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Without Aadhaar, without identity

Vyom Anil, Jean Dreze write: People who lose their Aadhaar number may not be able to retrieve it, and risk losing all social benefits.

Written by **Vyom Anil** , **Jean Dreze** |
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WILD CHASE FOR IDENTITY

VYOM ANIL AND JEAN DRÈZE

The problem is that the only record many people have of their Aadhaar number is their Aadhaar card.

The recent ordeal of a poor Musahar woman, Reena Devi, exposes a serious flaw in Aadhaar's architecture: Some people are unable to retrieve their Aadhaar number if they have lost it.

The problem is that the only record many people have of their Aadhaar number is their Aadhaar card. But what if they lose the card? Here, as in many other domains, India has created a two-track system with first-rate facilities for some and cattle treatment for the underprivileged.

Reena lives in Kinaru village of Muzaffarpur district in Bihar, with her parents-in-law and two babies. She had lost her husband a few days before we met her last October. Even before he died, the family lived in abject poverty. Now that the main bread-winner is no more, they barely survive.

Reena is entitled to a ration card, job card, bank account and widow pension, among other benefits. But she has none of those because she has lost her Aadhaar card and all these facilities require Aadhaar, in practice if not in theory. Reena was desperate to retrieve her Aadhaar number (and obtain a new Aadhaar card) when we met her.

Reena would never have been able to retrieve her Aadhaar number without the sort of assistance we were able to give her. Even for us, with our university degrees and fluent English, it took months to solve her problem. In the end, we succeeded, but not without special assistance. (By the way, there is nothing wrong with Reena's fingerprints.)

We began by exhausting all local remedies. One of us (Vyom) accompanied Reena to the local Aadhaar enrolment centre at Uttar Bihar Grameen Bank. From there they were sent to the block headquarters in Turki, then to the District Registrar cum Counseling Centre in Muzaffarpur, and from there to the Aadhaar enrolment centre at the India Post Office, Muzaffarpur. This to-and-fro took many days because there were long queues everywhere. We were no wiser at the end of it. Often, we received wrong or contradictory information. For instance, the Block

Development Officer initially claimed that it was impossible to retrieve Reena's Aadhaar number, and later that it would be easy to retrieve at the district level using her biometrics.

This experience gave us a sobering view of the private agencies that deal with Aadhaar enrolment and updation at the local level in Bihar. Most are run by unaccountable data operators. Their misdeeds include overcharging for services, irresponsible handling of important documents, misplacing them, and turning away poor people who bring difficult queries. The Aadhaar enrolment centres at banks, post offices and government offices were also dens of harassment. Multiple visits to these agencies and offices cost more than Reena would have been able to afford — money for printouts, photocopying charges, so-called application fees, aside from travel expenses and time wasted.

The UIDAI's telephonic helpline was of little help. We were told that Reena's Aadhaar number could be retrieved if she provided her name, address, PIN code and date of birth. But Reena has no idea of her date of birth. The UIDAI website gave clear instructions on how to retrieve a lost Aadhaar number, but only for those who have a registered mobile or email address in the Aadhaar database.

All this went on for a few weeks. On December 3, 2020, some representatives of the UIDAI's help centre advised Reena to make a fresh application for Aadhaar. They were not sure whether it would help, but thought there was no harm trying. Reena re-applied the same day, but received a rejection message on December 29, citing an unspecified "document related error".

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Meanwhile, we sent a query to UIDAI under the Right to Information Act, asking how a person who has lost her Aadhaar number is supposed to retrieve it. The response explained how this can be done with the help of a registered phone number or email address, without even considering the possibility that someone may lack those. So we sent a follow-up RTI query to UIDAI, specifically asking how Aadhaar can be retrieved without a registered phone number or email address. The response, received on February 12, 2021, was a gem: "If mobile number and e-mail id are not registered with his/her Aadhaar, Resident can visit any Permanent Enrolment Centres for updation (mobile number and e-mail id)." Was this a cop-out, or did the author fail to realise that Aadhaar "updation" is impossible without the number? We shall never know.

On February 25, Vyom visited the UIDAI office in Patna with a lawyer and Reena's full documents. The UIDAI was powerless to retrieve her Aadhaar number but the Assistant Director-General suggested making another application for Aadhaar. He said that it would be rejected, but that some valuable information might emerge. So Reena applied for Aadhaar again. On March 19, she received this rejection message: "Manual Dedup Process found this as duplicate". In other words, she was told that she already had an Aadhaar number, something she knew very well!

It is only on April 7 that a sympathetic UIDAI officer in Ranchi was finally able to retrieve Reena's Aadhaar number using the details of her latest enrolment slip. Presumably, the de-duplication process had identified her Aadhaar number. He told us that he had assisted many other people who were unable to retrieve their Aadhaar number. This suggests that Reena is not an isolated victim.

Reena's story raises at least four questions for UIDAI. First, is there a reliable and well-defined way of retrieving a lost Aadhaar number for someone who does not have a registered mobile number or email address? Second, if there is, then why is this retrieval method not being clearly communicated? Third, given that the current method is obviously inadequate, what does UIDAI propose to do to make life easier for people like Reena?

Finally, who is to be held accountable for the injustice that has been done to Reena and others by depriving them of social benefits for no fault of their own? Incidentally, our best efforts to secure a ration card for her without Aadhaar have failed.

This column first appeared in the print edition on July 5, 2021 under the title 'Wild chase for identity'. Anil is a research scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University; Drèze is Visiting Professor at the Department of Economics, Ranchi University

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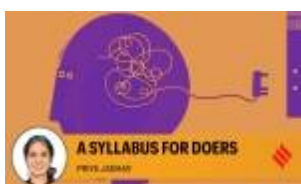
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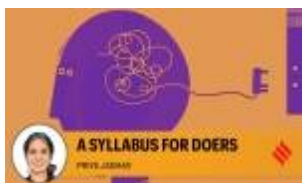
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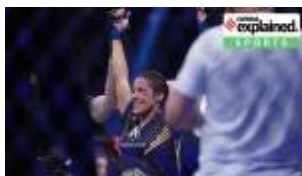### Nitish Kumar's demand for special status for Bihar

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