

Virtual Aadhaar ID: too little, too late?

Identity trouble: The UIDAI had on Wednesday introduced the concept of a virtual Aadhaar ID Special Arrangement

The move to introduce an “untested” virtual ID to address security concerns over Aadhaar database is a step in the right direction, but may be a case of too little, too late, according to experts, as many of the 119 crore Aadhaar holders have already shared their 12-digit numbers with various entities.

“What about all the databases that are already linked up with our Aadhaar number? Virtual ID will therefore not attack the root of the problem. At best, it is band-aid,” said Reetika Khera, faculty, Indian Institute of Technology-Delhi.

“Can we realistically expect rural folks to use this to protect themselves? Or are we pushing the barely literate into the hands of middlemen who will ‘help’ them navigate it?” she questioned.

The Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) on Wednesday introduced the concept of a virtual ID that can be used in lieu of the Aadhaar number at the time of authentication, thus eliminating the need to share and store Aadhaar numbers. It can be generated only by the Aadhaar number-holder via the UIDAI website, Aadhaar enrolment centre, or its mobile application.

Experts pointed out that the virtual ID is voluntary and the Aadhaar number will still need to be used at some places.

“Unless all entities are required to use virtual IDs or UID tokens, and are barred from storing Aadhaar numbers, the new measures won’t really help,” said Pranesh Prakash, Policy Director, Centre for Internet and Society, Bengaluru.

Kiran Jonnalagadda, co-founder of the Internet Freedom Foundation, agreed. “The idea is good but it should have been done in 2010, as now all the data is already out. Now, what can be done is revoke everybody’s Aadhaar and give new IDs.”

Mr. Jonnalagadda added that Authentication User Agencies (AUAs) categorised as ‘global AUAs’ by the UIDAI will be exempted from using the virtual IDs. “These are likely to be entities which require de-duplication for subsidy transfer, such as banks and government agencies. All the leaks have happened till now from these entities. So, basically, the move will exempt the parties that are the problem,” he said.

Vipin Nair, one of the advocates representing the petitioners who have challenged the Aadhaar Act in the Supreme Court said, “It is potentially a case of unmitigated chaos purely from an Information Technology perspective.”

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