

We need Aadhaar, and much more

Data classification through identities has been the norm across space and time, to track institutions, materials and money



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Some of us may have come across cases involving people who have been sold the same parcel of land. This happens because we do not have unique identities for land parcels; the existing system of identifying land using the 'state-district-land-revenue village-survey number-subdivision number' matrix is cumbersome and difficult to verify. Encumbrance certificates may not reveal everything, specially when there is a lag between registration and data updation or if there has been no subdivision of the plot.

A unique, standardised number identifying land and property across India or at least within a State may be a solution. Like the Aadhaar number, it can help route mail and also prevent ghost registrations. There can be digital identity tags, along the same lines, for other entities too.

Not a new idea

Looking at the debate Aadhaar has generated, it would seem that this was the first time anyone was talking of 'codes' for identification. When I first wrote about the need for unique 'citizen identity numbers' a couple of decades ago, it did not generate much interest. The fact is such tags have underpinned administrative systems across the world for a long time. Todarmal Akbar's revenue minister, and Sher Shah, before him had devised elaborate mechanisms for identifying and measuring land and the revenue due to the king. Centuries later the British initiated the trigo-

nometric survey of the country for their land and revenue administration systems, and the assignment of 'survey numbers' for lands, title deeds or record of rights was an important step.

Unique codes for several 'entities' used throughout our colonial history persist even now: vehicles with number plates which are just codes to identify them uniquely; building permits; trade licences; government orders, Acts and rules; budget heads; postal addresses (PIN); application numbers; registration numbers; and so on. Similarly, at the international level we have several standards: for instance the UN Standard Products and Services Codes (UNSPSC) for goods and services that facilitate global commerce.

All these identity tags have enabled unique identification of beneficiaries or products and entities, leading to administrative convenience, better record-keeping, proper accounting, security and pre-date the IT age.

Now, in the digital age when instantaneous connectivity and IT are buzz words, such standards and tags will become inevitable. Ultimately, we will need digital identities for a host of entities, all of which will require codes that are universally recognisable and can be used to ensure order, interoperability and so on. I use the acronym I-M-PACT (Information, Intangibles like institutions], Materials, People, Assets, Cash and Transactions) as a framework to help us remember all that we need to create standards and codes for.

Big advantages

The benefits of will be enormous. The need for data has become humongous, given our formidable ability to crunch this data and derive utility from it. Countries use



There's a better way Than wading through complicated codes PW SIVAKUMAR

data and data analytics for several purposes ranging from planning and policy formulation to forecasting demand to preventing leakages and facilitating research. Now that Aadhaar is a fait accompli — privacy and security issues notwithstanding — we need to move on to other equally important areas.

Let's start with institutions: companies, societies, trusts or hospitals, banks, malls, markets, etc. Today we need to access multiple sources to access data about any institution we may want to study nationally and even this may be incomplete or inaccurate. Information aggregation around one type or class of institution is possible only if we have a specific identity standard for each institution that is nationally applied.

Assets — both immovable (land, buildings) and movable (vehicles, equipment, phones) — constitute the next item. We could identify lands through a single identification number that would be unique across the country and would help rationalise transactions. This could be based on a 'lat-long' or GPS framework.

A logical extension of this would

within each department but within all departments at the Central and State levels? For instance, application formats for, say, a ration card of the civil supplies department or a disability certificate could be nationally standardised and numbered.

Cash — or money-related codes — could include budget lines, tax heads, balance-sheet items and so on. When we use challans to pay money to government institutions we use numbers which tell the Government into which account it should flow. Some standardisation across departments, sectors and States would be useful like the Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) for corporate entities. Transactions or Processes are more complex. We can start off with governmental processes: registration of land, issue of new passports, mutations in a ration card, opening a bank account, and so on.

Once we uniquely identify processes across States, and if possible, the entire country, we can then begin putting in place standardised identity tags and protocols for each process along with timelines, responsibilities, etc. that are robustly defined and understood.

When governments begin data collection or AI-based data-mining exercises across the country the sheer variety of institutions, processes, documents, and the lack of standards generally would render such exercises very difficult.

Codification and standardisation would yield enormous benefits similar to Aadhaar numbers for people. These would constitute virtual building blocks for an 'enterprise-wide' architecture for governance at the Central, State and local levels.

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