

UMPTEEN PROOFS, BUT NO IDENTITY

THE Election Commission's special intensive revision of electoral rolls in Bihar and proposal to extend it to other states have stirred the hornet's nest of identity yet again. But identity challenges being faced by Indians run far deeper than the EC's periodic revisions. For many, it's 'a million mutinies a day' as different authorities periodically unleash their own dream projects on identifying or improvising on the identification of their subjects.

Consider the nationwide systems. The passport system commenced in 1920 and was revamped in 1967. In 2024, there were 9.3 crore valid passports. Electoral identification dates back to the first general elections of 1951-52. The first major attempt to issue an Electoral Photo ID Card (EPIC) was initiated by the EC during 1993-96. In 2024, there were 97 crore voters with EPICs for many of them. The Permanent Account Number was introduced by the Central Board of Direct Taxes in 1972, initially as an option but made mandatory for taxpayers from 1976. The latest data says there are 78 crore PAN cards.

In the mid-2000s came the brilliant idea of a unique ID for every resident—Aadhaar—using biometric imprints. The Unique Identification Authority of India was set up in 2009 and the first Aadhaar card issued in 2010. After a checkered trajectory, the UIDAI has issued Aadhaar cards to about 185 crore residents.

EPIC and passports are treated as universal proofs of identity, date of birth, and address. However, they do not offer universal coverage. EPIC is for citizens above 18 years, while passports cover only about 6.5 percent of the population. PAN, though available to a wider demography, is primarily a specific-purpose identifier for tax and financial transactions, and not an address proof. Aadhaar, with the largest coverage, has become just another ID. While it is accepted for its biometric features, it is neither a proof of nationality nor of date of birth. There are also about 5 dozen other IDs accepted by various state-level authorities.

All these IDs suffer from duplication and fakery due to the incentive structures in our ground-level governance systems. Recent reports of the CBI unearthing 8.5 lakh 'mule accounts' across certain banks, likely the tip of an iceberg, and the growing incidence of identity theft in financial crimes reveal deeper structural



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vulnerabilities of the fragmented and often unreliable identity architecture.

This is mainly the result of the unwillingness of the identifying authorities to work together and to have a common format for the basic parameters, or at least a common pattern of writing the name and a few basic parameters.

Take the example of writing the name of the applicant in the application forms of four national-level authorities. For EC's EPIC: "First name followed by middle name and surname [if any]". For MEA's passport: "Given name [means first name], followed by middle name [if



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Not just in Bihar, proving identity is a daily challenge for lakhs of Indians. The proliferation of uncoordinated ID systems and lack of a common format have created frustration, enabled fakery and denied livelihoods. A Planning Commission effort from the 2000s could offer an ideal systemic remedy

any] and surname". For CBDT's PAN: "Last name/sSurname, followed by first name and middle name". And for UIDAI, Aadhaar: "Fill in name as given in the document presented in support of the PoI, while omitting any titles, honifics, and aliases."

As long as these national IDs operated in silos, they posed no significant inconvenience to the people. However, sizable duplications across systems prompted a policy push to interlink them—PAN with Aadhaar, for example. Discrepancies in personal details, especially names, have led to frequent mis-

matches, making the process of linkage error-prone and frustrating for individuals. As the demand for formal proof and proof of that proof intensified, the spelling and structure of names in official documents became critical.

Aadhar was a great opportunity to bring a structure to identification. Had the UIDAI and EC collaborated on a unified identification framework, many of today's challenges could have been averted. They had the benefit of the contours of a multi-application smart card propounded by a committee appointed by the then Planning Commission in 2005. A working group in 2007 amplified the architecture of that system. The proposed model envisioned a smart identity system akin to a multi-storeyed building. The ground floor would house the basic demographic and biometric information of a resident (as in Aadhaar), while successive floors could serve different functional needs—electoral rolls, PDS, MNREGA—each protected by its own set of access controls and verification protocols.

The home to nearly a fifth of humanity cannot be governed like a city-state. India's identity challenges cannot be solved by proliferating plastic IDs and digital apps, the instruments of a burgeoning identification industry. The identity system must be well-designed, structured and orderly from the outset, rather than procrastinating endlessly like a perpetual construction site.

The system can still be rebooted if all authorities come on board. It should be accompanied by a campaign to educate every Indian on how to write her name, birth date and address in a consistent manner, and why it matters for their identity, livelihood and rights.

No, this must not be yet another ID issued by yet another agency operating in mission mode. It should be only a common format for the existing IDs or a harmonised ID. To be given to the youngest generations. Let the elder generations live in peace with whatever legally issued IDs they have.

(Views are personal)