Varun Sai.

Reviewing Aadhaar enabled governance in India

Abstract

The Digital India programme is a « flagship programme of the Government of India with a vision to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy » (digitalindia.gov.in, 2017). A precursor to this initiative is the diffusion of mobile phones and rollout of biometric identity cards called Aadhaar (Gosh, 2017). Nandan Nilekani, co-founder of Infosys, asserts that Aadhaar based governance can provide unique form of identification to strengthen welfare initiatives by involving various startups and tech companies (Nilekani and Shah, 2015). Thus, we can see e-governance platforms in India emerging as arenas (Bakker, Van Lente and Meeus, 2011), where the state becomes an arena for the biometric infrastructure (Rao and Nair, 2019).

Public Distribution System (PDS), was introduced to combat acute poverty, issues of undernour-ishment and food shortage by providing food grains to beneficiaries (Swaminathan, 2010). How-ever, food grains were illegally distributed to non-entitled customers through practices like black marketing, hoarding and diverting grains to private markets (Parikh, 1994). E-Public Distribution System (E-PDS), which evolved as an e-governance platform, is introduced to tackle such malprac-tices and corruption through surveillance (Masiero, 2014). But, practices of caste, class and gen-der hinder access and use of these technologies questioning the participation one has in availing these services (Kamath, 2018). Studies testing e-PDS reveal that with new challenges around us-ing these technologies, people are still fighting for their rights (Masiero, 2014).

The aim of the essay is to explore e-PDS system as an arena and infrastructure that enforce the adoption of biometric identification in welfare schemes. This is done so by reviewing the history of biometric identity cards in India, critically analysing the e-PDS platform employed in India using theories from Science Technology and Society studies.

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