Aadhaar Failures: A Tragedy of Errors

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Several instances of practical difficulties that people across India have faced in accessing welfare schemes show the magnitude of the problems inherent in the Aadhaar project.

The Aadhaar number is a 12-digit unique number assigned to all Indian residents. Its uniqueness is supposed to be guaranteed by the use of biometrics (fingerprints, iris and photographs). Besides biometric information, the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) also collects some demographic information.

Since its inception, it was projected as a tool to improve the administrative efficiency of welfare programmes by reducing corruption and enhancing inclusion into such programmes.[1] Contrary to these claims, it has become a hurdle in accessing existing benefits. This short note presents a typology of issues related to Aadhaar, with a special focus on cases where it has been made mandatory, particularly in terms of receiving benefits from welfare programmes.

The magnitude of the issues with the technologies used by the Aadhaar project is hard to discern, as the government is not easily forthcoming with its data, and primary data is

limited.[2] This note relies on case studies, secondary data and primary data, covering a number of welfare programmes and states, ranging from those known to have reasonable administrative capacity to those with weak administration.

There are two overlapping issues with the technology. One is the soundness of the technology and the other is its implementation. Often it is not possible to disentangle the two neatly. The following sections list these problems along with examples of practical difficulties people have faced with Aadhaar.

Getting an Aadhaar Number

Biometrics at the enrolment stage: When the quality of the biometrics is inadequate, enrolment can be a problem. In theory, there is a system in place for "biometric exceptions," in fact, it is often not available on the ground. When it becomes a media embarrassment, some cases get resolved. For instance, a visually-impaired school going boy was denied Aadhaar services in rural Odisha while Amba Kunwar and Budhni Devi were denied services in Jharkhand.

Failure to get Aadhaar for other reasons: Some are too sick to get Aadhaar (like Gangi Tuti), or immobile or bedridden (Kapil Paikra has been bedridden after a road accident in 2009 – before UIDAI began issuing Aadhaar numbers), and so, are unable to get it. Sometimes people apply and just never hear back.

Lost Aadhaar: In some cases, there were people who lost their Aadhaar number/card and could not get it reissued, like Jugli Devi, whose Aadhaar card was eaten by a rat.

Bogus and duplicate Aadhaar numbers: Several reports have highlighted how fake Aadhaar numbers are being generated. A compilation of news reports on bogus or fake Aadhaar is available here. There are also a few documented cases of duplicate Aadhaar numbers being issued.

"Illegal immigrants": In states like Assam, Aadhaar numbers have not been issued because of a controversy about immigrants from Bangladesh. Rohingyas from Myanmar have faced similar issues.

Linking Aadhaar

Linking Aadhaar has become compulsory for a range of government services and benefits. Though linking may seem an easy enough thing to do, in fact, it is cumbersome or impossible in many cases for a variety of reasons.

Lack of awareness: Mangri Pahnain in Jharkhand did not receive her pension for 13 months because of a failure to link with her bank account.

Immobility due to age or physical disability: Soma Tidu lost his disability pension because no one could get his paperwork done.

Inability to link: There have been instances when, owing to absence (for example, Daniel Topo, a migrant worker, missed the deadline), or illness (Sarita Devi could not link her Aadhaar because her son was very ill), during the designated time when Aadhaar was being linked, people have been unable to link their Aadhaar.

Errors in the process of linking: Bhoja Mahto's pension was stopped because of an error in linking Aadhaar and often no one knows what the error is.

Middlemen and bribes: Money is demanded to link it. For instance, Laxman Parhaiya was asked for ₹120.

Inconsistency between the details recorded on Aadhaar: Sanni Tuti's name is misspelt, so her linking does not work because it does not match with the database with which it is being linked.

Lack of accountability: There are instances when people submit their details, but concerned functionaries do not do the needful. Dukhni Devi had been waiting for 13 months after submitting her paperwork.

Authentication

Failure in authentication: It is not obvious how people who were enrolled through the biometric exception clause are supposed to routinely authenticate themselves when availing

benefits.[3] Even among those who were able to enrol with all their biometrics, many face fingerprint authentication issues ("false negatives"). The government has admitted to high authentication failures in the Supreme Court of India. On paper, the government claims that exception mechanisms are in place – such as the use of one-time passwords (OTPs) – but on the ground, these are rarely visible. In this video, the shopkeeper tries a commonly used tactic (for example, innovative ways of greasing fingers).
The elderly are more vulnerable to biometric authentication failures (for example, Jainath Ram, in rural Jharkhand can no longer draw subsidised rations due to biometric failures; this clip shows an old woman in Andhra Pradesh failing to authenticate herself). Other vulnerable groups include manual labourers (Tilo Kumari, in the same village, has the same problem), and people like Magda Ram, a leprosy patient.

Hassles with authentication: Here, an old bent-over lady, has to be carried to the ration shop so that she can authenticate herself. Olasi Hansda cannot walk, and so cannot authenticate herself. Mada Mallavya and his visually challenged daughter lost access for similar reasons and eventually gave up trying to authenticate themselves.

Updating biometrics: Biometrics are not stable over the lifespan of an individual, so they

are asked to [update/re-enrol their biometrics](). This costs money or may take time, and in some cases, it may take repeated efforts (for example, if an enrolment centre is not easy to find).

Architecture/Design Issues

To the extent that Aadhaar is being made an essential feature of the banking system, there are issues of platform design.

Redirected payments: The Aadhaar Payments Bridge (APB) architecture hopes to use the UID number as a financial address, and at any given point, the APB architecture allows for [only one bank account number to be linked to Aadhaar](). But, because of the "[Last Aadhaar Linked Account]()" (LALA) rule when people have more than one account, the last Aadhaar-linked bank account automatically starts receiving all payments, even those that were directed to previously linked Aadhaar accounts. The most infamous case here is the [Airtel mobile wallet]() case.

e-KYC requirements: Initially bank accounts were linked with Aadhaar numbers to meet the government's deadlines. This was often done without informing the person concerned. Later, the banks were required to complete 'e-KYC' and take consent from customers to connect bank accounts to Aadhaar through biometric authentication. Until e-KYC formalities are completed, bank accounts could be "[frozen]()." E-KYC verification sometimes requires a few months to be successfully completed, as was seen in the case of [Kiso Devi]()).

Aadhaar linking failures: This could be because a wrong Aadhaar number is entered or if the demographic details on the Aadhaar card do not match those associated with the bank account. When [failures occur]() (for example, Aadhaar may be [deactivated]()), functionaries are unable to fathom the cause of the failure, because they do not know what the error codes stand for or where they can be remedied.

Consequences of Problems with Aadhaar

Cancellation: Sometimes, names are [cancelled without any notice]() because of which benefits are revoked. [Rajkumari Devi]() completed her paperwork after her name was struck off, but no luck. Many have lost benefits because they were unable to link their Aadhaar numbers to essential welfare services. For instance, [Radhu Parhaiya]() lost his subsidised ration card while [Dileshwari Devi]() lost her pension.

Suspension: Those who are lucky may be successful in having their names reinstated, such as [Bhoja Mahto]() or [Sarol Lohra](), who had their pensions reinstated. However, no arrears were paid. Fewer were successful in getting the arrears for those months when their names were wrongfully struck off.

Delayed and rejected payments: [e-KYC requirements]() have held up pensions and

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) wages for months in for millions of labourers and pensioners.

Denial of basic rights: Sanjay Parhaiya could not get admission to a school because of biometric issues which prevented his enrollment. Women have delivered babies in the parking lot of a hospital because they did not have Aadhaar.

Increased transaction costs: The effort required to avail existing benefits has gone up – either due to longer waits at the ration shop, or repeated trips for authentication, or trips to different places that either support online transactions or disburse other welfare benefits.

Bribes: Middlemen continue to play a role in the process of getting an Aadhaar card made and in linking it (for example, Laxman Parhaiya had to pay ₹120). They even play a role when benefits are disbursed. For example, Dasiya Kunwar was asked for ₹2,000 when she went to the "customer service centre" to withdraw her pension.

Identity fraud and theft: As Aadhaar cards get linked with people's financial details (bank account numbers, mobile numbers and tax returns) there have been nearly 300 reports of identity fraud and identity theft. Readily replicated biometrics have opened the door to identity theft.

Deaths: According to a compilation prepared with Siraj Dutta and other activists, we have been able to document 42 hunger-related deaths since 2017 that were precipitated by Aadhaar being made compulsory for welfare programmes. Others died when they were denied healthcare at hospitals (a partial compilation is available here). Using technology to cheat people: Ration shop dealers and customer service providers in places where the use of Aadhaar is compulsory, often use the technology to obfuscate matters in ways that disempower people. Some of these people have been figuring out loopholes within the Aadhaar ecosystem and exploiting it for their own benefit (see this scam in Uttar Pradesh's public distribution system).

"Pain without Gain"

Even though override mechanisms for enrolment, authentication exist on paper, they are rarely implemented on the ground.[4] This is a general but crucial part of the problem – there is a world of difference between the stated policy and how it is actually implemented on the ground. In Justice A K Sikri's majority opinion on the Aadhaar matter, he stated clearly that while exclusion was an important issue, they were convinced by the government's reassurance that override and exemption mechanisms were in place to deal with this.

Available evidence suggests that even if "teething" issues are resolved, if policy implementation is true to policy design, people will still, very likely be where they were before the integration of Aadhaar with welfare began. This is because of the over-centralized architecture of the technology, combined with the weak accountability of

intervening administrative links. These are a crucial part of the design problem in the Aadhaar project. In that sense, Aadhaar is "pain without gain."

End Notes:

1 See Khera (2011 and 2017) to see how these claims were exaggerated, if not entirely wrong.

2 Some of the published studies include "Pension Tension", "Well Done ABBA", "Aadhaar and Food Security in Jharkhand". Some results are unpublished but available on Twitter, including this map which plots newspaper coverage of exclusion, denial and death. Video testimonies of the range of issues highlighted here are available through this playlist on YouTube. See also the edited collection "Dissent on Aadhaar: Big data meets Big Brother".

3 In some cases at least, when the quality of all 10 fingerprints was rejected at the stage of enrolment, an Aadhaar number was successfully issued.

4 In work on Andhra Pradesh, where there is a functional exemption mechanism in place, 20,000 pensioners are still unable to get pensions (Khera and Patibandla, IIM Working paper, forthcoming).

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