

## Working Paper Number 194

### **The Unique Identity (UID) Project and the New ‘Bureaucratic Moment’ in India**

Swagato Sarkar<sup>1</sup>

*At various points in its career the Indian state has deployed technologies to govern the country. In its latest move, the state has undertaken a number of large scale projects to install digital technology, the most controversial of these is the Unique Identity Project, an ongoing project which is registering the biometric, along with demographic, information of the residents. In this paper, I will try to understand what is politically at stake in this technological intervention. I would like to explore whether these interventions signal a shift in thinking around the institutional, while negotiating the political in a particular way; whether it reconciles the participatory and procedural impulses of Indian democracy – negotiates with particular claims; and whether it brings a change in the state-citizen relationship. I will argue that these interventions cannot be understood as an orthodox neoliberal policy initiative – rather it articulates a new “will to power” and a desire to segregate, yet preserve the state, and free the executive from the encumbrance of populist democracy. Theoretically, the main thrust of this paper is to understand the “general economy of power”, as Michel Foucault calls it, which is unfolding in India around the issues of capitalist growth, inequality, governance, social protection and technology.*

October-2011

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, O.P. Jindal Global University, India.

At various points in its career the Indian state has deployed technologies to govern the country. In its latest move, the state has undertaken a number of large scale projects to install digital technology, the most controversial of these is the Unique Identity Project, an ongoing project which is registering biometric, along with demographic, information of the residents. In this paper, I will try to understand what is politically at stake in these digital technological interventions in governance (i.e. technology-mediated governance). I would like to explore whether these interventions signal a shift in the thinking around the institutional, while negotiating the political in a particular way; whether they reconcile the participatory and procedural impulses of Indian democracy; how they negotiate with particular claims; and whether they bring a change in the state-citizen relationship. I will argue that these interventions cannot be understood as an orthodox neoliberal policy initiative; rather they articulate a new “will to power” and a desire to segregate, yet preserve the state, and free the executive from the encumbrance of populist democracy.

## PART - I

### *The National e-Governance Plan and registering the population*

The Unique Identity Project has its origin in the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) adopted by the Government of India on May 2006. Under NeGP, 27 Mission Mode Projects (MMPs) have either been rolled out or are in the process of being rolling out. These MMPs are “high priority citizen services” offered by various government departments (like income-tax, company affairs, pension, passport, etc.), whose mode of delivery would change from manual to e-delivery (i.e. electronic delivery). The NeGP is purported to offer “a seamless view of Government” and bring service delivery to the doorstep of the citizens. An official document on NeGP highlights two aspects of its approach: a centralized initiative and a decentralized implementation model, as it explains,

E-Governance would be promoted through a Centralized initiative to the extent necessary to ensure citizen service orientation, to realize the objective of interoperability<sup>2</sup> of various e-Governance applications and to ensure optimal utilization of ICT infrastructure/resources while allowing for and adopting, as a policy, a Decentralized Implementation Model (DoIT 2011, p.11)

The new governance infrastructure would be deployed on a public-private partnership (PPP) model, which would “enlarge the resource pool without compromising on the security aspects [of the IT infrastructure and data]” (ibid p.12).

While most of the MMPs aim to offer an easy access to the chosen services and their speedy delivery, the National Resident/Citizen Database and UID projects stand out as they aim to create a database on the (entire) population, which would provide the state (and other non-state actors/agencies) with an extremely powerful tool. Prior to the conceptualisation of these two MMPs, the Parliament of India had amended the Citizens’ Act 1955 in 2003 and introduced a new clause – 14A, which stipulates that “[t]he Central Government *may compulsorily* register every citizen of India and issue [a] national identity card to him [*sic*]” [emphasis added] and that “[t]he Central Government may maintain a National Register of

---

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia defines interoperability as, “the ability of diverse systems and organi(s)ations to work together (inter-operate).”

Indian Citizens and for that purpose establish a National Registration Authority.” This offered a ground to conceptualise an MMP to register the citizens “under the National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC) and provide them National Identity Cards by the Registrar General, India (RGI), Ministry of Home Affairs, who has been designated as [the] Registrar General Citizen Registration (RGCR) by the statute” (ibid p. 70).

### ***National Resident/Citizen Database and UID MMPs***

The idea of a National Security System arose out of a concern for (obviously) national security and “illegal” immigration. It was proposed that all citizens should be provided with a Multi-purpose National Identity Card (MNIC), and “this should be introduced initially in the border districts or may be in a 20 [Km] border belt and extended to the hinterland progressively” (ibid p.70 and *passim*). A pilot project was launched on April 2003 in 20 districts of 12 States. The project helped to gather information on designing a system for population registration: “processes for collection and verification of individual data as well as the technology for production, personali(s)ation of identity cards using an inter-operable operating system.”

After the completion of this pilot project on 31 March 2009, an MNIC Mission Mode Project was conceptualised to register citizens under the National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC) for the purpose of issuing them with National Identity Cards.” However, the experience gathered from the MNIC pilot project made it clear that the “*determination of Citizenship was a complicated and involved issue*” (ibid p.71 and *passim*, emphasis added; note: the MMP is entitled as “resident/citizen”). Hence, it was decided that “all the usual residents in the country” would be registered, rather than all citizens and thereby create a National Population Register (NPR). The NPR would collect “information on specific characteristics of each individual along with their photographs, finger biometrics and IRIS. The NPR shall thus result in creation of a biometrics based identity database in the country.” This database would “become a robust source of authentic real time data which would help in better targeting of the benefits and services under various Government schemes/programmes, improve infrastructural planning, would provide a fillip to strengthen security of the country and prevent identity fraud.”

On the other hand, “the Unique Identification Number (UID) project was conceptuali(s)ed to create a verifiable and credible database of individuals.” This database was supposed to be based on “the voter list of the Election Commission of India (ECI), which is the most credible and validated data on residents [*sic*, citizens] available in the country and thereafter linkages were to be established with major database holders such as MoRD [Ministry of Rural Development], PDS [Public Distribution System], ECI and RGI [Registrar General, India].” But later it was decided to move away from the ECI database [i.e. electoral roll] and to opt for fresh registration of residents.

As NPR and UID would both create biometric database, so to avoid duplication of effort and database, an Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) was formed “to collate the two schemes.... [It] recommended that the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) be notified as an executive authority and anchored in the Planning Commission to own, manage and operate the UID database” (ibid p.72). Arguably, the reason for anchoring the UIDAI in the Planning Commission was that this database would become an important tool for the planners as “the count of people residing in an area would be known at any point of

time” (ibid p.73). On the other hand, the Knowledge Commission of India felt that various modes of identification by the state, [i.e. the various cards issued by the state] need to be consolidated into one, which reinforced the idea of UID. The UIDAI was formally constituted and notified on 28 January, 2009 (ibid p. 78).

The NeGP document provides an outline of the current strategy to build and maintain the database:

the data collected in the NPR will be subjected to de-duplication by the UIDAI. After de-duplication, the UIDAI will issue a Unique Identification Number (UID) [called *Aadhaar*, which means foundation]. This UID Number will be part of the NPR and the NPR Cards will bear this UID Number. The maintenance of the NPR database and updating subsequently will be done by the Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India. The UID of each individual in the database will become the *link number* between the sectoral databases, thus bringing about a host of conceivable benefits. The NPR database would be updated and maintained on a continuous basis by setting up of NPR centres at each of the Tehsils/Taluks/wards [units of administration] (DoIT 2011, p. 72, emphasis added).

As it stands now, Aadhaar or the UID number does not substitute or replace any existing cards or numbers, contrary to the proposal of the Knowledge Commission. Aadhaar is issued on the basis of extensive biometric information (facial photograph, two iris scans, and ten fingerprints) and a thin set of demographic information: the resident’s name, address, gender, age, name of parent/guardian if the resident is below 5 years of age.

The UIDAI claims that Aadhaar would offer the following benefits:

- i. “help in better targeting of beneficiary[-]oriented schemes ... by uniquely identifying the residents/beneficiaries,
- ii. significantly reduce identity frauds and thereby help in efficient utilization of funds allocated to these schemes.
- iii. Over a period of time, this may help in reducing the total outlay under these schemes by preventing duplicates both under the same scheme and across various schemes” (DoIT 2011, p.78).

The benefit of Aadhaar for the residents would be that they can furnish Aadhaar as the single source for all identity verifications (proof of identity and proof of address) required for obtaining various services, without producing any additional document (this is the ideal situation, which will see below is not the actual case), i.e. the Aadhaar number on any card can be supplied for verification and authentication. The official documents claim that Aadhaar will “also facilitate entry for poor and underprivileged residents into the formal banking system, and the opportunity to avail services provided by the government and the private sector. The UID will also give [Indian] migrants *mobility of identity*” (DoIT 2011, p.79, emphasis added).

### ***The way Aadhaar works***

The UID project has three parts: enrolment, de-duplication and verification. In various parts of the country, UIDAI has started *enrolment* camps often run by private agencies to ‘capture’ biometric and demographic information. After enrolment, the encrypted data is sent to the

UIDAI headquarters in New Delhi in a secured manner, where the quality of the data captured is checked and a particular individual's identity is verified following a 1:n matching, i.e. one individual is checked against the available database of the (entire) population called the Central ID Data Repository (CIDR). This is the *de-duplication* process. If the information provided by/captured from the person does not match with the existing ones, then the person is considered to be unique and an Aadhaar number is issued. The Aadhaar number is sent by post to the person.

If an institution/agency requires the identity of a person to be established and authenticated and accepts Aadhaar, then the person in question can furnish his/her Aadhaar number. The institute can ask the person to furnish the demographic information as well and to take biometric tests – the information and the level of security required for *verification* will be solely determined by the institution's policy, not UIDAI (e.g. for a smaller transaction, a bank can just ask for thumb imprint verification, whereas for a very high amount, it can request to verify a full set of biometric information). The captured information, along with the Aadhaar number, is sent to UIDAI. UIDAI will do a 1:1 check of the given information with the CIDR (which can be accessed through electronic networks) to authenticate the information in *real-time*. Analogically, it is like opening a drawer marked with a particular Aadhaar number to check the content (i.e. information) inside drawer. UIDAI would return back an answer to query in the form of 'Yes', or 'No', i.e. yes, the UIDAI database matches with the information given by the institute and it is authenticated, or no, it does not match. UIDAI will not provide any other information to the institution seeking verification of an identity.

The UIDAI will separate biometric information from demographic one, encrypt both the sets and distribute and store those on various servers, so that even if one server is hacked, one will not have access to the entire set of information on a particular person. The sole owner of the database would be UIDAI and no other government department will have access to the data sets.

## PART – II

### ***UID/ Aadhaar and the Governmental Rationality***

How do we critically engage with this new governance structure and the UID, with its overt intention to register the residents? The critique and criticisms of the UID so far has been on the civil liberties ground, i.e. the UID/biometric database is creating a super-powerful surveillance state (Ramanathan 2010), or on the technical ground (Ramkumar 2009), i.e. it is too big in scale and its failure will be spectacular and consequential; it is an experimental infrastructure which has no predecessor in the world, and the accuracy of biometric authentication of an individual within a massive pool of billion plus people is not assured; the state-of-the-art technology is not adequate to match such a huge number of unique patterns instantly or in real-time (this is a wrong understanding of the way UID works). The likelihood of error is high and such errors will cause misery to, and harassment of, ordinary people. The third position sees the UID as an uninvited entity and an intruder in the day-to-day functioning of social welfare programmes like the Public Distribution System and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which will complicate the existing system, instead of improving it (Khera, Dreze 2010). Beyond these, politically, what is at stake here? For that we need to look at the specificity of the UID.

First, let us consider the focus on “population”. Michel Foucault argues that the decisive shift in the history of ideas of the function of the state came with the introduction of the concept of population (over sovereignty) (Foucault 2007). The state undertakes projects to know, map and categorise the population and territory. The technologies for such a task were mostly cartography (maps of territory and “resources” like forests, rivers, etc.), ethnography (classifying people into ‘tribes’, ‘castes’ based on ‘cultural’ and social attributes) and demography (census, national sample survey, etc. recording the names, physical attributes, territorial coordinates), i.e. an epistemological drive informed by the Cartesian posit(ion)ing of a subject. Parallel to this, there have been various attempts to record the physical (i.e. visible) characteristics of a person to uniquely identify him or her (like thumb imprint, size of the cranium, etc.) – these were the early practices of biometrics (and anthropometry), many of which were part of eugenics and racial profiling experiments mostly on the ‘people without history.’

Now, attempts are being made to utilise the recent advancement in the computation of algorithm (used in biometrics) and digital communication systems to map, categorise and track people – the search for a new way of knowing and governing the population. Foucault (ibid p.25) explains, “sovereignty is exercised within the borders of a territory, discipline is exercised on the bodies of individuals, and security is exercised over a whole population.” The deployment of (electronic) biometrics and digital networks can bring about a convergence in all these three aspects of governance: sovereignty, discipline and security. It is not a question of whether technological interventions like UID would be successful or a failure; rather we need to understand the political significance and consequences of this convergence, understand the logics and rationality of this new technology-mediated governance structure, and whether we can detect a shift in the organisation of the state and the state-citizen relationship.

As already mentioned, the main (operational) purpose of UID is to verify an identity in real-time, i.e. instantly match a person with the data already available on the CIDR. The digital infrastructure which would allow UIDAI to verify an identity in real-time operates on a combination of (i) the Logic of Network and (ii) the Logic of Biometrics.

*The Logic of Network:* A Network allows accessing, collation, coordination and comparison of inter-sectoral database, as well as intra-sectoral database. The possibility of authenticating and weeding out fake and duplicate identities and the purported claim of identifying “benefit/identity-frauds” depend crucially on this comparison.

Certain states like Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh have already constructed a Management Information System (MIS) in PDS which allows the monitoring of the stock at various points within the supply chain, the quantities of provisions supplied to the fair-price shops, and the off-take of ration by the beneficiaries. This MIS is an intra-sectoral database.

Various government departments and institutions in India maintain database on the population, but due to institutional jurisdiction and policy, or a lack of technology, these databases do not “talk to each other.” The digital technology allows these databases to interact in various ways depending on the agreed norms and policy decisions. A network offers the *technical possibility* for the creation of a unitary system, which would enable communication between inter-sectoral databases. There is an incipient attempt to create such networks, though it is not clear at this moment whether they will be interlinked to form a

network of networks: UIDAI will regulate the Central ID Data Repository (CIDR), the Ministry of Home Affairs [the ministry for internal security] is setting up a National Intelligence Grid or NATGRID<sup>3</sup>. NATGRID will have access to “21 categories of database like railway and air travel, income tax, bank account details, credit card transactions, visa and immigration records in the country” (*The Business Standard*, 30 May 2011) which will purportedly allow it to combat terrorism. If this Network of Networks along with Central ID database comes into being, then it could bring together agencies with three sets of concerns: security and intelligence, social protection (managing PDS and NREGA databases) and financial regulation and verification of customers (by the private sector).<sup>4</sup>

*The Logic of Biometrics:* The utility of biometrics lies in the claim of recording and authenticating a unique and permanent (?) identity. This uniqueness is based on identifying certain features of the human body to be a stable parameter, which can be standardised into a metric or a quantity. This metric can be used to generate an access code that stands for who you are; something non-transferable, something singular, i.e. your body (Fuller, 2003). This access code can override or complement photo- or electronic- ID-cards or passwords [in the industry parlance it is: “who you are (biometric), what you have (ID-card) and what you know (password)”] (see below for further discussion on this).

## PART – III

### *The rationality and political economy of UID*

By enquiring about the rationality which governs this digital network, we can also find how and which economic interests are brought within the fold of this network. The UID network borrows the operational rationality of ‘Know-Your-Resident’ (KYR) and ‘Know-Your-Customer’ (KYC) from the commercial (public and private) sector, both of which require (i) a proof of identity (henceforth, PoI) and (ii) a proof of address (henceforth, PoA). In the commercial sectors like bank, electricity, telephone, air travel, railways, etc., services are made available after furnishing PoI and PoA. KYR and KYC become important mostly within the service sector where the provider and the subscriber enter into a (long-term) relationship for servicing (e.g. electricity or telephone) and payment. Therefore it is important for a company to recover any outstanding amount or to install the devices at the customer’s premise, or when the identity of a traveller with an electronically-issued ticket needs to be ascertained before boarding a train or an aeroplane. In sum, the KYR model becomes important in the service and finance sectors of the economy. Most often the need for KYR arises because of the information asymmetry between a service provider and a service seeker, where it is assumed that the service provider would not know the customer personally. This calls for a reliable third party/authority who would verify the KYR and KYC data. So far, any government issued photo-ID card like driving license, voter ID card, etc. could have been

---

<sup>3</sup>We are not interested to understand the politics within the institution, in this case the inter-ministerial tension over NATGRID and the debate over the budgetary allocation for the UID project. It has been widely reported that the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Finance “apparently think that if the [NATGRID] project comes into operation, the MHA [Ministry of Home Affairs] would have uninterrupted access to all information under their jurisdiction” (*The Business Standard*, 30 May 2011) and thereby become more powerful than the other ministries.

<sup>4</sup> This convergence of various concerns needs to be examined to understand the development and sharing of common logics, which could possibly extend governmentality beyond the state.

furnished. However, the authenticity of these cards, i.e. whether they are original or fake, even when they bore a hologram, could not be ascertained. Aadhaar promises to overcome this problem and the UIDAI emerges as that third party, i.e. the state agency, which authenticates and identifies a person. Other way round, it can also be noticed that the UIDAI itself wants to play a larger role in the commercial sector and become economically viable.

The UIDAI sees Aadhaar as an “ecosystem” comprising the government, people, vendors, developers, operators and applications (‘apps’). The UIDAI presumes that in the near future authentication and identification would become crucial issues, if not central, in the economy and hence the UID ecosystem stands to become an attractive proposition for the developers and operators. Aadhaar would be the foundation for authentication and identification, and the private operators can build applications as layers on it. This ecosystem mimics the mobile telephone platforms like iPhone and Android – the “app market” model, where there are apps for almost every aspect of life. The entrepreneurial developers will see the opportunity and create innovative ‘apps’. Similar to the way paper money is replaced by plastic money or credit/debit cards in transactions, the UID will solve the problem of authenticating and identifying a party. Two questions arise here: When and why did “transaction” become a problem? If UID is a commercial infrastructure, then who stands to benefit most from the design of the system?

Market is about transactions or exchanges. In transactions, even before the legal/contractual obligations set in, there is a question of trust between people. If the transaction takes place face to face, then it may be assumed that the trust deficit and information asymmetry among them are not serious enough. But where transactions take place between unknown people or involve many people/multiple agents, then the trust deficit and information asymmetry become significant issues. Authentication of one or both the parties and thereby verifying them and their rights and entitlements, helps in creating trust between two unknown individuals. Identification helps in establishing a person by providing his/her background.

The UIDAI claims that Aadhaar will solve the problem of the *kirana* [road corner] shops and small traders. It is argued that these traders tend to adversely select their customers and cannot avoid default by the latter, which becomes difficult for the lenders to absorb. In case of lending, they cannot check the creditworthiness and credit history of the borrowers. Thus, UID will solve these problems by providing information on a particular person. But this is an erroneous understanding of how the informal economy works.

In the informal economy, transactions are generally of small amount and usually take place either on a face-to-face basis or follow a social referral system, i.e. information is sought from within the social network in selecting a customer or a business partner. The transactions in the informal economy do not generally follow the principles of open market; it is generally a closed network. Therefore, the UIDAI’s claim of helping the small traders is a misplaced one. Intentionally or unintentionally the design of the UID platform is biased towards *large volume of anonymous transactions*, which is a feature of the organised sector, where large capital rules.

We see a similar argument for UID’s role in managing the state’s social policy. The problem presented in this strand of argument is this: there are leakages in the social welfare systems and a large number of benefit-frauds, for example, in public distribution system (PDS), there are leakages from the supply chain and diversion of ration to the open market and the presence of fake/ghost and duplicates ration cards which further amplify the leakages. These



malpractices happen because the government departments (e.g. Dept. of Civil Supplies) cannot ascertain who ‘took up’ the quota of supplies: is it the intended beneficiary or someone else? This understanding pivots around the “calculation of cost” of loss in the system, and how best to manage the state subsidy, particularly when the annual budgetary outlays for social expenditure has been meagre.

The issue here is that the relationship between the state and the citizen is obfuscated by the mediation of intermediary institutions; in case of PDS, the supply chain from the Food Corporation of India’s warehouse to the fair-price shop. Since, the relationship between the state and the citizen is fundamental, hence it has to be made transparent and the intermediaries are modifiable, transformable or removable. This issue is *not* similar to the “Last Mile” problem articulated in policy discourse, which is a problem of reaching to the ultimate beneficiary. Here, the problem is not about failing to reach or cover the last beneficiary, but – as mentioned above – a problem of ascertaining whether the actual beneficiary has availed the benefit.

From the point of institutional design, it acknowledges the problem of reach/coverage, yet the emphasis is on the loss. Therefore, instead of Last Mile, it is more like a dark end of the tunnel, the state of affairs on the recipient’s end is unknown to the state and hence it needs to be illuminated, rendered visible. However, there is a connection with the “Last Mile” problem. The term “Last Mile” problem has been borrowed from the telecommunications industry where the companies found it challenging to “fan out” wires from the main cable to individual premises, particularly in the rural areas. The very fact that the telecommunication revolution in India has largely been able to solve this Last Mile problem by adopting a hybrid technological solution, hence, this network can be harnessed and augmented for bridging the Last Mile problem in the public systems like PDS<sup>5</sup>. For that, the UIDAI argues, the design and infrastructure of PDS need to be overhauled.

The UIDAI’s premise is that Aadhaar is a unique number given to every individual, and telecommunications technology and network (including end-level portable/handheld devices) can reach the beneficiary. Therefore, the delivery system needs to be thought in a bottom-up way, starting with the beneficiary. The authentication of a beneficiary is to be done at fair-price shop (FPS) when the person comes to draw her/his family’s ration. This would screen out the ration taken using fake and duplicate cards. This authenticated off-take by beneficiaries becomes the record on the basis of which the government allocates provisions to that particular fair-price shop. The allocation becomes variable, linked to authentication and the choice of FPS by the beneficiary. This authentication is then followed up through the supply chain and the allocated grain is tracked from the point of release to its arrival to the FPS over the MIS as the UIDAI document (2010, p.5) explains:

An Aadhaar-linked MIS would enable the PDS to address broader procurement, storage and monitoring challenges. Registration and procurement orders could be managed online, enabling decentralized, and more local procurement Inventory management could be streamlined and handled online in real-time. This would also

---

<sup>5</sup> This point was put forward by Ashish Rajadhakshya. Nandan Nilekani, the chairperson of UIDAI, emphasised the role of telecommunications and “UID data will be accessible to authenticating applications through telecom networks.” He told the delegates of a conference, “We are going to create apps which will need connectivity: Our whole assumption is that these are online systems, mobile based – it assumes ubiquitous connectivity throughout the country. We are banking on the Telecom Industry to deliver on the promise of connectivity” (Medianama, 2009).

enable the PDS to implement state wide information systems that link all ration shops in a state, and give beneficiaries more flexibility in how they collect their entitlements, and from which ration shop.

The beneficiaries on the other hand can receive an SMS intimation of the amount of grain allocated to their FPS and when those should be available to them. Therefore, the system tries to bridge the information asymmetry between the FPS owner and the beneficiaries. The UIDAI (2010, pp.7-8) claims that since Aadhaar verifies the identity of a person by providing the PoI and PoA, so it also becomes easier for that person to apply for a ration card online by simply furnishing her/his Aadhaar number,

[G]overnments can implement a **centralized, Aadhaar-enabled registration system** for the whole state, where a poor person can log a request for a ration card through SMS. The request would be published on the system once the Aadhaar is verified.

Governments could subsequently process the logged request, verify eligibility of the individual, etc. Governments would also be able to track delays in processing applications and identify bottlenecks in issuing ration cards. In addition, civil society groups could track the progress in processing the applications, and take up these applications on behalf of the individuals.

An Aadhaar-based PDS can also allow the governments to supply provisions to ‘targeted’ individuals (e.g. nutritional supplements for pregnant women), instead the whole household.

This rationalisation and management of the social welfare system by means of technology is located within the re-thinking of the role of a government. The Blair-Clinton ‘Third Way’ advocated that the government should not produce; rather it should procure from the market. Welfare benefits like education, health, etc. should not be ‘produced’ by the government, but would be ‘procured’ from the market. Now it is suggested that the government should not involve in procuring directly; rather it should offer cash or coupons to the beneficiaries, who will go to the ‘supplier’ of their ‘choice’, as a proper consumer does in a competitive market.

The policy initiatives of the Government of India, like “financial inclusion” and “cash transfer”, would inject financial resources in the (rural) economy. This would all of a sudden bring a large number of people to the financial market, either as recipients of cash from the government or as consumers of newer financial as well as material commodities. In this market, the financial companies and service providers will face a large number of unknown individuals and the conventional model of paper trail would increase the transaction cost. This is where UID becomes important: it establishes the identity of the person with whom a financial company would deal; a ‘business correspondent’ of the company can use a handheld electronic device to complete the transaction and record the necessary information. Second, cash or coupons would be provided by the state to avail services like education and health, which were hitherto ‘supplied’ by the state, from the market. This market for education and health would require means to connect the ‘beneficiaries’ with the ‘service providers’ or ‘government-supported-entrepreneurs’, to identify the beneficiary and authenticate his/her/their entitlements. Again, the UID becomes crucial in bridging the gap.

## PART-IV

### *The new ontology*

The network and biometrics together articulate a different social and political ontology: it does away with the sub-divisions within the territory-population relationship, i.e. the domicile criterion. Here, the territory represents that supra-space which the international boundary of the Indian nation-state curves out, i.e. space conceived as a container. The population contained within this space does not require further fixation and can be mobile<sup>6</sup>. The challenge, as perceived, is to design an institutional structure which would allow the possibility of being mobile, i.e. a structure that can govern both the domiciled and the migrants. It is pertinent therefore to note that the UIDAI document (2010, p.4) emphasises the concept of “portability”:

Aadhaar is a universal number, and agencies and services can contact the central Unique Identification database from anywhere in the country to confirm a beneficiary’s identity. The number thus gives individuals a universal, portable form of identification.

Therefore, mobility in a mapped out space is not a problem for the administration as long as one matches with a profile on CIDR. As a consequence, for example, the public distribution system should no longer operate on a model of territorial confinement, i.e. one need not be tied to one PDS/fair-price shop. The beneficiaries should be able to take up ration from an FPS of their choice.

While it might be possible to address mobility within the governance structure, but the new technology-mediated governance structure struggles to reconstitute the basis of state’s recognition. It wants to dodge the normative and legal contentions that a politicised category like ‘citizenship’ entails and therefore has adopted ‘resident’ and jettisoned ‘citizen’ as a category to register people in both NPR and UID. Specifically, it wants to accept the empirical body of a resident as a category. This move has an important political implication: it can potentially also shed away the necessary condition of being propertied to be recognised by the state (and market)<sup>7</sup> that the concept of citizenship demands. This potential is an articulation of a different form of freedom. One can find a direct resonance of that in Marx’s remark that workers under capitalism are doubly free:

Free workers, in the double sense that they neither form part of the means of production themselves, as would be the case of slaves, bondsmen, etc., nor do they own the means of production, as would be the case with self-employed peasant-proprietors. The free workers are therefore free from, *unencumbered* by, any means of production of their own. [Marx, Capital Vol. 1, p 874, emphasis added]

The workers only have their bodily-capacity (both physical and intellectual/mental) to labour which they can sell as commodity in the market. Thus, what is stake in capitalist modernity, according to Marx, is that the bodily-capacity to labour is the only attribute of human beings that is recognised by capitalism<sup>8</sup>. In that sense, this turn away from citizenship indicates a

<sup>6</sup> One can also note the argument for a single national market in India, see *The Business Standard* (2008)

<sup>7</sup> The condition which is empirically expressed in terms of a proof of identity and a proof of address.

<sup>8</sup> Under communism this recognition of single attribute of human beings would be broken to explore the various potential of human beings and their existence (refer to Marx’s (1875) *Critique of the Gotha Programme*).

convergence of the attributes/categories which are recognised by capitalism and the new bureaucratic rationality: *the unencumbered body becomes the sole property* (as a legal category and as an attribute) that is recognised within the formal set up of the state and market.

Yet, this desire to recognise the bare body of the resident/labourer remains unfulfilled as the requirement for furnishing demographic information, proof of address, etc. while dealing with the government and private agencies remains in place. In other words, the bare body soon gets reterritorialised. This can be seen as the tension (and a contradiction) between recognising a person as a seller of labour-power and the buyer of certain commodities and services and a debtor.

### *Biometrics and political logics*

The logic of biometrics cannot be solely seen through the lens of technology; we need to understand the political implicated in it. I would claim that the deployment of/ dependence on biometrics is linked to the desire for a pure bureaucratic rationality, which informs the new institutional design.

Biometrics is directly part of the security discourse, and has its origin in eugenic practices (Maguire 2009). It was developed to identify, record and control the non-Europeans in colonised countries, most often the dangerous margins [e.g. criminals] and delinquents were the targets (as already mentioned) (see Sengupta 2003 and Caplan 2001 for further discussion on this topic). It is governed by a principle of suspicion and combines the technologies of discipline (setting up the norms of formal relationships) and the technologies of regulation and control (of flow and access). This biometric technology has moved out of this particular sector to become universal, covering all residents of a country and being deployed in managing welfare programmes among other fields. We need to unravel the logics of biometrics to understand the changes that it desires to bring.

If conventional politics of the demos emerged in the backdrop of the cartographic and ethnographic, including demographic surveys of the state, and the identities created in such practices were later politicised (the premise of Partha Chatterjee's political society, see Chatterjee 2004), then the logic of biometrics stands apart from that populist political logic.

This conventional politics is about reconfiguring the ethics of recognition and redistribution. The representational order depends on contesting and negotiating an identity, which develops a (relativist) play of difference and requires the construction of (meta-)narrative(s) (Fuller 2003). It involves the role of contingency in confronting the Other, the need to acknowledge the singularity of the Other and to come in terms with the moral ambiguity involved in that process.

The logic of biometrics signals a shift/rupture in that logic. Here, the difference is absolute and the entire exercise is geared towards overcoming contingency, contestation, and negotiation – an attempt to go beyond, and shield the institutions from, the messy body-politics of democracy. The epistemic objective of the biometric *dispositif*, like any other *dispositifs*, is to know and count the population over a territory (along with resources) to make the application of power effective and the apparatus scalable and interoperable. Biometrics establishes a difference, i.e. uniqueness, by using the algorithmic techniques of pattern matching. It attempts to completely map out the population of a given territory

(hence, mapping residents, not citizens) and render it as a rational (no fakes and duplicates) and transparent space. It can further accommodate various axes/vectors – cartographic, ethnographic, demographic, etc. – each of which can cross through the unique body, and thereby together can locate a particular body in a given space. It becomes like a cross-hair<sup>9</sup>: you have become a *target*. Thereafter, whether you become a target of a bullet<sup>10</sup>, or PDS rice, or some cash, it does not matter for the biometric system.

The ethical foundation of recognition is reduced to moral certainty, and gives away to a *static rule governed system*: a regime of standards and protocols. The syntax and objective of identification depends on the intention of the programmer (e.g. the state agencies) and how it is triangulated with other categories<sup>11</sup>. The imperative is to *verify* the bearer of entitlement/right and deny access to those who do not match. It requires no participation from the subjects at all – either you are entitled or not, which has already been established in the rule, i.e. you are disciplined by the rule. Therefore, on the face of it, a biometric system appears to be ideology-neutral (i.e. a rule governed system, which simply authenticates a person), yet it is very much ideology-driven (i.e. it is part of making a selected population discernible and targets for policy objectives – which Samuel Weber (2005) calls ‘the Militarization of Thinking’). This “will to power” articulates a desire for an absolute bureaucratic, procedural system and establish a new “normal” relationship between ‘citizens’ and the state.

I have mentioned earlier that the objective/desire of this absolute bureaucratic, procedural system is to shield and free public institutions from the messy body-politics of democracy (at least the messiness of Indian populist politics). But what kind of relationship does it form with the messy populism, various new demands of ‘rights’ and ‘inclusion’?

The UIDAI document on PDS agrees that “implementing the ‘Right to Food’ is a priority for the Indian government” (UIDAI 2010, p.1 and *passim*). It does not dispute with this late ‘rights-based approach to development’; rather it concurs with it and argues that Aadhaar is well suited – in fact ‘foundational’ – in realising the objectives of the ‘Right to Food’:

The functioning of the PDS – the mainstay of India’s food program[me]s – is critical to the implementation of Right to Food in India..... Aadhaar is best translated to mean a ‘foundation’, and the number would play precisely this role in the PDS. The number would be a foundation, over which the government can build more *effective* PDS processes, and ensure that the program helps [fulfil] the broad and admirable vision of India’s proposed national food security act. [emphasis added]

---

<sup>9</sup> Gillian Fuller provides an interesting insight, “In a world of multidimensional movement, biometrics is becoming the means by which the singularity of our bodies connect[s] quite literally into the networks where our multiple selves reside. The individual bodily connects to her divided self through regulated networks of power rather than as an individual “seeing herself” through representational metanarratives. What is important for identity now is how the points come together in a scan. For instance, do ten points correctly correlate in an iris scan? The individual in a biometric world is not “seen” as a whole body. The individual has no discernible outline, it is seen in fragments – a pattern match of the eye. Thus the algorithmic logic of the database replaces the linear logic of narrative and character development in the structural formation of the individual. In this sense then the *individual is a networked becoming* rather than a Cartesian positioning.” (Fuller 2003, n.p, emphasis added)

<sup>10</sup> Hence, the reference to IBM’s involved with the Nazis in the Holocaust is made in connection with this calculative logic (refer to Black, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> But at the same, the very fact that a particular category can be triangulated with spatial and temporal co-ordinates, means that a population can be identified for displacement or, deportation and help in the re-organisation of a given territory.

In the above quoted text, Aadhaar envisages its role in helping to build an “effective PDS.” Following a critique of ideology approach, one can obviously argue that this is an attempt by the UIDAI to insert itself into the PDS and thereby become relevant and ubiquitous, and expand its ‘usefulness’ (Khera 2010, Dreze 2010). The point which needs to be foregrounded is that UIDAI (which is seen as neoliberal institution) sees no conflict with the objectives of the ‘Right to Food’ (a progressive social democratic/ left-liberal demand for economic and social – the so-called 3<sup>rd</sup> generation – rights). This is not merely a compromised position of UIDAI, rather the rights-based approach offers it with a norm of entitlement, presents a formalised subject of entitlement, generates the protocols of presenting and verifying the subject for whom the state has assumed certain responsibilities. Thus the bureaucratic rationality encroaches upon the political reason by placing/creating the demand for a singular, closed (no play of difference) and final subject from political mediation.

The bureaucratic rationality also converges with the rights-based approach to development on the issues of realisation of rights and delivery of benefit-goods, which both the parties see as a problem of the design of institutions. The very emphasis on the performance of institutions and the creation of effective delivery system has already shifted the political debate on the organisational structure and power-relationships, i.e. institutions are encroached upon by vested interests (the two schools differ on the identity of the elite).

The rights-based approach itself signals a shift in the political imagination and struggle – one that moves away from the struggle around the relations and forces of production to the issues of social reproduction which the state now has to guarantee, thereby creating a statist/state-dependent politics, making the state a powerful (central) entity in the process. Thus, I will argue that the politics of rights is a reduction of politics into ‘politics of supplementation’ – supplementation of the reproductive needs of the people. Therefore, the ‘politics’ has to be around managing and supervising the operation of the ‘supply chain’,<sup>12</sup>.

We can witness that this bureaucratic rationality does not see itself in opposition to the state or politics, rather it preserves a very definite role for the state and politics, understood as the process of mediating contentions, building consensus, defining and guaranteeing rights, generating the norms of entitlements and presenting a subject before the executive. This is *not* neoliberalism<sup>13</sup> that wants “the retreat-of-the-state”, but one that wants to segregate the

---

<sup>12</sup> One can see that the institutional requirement of politics of supplementation also creates the conditions for the development or thriving of a cadre-based political party or community-based organisations (CBOs), which can ‘supervise’ the implementation of the programmes. The reproduction of grassroots level political institutions depends on being part of the developmental *dispositif*.

<sup>13</sup> In fact the contemporary Indian discussion papers (e.g. Ahluwalia 2011) and policy documents make a departure from orthodox neoliberalism. These are marked by the tension between “economic growth” (without which capitalism is meaningless) and “inclusiveness”, the latter stands for the problem of addressing the growing inequality in the society. Indian “neoliberalism” is increasingly open to negotiate and accommodate the pressures of the political processes, and accepts that “particular groups” ‘have not gained the benefits’ of the economic growth (which is a tacit way of acknowledging that “particular groups” like Dalits, Muslims, have been affected by the process of economic growth) and that certain “rights” of the people need to be formalised. Therefore, while ways of achieving a desirable (high) growth need to be found and ascertained, it is also imperative to restructure the social protection programmes, i.e. subsidises need to be rationed and managed. Parallel, to this one can observe a renewed attempt to redesign the institutional structure, particularly in deploying various technological tools to solve both the “business process” and tackle the “Last Mile”/coverage problem wherever it exists.

legislation from the executive, and make the executive free from the everyday wrangling of the conventional state.

On the other hand, it does *not* challenge the sovereignty of the state, but leaves certain issues as the state's absolute privy, and once the norms are agreed upon, it opens up the actual operation of a public system to a hybrid institutional order. To explore is, we need to look at the recommendations for redesigning the state apparatus in the recent documents produced by the expert-groups set up by various government departments.

### *Bureaucratic rationality beyond the state*

It is important to note that the literature on Network, particularly those inspired by Manuel Castells (1999) pits the Network against sovereignty, and thereby sees an emancipatory possibility in the Network. The IT-enabled network structures have contradictory tendencies: on the one hand, because of the ease of centralisation and monitoring, it can perfectly superimpose on the existing structures of authority. On the other hand, this system can be decentralised as well and is vulnerable to anarchic 'attacks' and disruptions. But here we have a situation where the state (the sovereign power) itself constructs and controls the network, yet it opens up the infrastructure to private commercial interests. One can detect that a convergence, or at least, a certain degree of overlap between the state and the commercial sector is taking place, and in the coming years, it needs to be observed how the state opens up to the non-state actors (private corporate interests), how the state and private sector not just share the logics and rationality, but the actual infrastructure and database.

The National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) articulates a rethinking on the organisational design of the government (i.e. "Mission Mode"). It emphasises "political ownership at the highest level" – which perhaps is an alternative term for 'political will' and 'command chain' such that a plan gets executed once it has been planned and agreed upon. It also advocates adopting public private partnership model in implementing e-governance projects, though it acknowledges that the authority should remain with the government and the concerns of security and privacy needs to be addressed adequately. It borrows concepts like "business process re-engineering" and "management of change" from management discourse.

The Report of the Technology Advisory Group for Unique Projects (Ministry of Finance, 2011) recommends that the government should move away from in-house management of smaller projects and outsourcing to Managed Service Providers (MSP) or vendors for larger projects to a National Information Utility (NIU) framework. The government would formulate the policy and enforce it, while the NIU would implement the IT systems. It recommends that every Mission Team should be able to hire people from outside the government on contractual basis. The relationship between the government and NIU would be contractual and that of a partnership. The NIU would be autonomous, profit *making* institutions, but *not* necessarily profit *maximising*.

### **Conclusion:**

I have argued in this paper that the UID signals a new turn in the thinking on the institutional design, by importing ideas of networked governance and biometric mapping of the population. It does not articulate an orthodox neoliberal position. It segregates the state's legislative power and the executive wing, and thereby tries to make the executive free, and shield it, from the compulsions and negotiations of populist democracy. Without challenging

the sovereignty of the state, it opens up the executive to the non-state actors. It posits a different ontology wherein the individual's bodily presence becomes the attribute for recognition by the state and market, and thereby, enunciates a different form of freedom. But, at the same time, it reterritorialises the body and demands demographic information and a proof of residence. Through these moves, the governmentality for the first time in India has started to move beyond the institutional domain of the state. I suggest that this can be seen as the coming of a new "bureaucratic moment."



## References

- Ahluwalia, Montek Singh (2011) "Prospects and Policy Challenges in the Twelfth Plan", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 May.
- Black, Edwin (2002) *IBM and the Holocaust*, Time Warner Paperbacks.
- Caplan, Jane and John Torpey, (eds) (2001), *Documenting Individual Identity. The Development of State Practices in the Modern World* (Princeton University Press).
- Castells, Manuel (1999) *Information Technology, Globalization and Social Development*. UNRISD Discussion Paper No. 114.
- Chatterjee, Partha (2004) *Politics of the Governed*, Columbia University Press.
- Foucault, Michel (2007) *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978*, McMillan Palgrave.
- Fuller, Gillian (2003), "Perfect Match: Biometrics and Body Patterning in a Networked World", *The FibreCulture Journal*, <http://one.fibrejournal.org/fcj002>, viewed on 3 April 2011.
- Department of Information Technology (2011) *Saaransh: A Compendium of Mission Mode Projects under NeGP*. Govt. of India, downloaded on 10 April 2011, from [http://www.mit.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/dit/files/Compendium\\_FINAL\\_Version\\_220211.pdf](http://www.mit.gov.in/sites/upload_files/dit/files/Compendium_FINAL_Version_220211.pdf)
- Drèze, Jean (2010) "Unique facility, or recipe for trouble?" *The Hindu*, 25 November, 2010, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/article911931.ece>
- Khera, Reetika (forthcoming). "India's Public Distribution System: Utilization and Impact." *Journal of Development Studies*.
- Khera, Reetika (2010) "Not all that Unique" *The Hindustan Times*, 30 August, 2010, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Not-all-that-unique/H1-Article1-593541.aspx>
- Maguire, Mark (2009). "The Birth of Biometric Security" *Anthropology Today* 25(2): 9-14.
- Marx, Karl (1990) *Capital Vol. 1*, Penguin, London
- (1875) *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, viewed on 5 April 2011, at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/>
- Medianama (2009) "India's Unique ID Project Will Open Its API, Needs Connectivity – Nandan Nilekani" <http://www.medianama.com/2009/12/223-indias-unique-id-project-will-open-its-api-needs-connectivity-nandan-nilekani/>
- Sengoopta, C. (2003). *Imprint of the Raj: How fingerprinting was born in colonial India*. London: Macmillan.

Ministry of Finance (2011) *Report of the Technology Advisory Group for Unique Projects*, New Delhi.

Ramakumar R (2009) “High-cost, high-risk” by R, *Frontline*, Volume 26, Issue 16, 1-14 August, 2009,  
<http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2616/stories/20090814261604900.htm>

Ramanathan, Usha (2010). “A Unique Identity Bill.” *Economic and Political Weekly* XLV (30): 10-14.

The Business Standard (November 17, 2008) ‘Nilekani's ideas for the future’  
<http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/nilekani's-ideas-forfuture/340440/>

Unique Identification Authority of India (2010a) *Envisioning a role for Aadhaar in the Public Distribution System*. Working Paper , 6/24/2010

Weber, Samuel (2005) *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking*, Fordham University Press