Aadhaar and multiple identity disorder

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A gautk (The Stranger) was Satyajit Ray’s last film. The film revolves around the return of an old man, Manomohan Mitra, to India after 35 years. Manomohan had spent all his life with Adivasis from across the world and has a certificate issued by the ration dealer for not producing the ration card, among others, perhaps paving the way for wages taken out in his name. While he was asked to sign the consent forms, he had no idea of what “rights-of-the-poor” advocates and “luddites” (those who are opposed to technological change) were talking about.

Not so long ago, Nandan Nilekani, the architect of the Aadhaar project, came up with a taxonomy of the people opposed to Aadhaar, two of the categories being “rights-of-the-poor” advocates and “luddites” (those who are opposed to technological change). Xavier doesn’t belong to either of the camps. He got an Aadhaar because he was told that once he gets his Aadhaar, all his problems would be solved. However, all that has happened is Xavier resides in multiple databases with Aadhaar acting as the compass among his many so-called identities.

Mr Nilekani’s taxonomy may appear clever but it indicates he is ill-informed about ground realities, and points to his technological naivety. What is primarily required is political and administrative will for effective delivery of services and not merely a randomly generated unique 12-digit number to tag people. Enrolment in Aadhaar itself is a shining example of the government’s reach and efficiency but democracy can be a panacea against corruption and leakages. But how many anecdotes are required to get the government to act?

An Agantuk — a stranger — is high on issues that the UIDAI project may dismiss Xavier’s situation as anecdotal. They may desire an assessment of the scale of such travesties. But how many anecdotes are required to make the government pause and reflect? The velocity of Aadhaar imposition has left no time for rigorous studies or debate in evaluating the costs and benefits of this coercive project. Aadhaar was supposed to be a panacea against corruption and leakages and a magic wand for financial inclusion. But, Xavier stands tall, paradoxically so, as a counter-example to the claims made by Aadhaar — he is yet to get his disability pension, his PDS entitlements are in peril, and cash is being withdrawn by somebody else in his name. Xavier exists as rows and columns in databases and is yet invisible to the administrative will for effective delivery of services and not merely a randomly generated unique 12-digit number to tag people.

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Identity in the Public Distribution System: Xavier has also been struggling to get his ration card. The PDS website indicates otherwise. An Aadhaar enrolment camp was conducted in his village a few years ago. Since then Xavier owns an Aadhaar card. Unaware of privacy concerns, he had given his Aadhaar number to a contractor, among others.

Identity as an NREGA worker: Xavier is listed as “Jebiyar” Ahir in the NREGA Management Information System (MIS). His job card, bank passbook, and his Aadhaar number have been taken away by a local contractor, among others. Xavier remains an agantuk — a stranger — to the state. Much like Manomohan’s passport, Xavier’s Aadhaar is also a randomly generated unique 12-digit number.

Why Xavier is an agantuk: Xavier’s situation as anecdotal

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