

Unique Biometric IDs

Governmentality and Appropriation in a Digital India

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Abstract:

On a global scale, the usage of a variety of digital ID and surveillance technologies in both civic and security governance is increasingly taking place, leading to standardised forms and practices. India is implementing the largest biometric scheme in history. As part of a larger plan to digitalise the country's governance, the objective of the Unique Identification (UID) project is to enrol the entire populace, roughly speaking 20% of the world's population. This dissertation investigates the implementation of biometric IDs in India, asking what are the governmental rationales of biometric identification in India? How does national biometric identification shape the conditions of possibility for governing conduct? And, how do people utilise and appropriate digital, biometric IDs? Based on observation of enrolment sites, semi-structured- and narrative interviews of officials, as well as persons enrolled into the scheme, the dissertation shows how biometric IDs are imagined and experienced.

Analytically, the dissertation places the Indian project within the larger framework of governmentality in the post-colony. The concept of appropriation is developed to describe the processes by which governmental schemes are altered or modified to benefit local contexts. I investigate the identification of the homeless in Delhi, narratives on fraud by inhabitants in the northern Indian town of Vrindavan, and the daily utilisation of software by Indian bankers, to describe such processes of subversion. The dissertation shows that standardised biometric tools, albeit applicable to multiple contexts and usages, become enmeshed and appropriated in the contexts in which they are implemented.

Keywords: India, biometric identification, Aadhaar, Unique ID, governmentality, appropriation, postcolonial, biopower, risk, narrative method, subjectivity

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