on ground. They need to be reminded that, not so long ago, huge sums of money in welfare schemes meant for poor were being siphoned away through ghost entities and duplicates and as a result, genuine beneficiaries suffered.

Fake PAN and ghost bank accounts and shell companies helped in large-scale tax evasion, money laundering and the generation of black money. Efforts of the government to weed out these ghost entities had only a limited and transient impact. These entities were resilient and would soon reappear in much larger numbers. Aadhaar was conceptualised to address this malaise and was given a statutory basis in 2016 through the enactment of the Aadhaar Act, which enables the government to make Aadhaar mandatory for welfare schemes and services.

The critics claim that the government's notifications mandating Aadhaar in schemes like the PDS, MGNREGA and mid-day meals have led to denial of benefits to the vulnerable sections of society. They have cited a few instances of elderly people being denied food rations because they did not have Aadhaar or their fingerprints could not be authenticated since their fingers had worn with age. An impression is sought to be created that Aadhaar is responsible for the exclusion of such beneficiaries and therefore is anti-poor and should be discarded. It is a classic case of barking up the wrong tree. Aadhaar has been given to more than 115 crore people. More than 99 per cent adults in the country are covered under it. Notwithstanding such high coverage, the Aadhaar Act mandates that not even one person be denied benefits because of the lack of Aadhaar. Regulation 12 of the Aadhaar (Enrollment and Update) Regulations enjoins the agency requiring coverage, the Aadhaar Act mandates that not even one person be denied benefits because of the lack of Aadhaar. Regulation 12 of the Aadhaar (Enrollment and Update) Regulations enjoins the agency requiring Aadhaar to enroll its beneficiary and provide him benefits till he has Aadhaar. The Aadhaar Act also provides statutory protection to those who are unable to authenticate fingerprints because their fingers have worn with age or other reasons such as technical faults and connectivity failures. Section Seven of the Aadhaar Act mandates "delivery of benefits through Aadhaar authentication or furnishing proof of possession of Aadhaar number".
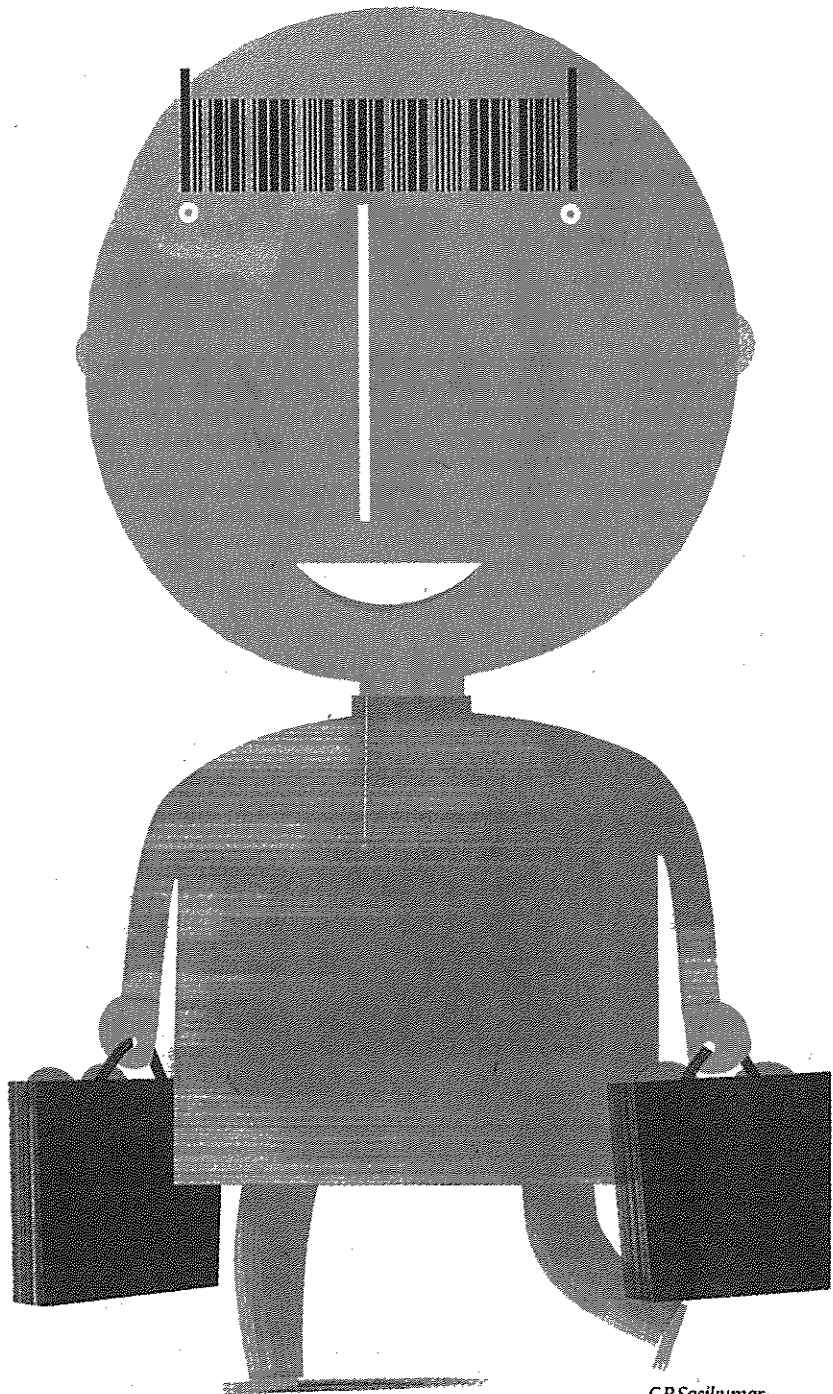
It is, therefore, absolutely clear that in case a person has difficulty in getting his fingerprints authenticated on a machine, he can provide a copy of his Aadhaar card and receive the benefits till the system is rectified. The field agencies have been instructed accordingly through notifications issued by the government. In spite of this, if a person is denied because he does not have Aadhaar or he is unable to biometrically authenticate the information, it is a violation of the government's instructions. Such violators have to be punished. But to claim that Aadhaar is responsible for the denial of benefits is akin to blaming the Reserve Bank of India's currency system when a few merchants refuse to accept the new Rs 500 notes from customers. Needless to say, such offences have to be dealt with by the local law enforcement agencies.

Some critics of Aadhaar demand that benefits be not denied to those who are unwilling to enroll for Aadhaar. This plea is certainly not tenable under the Aadhaar Act, which stipulates that Aadhaar enrollment can be made mandatory for the grant of benefits. Therefore, if one does not want to enroll for Aadhaar, he has to make a conscious choice of foregoing the benefits. The plea of the critics is akin to a case where someone can be made mandatory for the grant of benefits. Therefore, if one does not want to enroll for Aadhaar, he has to make a conscious choice of foregoing the benefits. The plea of the critics is akin to a case where someone, on the basis of the fundamental right to freedom of movement under the Constitution, insists on driving a motor vehicle without applying for a driver's licence. Isn't the state, which is spending lakhs of crores of taxpayers' money on welfare schemes, entitled to use a credible identification system like Aadhaar to ensure that the benefits go only to genuine beneficiaries? Have we not heard stories about how people would often be turned away from ration shops on the pretext that the stock had finished? Since now, benefits will be distributed through Aadhaar authentication, it will be much harder to fudge records and deny genuine beneficiaries. Under the Aadhaar regime, everyone involved in the delivery system is subject to a greater accountability. The citizen is also empowered because it is harder for anyone to impersonate him and deny his rights.

Aadhaar has saved the government more than Rs 56,000 crore during the last three years by removing fakes and duplicates. Critics who dispute these figures may refer to the World Bank's Digital Dividend Report 2016 which has estimated that Aadhaar could annually save the central government US $11 billion if used in all welfare programmes. The efficacy of Aadhaar has also been questioned on the ground that it has not been able to curb quantity and quality frauds and check corruption by the service providers — for example, some fair price shop dealers continue to give poor quality foodgrains or give less quantities to the beneficiaries even after Aadhaar authentication.

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One needs to understand that Aadhaar is not a magic bullet or cure for all the ills of our society. It cannot be challenged on the ground that it is not able to solve a problem fully. In fact, the Supreme Court in its recent PAN-One needs to understand that Aadhaar is not a magic bullet or cure for all the ills of our society. It cannot be challenged on the ground that it is not able to solve a problem fully. In fact, the Supreme Court in its recent PAN-Aadhaar judgment held that the introduction of Aadhaar in the tax regime cannot be denounced just because the deep-rooted menace of tax evasion needs to be tackled by multiple actions — each individual action considered in isolation may not be sufficient. Similarly, Aadhaar only authenticates the beneficiary's identity; other abuses and transgressions have to be addressed by the appropriate agencies of the state.

We also need to be aware that the beneficiaries of the erstwhile leaky system would do everything possible to demonise Aadhaar. They would try to deny benefits to the deserving and put the entire blame on Aadhaar. There are stories — and videos — in social media about Aadhaar leading to large-scale denial, about old and poor people being deprived of their rations and pensions, a ration shop dealer being made to climb up a tree to make his biometric authentication machine work. It is unfortunate that many sincere social workers, activists, and even economists are not able to discern the sinister designs of such people. It would have served the country and the poor better if the conscientious objectors of Aadhaar had seen through this pernicious design and directed their objections to the violators of Aadhaar rather than Aadhaar. They need to understand that Aadhaar is an instrument of empowerment and not a tool of exclusion.

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