

Towards a unique digital South Asian identity

Executed properly, Aadhaar could become a central pillar of India's 'neighbourhood first' policy



ARUN MOHAN SUKUMAR

The enthusiasm with which government agencies and businesses have embraced Aadhaar should prompt India's foreign policy planners to deploy it abroad. Executed properly, Aadhaar could become a central pillar of India's "neighbourhood first" policy, culminating in the creation of a unique digital South Asian identity. A single, region-wide platform to authenticate residents of South Asia could integrate its markets, bring communities closer and allow governments to offer a wider range of governance services. None of this is to ignore the steps that India's Unique Identification Authority must take to secure its own Aadhaar ecosystem. But the demand for identity-driven governance in South Asia is indisputable, and Aadhaar could be Indian foreign policy's biggest asset to promote economic and political convergence in the region.

Already, South Asian economies are in varying stages of conceiving or implementing their own "national identity" schemes. Pakistan has the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), that

for two decades has collected biometric information. NADRA, however, has seen limited success: at last count, it had issued only 3.8 lakh ID cards to Pakistanis, in comparison to Aadhaar's one billion-plus enrolments. In 2013, NADRA even won an international contract to create Sri Lanka's digital national identity scheme, but that project appears to have stalled. Nepal, meanwhile, intends to roll out biometrics-driven "national ID cards" to its citizens soon. The Election Commission in Bangladesh began issuing such cards last year.

Exporting Aadhaar

South Asian governments, long content to gather data through traditional means such as censuses, are struggling to capture dynamic trends in their population. Current databases shine no light on urban mobility, data consumption patterns, or quality of life, because these are metrics that need integrated data sets and powerful analytical tools. To capture "multi-dimensional" data, India's neighbours have moved towards digital identity schemes. The need for unique IDs is also acute because post-conflict societies in South Asia have not fully rehabilitated excluded minorities or former combatants. In comparison to politically fraught changes – for instance, the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution for the devol-



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

ution of powers, or federalist reforms in Nepal – digital identity schemes are easier to implement, can strengthen local governments and support the financial inclusion of marginalised sections.

Beyond collecting biometric data, however, South Asian governments have not been able to create digital ID-enabled applications. This is what Aadhaar has mastered, making it a very valuable foreign policy export. Its open application programming interface (API) layers – known as "India Stack" – set Aadhaar apart from other biometric ID programmes. India Stack APIs, which include the Unified Payment Interface (UPI) and Aadhaar e-KYC, allow applications to be built atop them (for example, the Bharat Interface for Money or BHIM app) and enable identity-driven transactions. Such platforms will be invaluable to an economy working to integrate its

communities. Take the return of military-occupied land in Sri Lanka's Northern Province to the Tamils, an exercise that has become a political and logistical nightmare for Colombo. A digital identity-based scheme will not only authenticate the legitimate recipients of land, but also simplify future transactions for sale, leasing or commercial use. In Bangladesh, digital IDs could track loans made by multiple microfinance institutions to the same borrower and help check rural debt.

Strategic benefits

India too stands to benefit by exporting the Aadhaar architecture. The digital networks for much of South Asia are likely to be supplied by Chinese companies over the next decade. Telecom pipes and towers built by China will carry the Internet to the user, but innovation in Asia's digital economies will happen at the top – the "app layer". Aadhaar-like platforms catalyse innovation by tailoring Big Data for governments and businesses alike. The political and economic leverage India will accrue as a result of enabling such entrepreneurship will surpass fixed investments by China. There is another strategic reason for India to export the Aadhaar platform. Once a critical mass of Aadhaar-enabled applications has been created, interoperability standards for the digital ecosystem will be determined

by the Unique ID programme. App developers, handheld manufacturers, and even Internet Service Providers will have to work around Aadhaar's encryption standards and data protection guidelines. Such a scenario will be India's best response to concerns that China will pump its infrastructure, and – in the words of Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar – "hard wire" the norms of governance in the region.

The same concerns of surveillance and privacy that animate the Aadhaar debate in India would no doubt be reflected in South Asian societies. Perhaps more sharply, given the propensity of some governments in the neighbourhood to target minority communities. They can learn from India's mistakes. South Asian countries that have not digitised their public databases fully can create secure ones to link to unique ID programmes. A national ID programme would also be a trigger for them to enact strong data protection laws.

Aadhaar is a constitutional technology that can build whole new information and communication technology ecosystems. New Delhi should appreciate its foreign policy value and integrate the project into its neighbourhood agenda.

Arun Mohan Sukumar heads the Cyber Initiative at the Observer Research Foundation. Madhulika Sri Kumar contributed with research inputs to this piece