THE HINDU EXPLAINS

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Infrastructure: Airports

The story so far: Last week, Minister of State for Civil Aviation V.K. Singh, said four airports in the country will soon have facial recognition technology (FRT)-based boarding system for passengers. In a written response to a question in Lok Sabha on Thursday, Mr. Singh said that the Airports Authority of India (AAI) is working on a biometric boarding system at the Varanasi, Pune, Kolkata and Vijayawada airports.

"This biometric boarding system is part of the first phase of Digi Yatra scheme's implementation," Mr. Singh said in the response.

Digi Yatra initiative aims to make air travel paperless and hassle-free in the country, and proposes to simplify passenger-related processes at various check points at the airport by using FRT-based biometric scanning.

Once implemented, air travellers who choose to use the service won't have to show their tickets, boarding passes, or physical identity cards at several points at the airport. This in turn would reduce queue waiting time and accelerate processing time.

The MoCA plans to build an identity management platform that will enable biometric-based scanning across all airports in India. The platform will include passengers' digital identities, like Aadhaar, passport details or other identity cards.

The 'Common Digi Yatra ID' platform will be used to enrol passengers, authenticate their data, and share consenting passengers' profiles with other airport partners. The app-based interface will be built as a shared national infrastructure, which will provide APIs to airports. It will also allow other apps to be integrated with it, according to a 2018 MoCA policy paper on the scheme.

The scheme was planned to be made operational in early 2019, with pilot rollouts in Bengaluru and Hyderabad airports. Bengaluru's Kempegowda International Airport successfully tested the biometric-based self-boarding facility by mid-2019.

The AAI planned to launch the scheme at Kolkata, Varanasi, Pune and Vijayawada by April 2019. But the roll-out was delayed, possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The MoCA is now rescheduling its roll-out plans, and has proposed that the Digi Yatra system go live in March 2022, and then be scaled up in a phased manner for adoption across various airports in the country.

The AAI has engaged NEC Corporation Pvt. Ltd. to implement FRT at the four airports.

"Data shared by the passenger is to be used for the purpose defined and would not be shared with any other external stakeholders," Mr. Singh said.

Passengers' biometric information will be collected via an app, and deleted 24 hours after flight departure. And the security of the FRT system will be tested independently, according to the Minister.

He also noted that the FRT deployed will comply with the country's data privacy and protection practices.

But India's recently adopted Personal Data Protection Bill (PDPB), 2019, falls short of the standards set by the Justice Srikrishna Committee. The Bill fails to build a legal structure on the landmark *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy vs Union of India* judgment on the right of privacy. It diverges from the Committee's 2018 draft, which proposed a judicial oversight in selecting members of the Data Protection Authority.

Globally, the rapid adoption of FRT raises several concerns, primarily related to the possibility of the technology's potential to undermine the right to privacy. Policies focused on mitigating risks associated with use of FRT must be developed to protect personal data.

The use of iris scans, fingerprints and facial recognition to identify travellers has been operational in some international airports in the past few years. They use algorithmic systems to get a face grab of passengers at the first security checkpoint.

A camera scans the passenger's face, and takes measurements of their facial features to build a biometric profile of them. And then, when the same person boards the flight, another camera takes a picture of their face and runs an algorithm to check whether the two images match with the boarding pass. In 2019, a traveller's tweet went viral — she posted her experience of having to go through a biometric scanning system for the airline JetBlue without her knowledge. At the heart of her concern was the option to opt in or out of a service.

Without a clear idea of where the biometric data will be stored, and who else will have access to it, some passengers prefer to keep their personal data private. "It might sound trite, but right now, the key to opting out of face recognition is to be vigilant," digital rights group Electronic Frontier Foundation said in its blog. "There's no single box you can check, and importantly, it may not be possible for non-U.S. persons to opt out of face recognition entirely."

A growing body of research shows that biometric scanning technologies coupled with AI have an inherent bias. A report by the U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology noted that facial recognition technology found Black, Brown and Asian individuals to be 100 times more likely to be misidentified than white male faces.

A 2018 research paper, co-authored by ex-Google top AI scientist Timnit Gebru and MIT Media Labs' Joy Buolamwini, found that machine learning algorithms discriminate based on classes like race and gender.

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The sale of the two objects pertaining to the history of the online encyclopaedia, titled 'The Birth of Wikipedia', will be open till December 15.

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