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Aadhaar biometrics not reliable in India's climate: What Moody's has said

Since many essential services are predicated on the Aadhar-based verification, unreliability of biometric technologies becomes a major issue.

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At a government centre in Shahada, Maharashtra, where Aadhaar data is taken, either to rectify old details or create a new identity. (Express photo by Prashant Nadkar/File)

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Raising major red flags about Aadhaar – India's 12-digit universal identity – global rating major Moody's Investors Service has questioned the reliability of biometric technologies, especially for people in hot and humid climates, and pointed to consequent service denials caused by this.

The concerns come a year after the country's top auditor, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India had pulled up the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) for Aadhaar's "deficient data management".

What Moody's has said about Aadhaar

Moody's has noted that Aadhaar, which is the world's largest digital ID program, enables access to public and private services, with verification via fingerprint or iris scans, and alternatives like One-Time Passcodes, with an aim to integrate marginalised groups and expand welfare benefits access.

“However, the system faces hurdles, including the burden of establishing authorisation and concerns about biometric reliability,” Moody’s said.

“The system often results in service denials, and the reliability of biometric technologies, especially for manual labourers in hot, humid climates, is questionable,” it added.

Why the reliability concerns are alarming

The concerns over Aadhaar’s reliability are significant given that it is the primary identity document that is linked to a number of the government’s welfare schemes. So, if the technology is not reliable, it might result in people not receiving various subsidies from the government that they are entitled to. Bear in mind, a number of the people who depend on government subsidies are also those who need it the most.

Here are some stats –

As of July 31, 2023, 765.30 million Indians had linked Aadhaar with ration card to avail ration through Public Distribution System. Over 280 million residents linked Aadhaar with cooking gas connection for LPG subsidy through PAHAL.

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Over 788 Million Aadhaar have been uniquely linked with the Bank Accounts on NPCI Mapper. And almost 100 per cent of farmer-beneficiaries under PM Kisan Yojna are connected via Aadhaar.

“(Un)reliability becomes an issue because you are predicating the delivery of essential services on the biometrics working flawlessly — which they don’t,” Laavanya Tamang, senior researcher at LibTech India, an action research organisation which focuses on the delivery infrastructure of welfare programmes such as PDS, told *The Indian Express*.

“The consequences of such failures can be extremely grave. For instance, there are documented cases in Jharkhand of starvation deaths linked to Aadhaar biometrics failing and people consequently not being able to receive rations from the PDS,” Tamang, who works in Jharkhand, said.

Aadhaar's recurring concerns

Even as it has become the de facto identity for over 1.3 billion Indians, **issues around Aadhaar's privacy and reliability** have been repeatedly raised over the years.

Last year, in a report, the CAG said that there are issues of data-matching, errors in authentication, and shortfall in archiving in Aadhaar. It added that the data of Aadhaar card holders have not been matched with their Aadhaar number even after 10 years in some cases.

It has also criticised the absence of a system to analyse the factors leading to authentication errors, and said that even though UIDAI was maintaining one of the largest biometric databases in the world, it did not have a data archiving policy, which is considered “a vital storage management best practice”.

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“UIDAI provided Authentication services to banks, mobile operators and other agencies free of charge till March 2019, contrary to the provisions of their own Regulations, depriving revenue to the Government,” the CAG noted in a 108 page report last April.

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