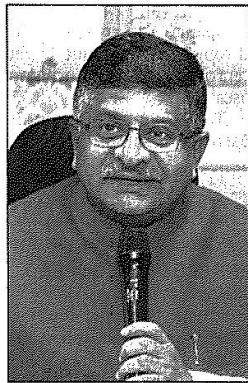## INTERVIEW WITH RAVI SHANKAR PRASAD

'Any unauthorised use of Aadhaar information will face prosecution'

EVEN AS state and central government officials who "inadvertently" released Aadhaar data of several beneficiaries are being sensitised to the implications of doing so, Minister of Law & Justice and Electronics & Information Technology RAVI SHANKAR PRASAD has asserted that any person or organisation releasing Aadhaar data for unauthorised use is liable to be prosecuted. In an interview with PRANAV MUKUL, the minister also talked about the growth of India's digital economy to $1 trillion by 2025, compared with $270 billion currently. In this growth story, which is expected to add 2.5-3 million jobs, Prasad believes digital payments, e-commerce, electronics manufacturing, and cyber-security will play an important role. Edited excerpts:

A number of questions have been raised on the security of Aadhaar in light of the recently reported data leaks. Has the government identified any loopholes, and if so, has it attempted to plug them?

Aadhaar today is backed by a proper parliamentary law with due regard to security. It aims to have maximum utilisation with minimum information. The Aadhaar card has the name, photograph, date of birth, gender, address, that's all. Apart from this, name of your parents, educational qualification, medical records, and income records - none of this is there by which you can be profiled. The entire information is federated. If a bank trying to open an account for the customer seeks authentication, the Aadhaar system does not know for what purpose it is being sought. Two crore authentications are being done every day. Only in the case of national security, the biometric information can be released, that too when a committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary comprising the secretaries of law, IT, collectively come to a conclusion that it is needed to be done. This is the whole safeguard we've taken, there is a parliamentary law which ensures data privacy and security. If any banker, or even a mobile service operator who sells SIM cards, puts the

Aadhaar number or other information of his customer for unauthorised or any collateral use, they can prosecuted. In fact, they can be jailed for three years with a penalty of Rs 10 lakh. Even I as a minister of IT, cannot give fingerprint and iris for unauthorised use. Therefore, this systematic campaign against Aadhaar comes as a surprise for me.

Have the government officials who released this information also been prosecuted?

Some of the officials said it was inadvertent, and they have been sensitised. It is unlike the case of some NGO, sourcing data from outside, and seeking to circulate. Therefore, the UIDAI has asked them from where they got the data.

There are many technologies that are based on the Aadhaar system today, including those such as Aadhaar-enabled payments system and BHIM, which the government is promoting. Do you think cases such as these would create a level of mistrust among people using these platforms?

This technology and platform is helping the people. It was linked with PAN to prevent money laundering. The true aim of Digital India is to have low-cost, affordable technology that is inclusive. More importantly, Aadhaar has become a tool for empowerment and transparent delivery. Is any poor complaining? He's empowered, he's getting money in his account. Rajiv Gandhi had said 'I send 1 rupee

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from Delhi, only 15 paise reaches the ground'. In this government, Rs 100 is sent, and Rs 100 reaches the ground. Everyone is free to criticise, but they must also see how the poor people are happy by being empowered, getting benefits without hassle. Let me ask a question: Were MNREGA payments being abused or not? In many villages in North India there were no *mazdoors*, only affluent *kisaans* but big amount of MNREGA used to go or not? Voter ID is also in public domain, there is a photograph in the voter list. I don't see any campaign there.

Are you working on a separate law for data protection?

Government is open to that.

There have been several reports suggesting mass layoffs in the software services sector. Has the government intervened to address this?

I have talked to many of the top companies' CEOs. They have said they'll come back with proper data, but they have denied any mass layoffs, not only to Nasscom but also to us. The government is also open to further dialogue with the industry. Some companies said we're going to hire 30-40,000 more this year. Indian digital economy will become a $1 trillion economy by 2025, and this will include IT and IT-enabled services, digital payments, electronic manufacturing, e-commerce, start-ups, communications, cyber security, etc. So in the context of Indian digital economy going to the

higher gear to reach $1 trillion, along with government's focus on digital payment, the Nasscom report, which says the industry would hire 2.5-3 million more people in the next 5-7 years, makes sense.

Is the software services sector becoming less relevant to India, considering the government's focus is increasing on other new age technologies such as digital payments, e-commerce, etc?

Software services sector will also remain relevant. All the components of IT will remain relevant. 10 lakh people are today working in nearly 2.5 lakh common service centres. They are giving digital delivery of services, making Aadhaar, PAN card, railway ticketing, etc. These 2.5 lakh CSCs have earned Rs 1,800 crore, most of which was in the last three years. They have earned Rs 600 crore only from making 21 crore Aadhaar cards.

Many of them are having earning over Rs 1 lakh per month. Only these CSCs have huge potential for creating jobs as they offer more and more services. Therefore I completely support Nasscom's assessment, that Indian IT scenario is completely robust. Software services will have to play a key role in the growth, because it is the basic anchor.

Have you envisaged where the next wave of start-ups would come from in India?

I cannot predict, except to say that it holds great promise. Just to give you an example, there are 7.2 crore soil health cards issued in the country. I would like to see start-ups leverage this number.

We're coming up with the digital village scheme, where we plan to have virtual classrooms, there I see a lot of room for start-ups. When you lay down a thriving foundation for a digital ecosystem for the country, it gives a big scope for new technologies and opportunities. I also see a lot of potential for homegrown cyber education, and cyber knowledge sharing initiatives. For instance, start-ups will play a huge role in keeping systems safe and secure.

When the previous governments have spoken of inclusive growth, agriculture was a key facet to that. In the NDA government, digital economy and digital inclusion plays a greater role...

Sabka saath sabka vikaas includes agriculture also. One of the main focus areas is technology for agriculture, apart from that there are many other initiatives like soil health card, Fasal Bima Yojana, higher compensation in event of crop damage, that the government has undertaken.

Has the government agreed to Apple's demand for tax exemptions?

It is wrong reporting, we don't know from where it came. We are in talks and we will come out with a structured response after the talk is over. India is a huge market, millions of Indians are using smartphones, and therefore we must understand the sentiment of Indians for Apple. Because of the market size and enormity of India's digital economy, I'm sure Apple needs to come to India. Apple must explore the Indian market.

As the law minister, what are they key steps you've taken to address the issue about pendency of cases in the country?

Over 50,000 courts have been digitised. We have launched the pro-bono portal, where lawyers can give free legal advice. Pendency in high courts and Supreme Court is coming down, but district courts are still an area of concern, I'm being very frank. These initiatives will start helping out though. We're going to have Nyaya Mitra in most of the districts where highest number of litigations pending since 10 years or above are there. Nyaya Mitra will work as an interface between the judiciary, the police and the administration. In CSCs, paralegal volunteers will be there, who will give pre-legal litigation advice to poor ladies by connecting them to district legal service authorities. Digital aid at the base level of gram panchayat is also being used for legal aid.