

Cyborg Citizen: A Transnational View of Cyborg Biopolitics

It was nearing the end of summer and I was sitting in a large, air-conditioned office in the middle of Delhi. I had been lucky enough to land an interview with Ashok Pal Singh, – an original member of India’s universal identity program development team. We had just finished talking about how this universal ID program – known as Aadhaar, or “foundation” in several Indian languages – was implemented, when Ashok pivoted to the international significance of the Aadhaar project. He proudly told me that Aadhaar had been the subject of at least two cover stories in international magazines, that the World Bank had begun its own ID project based on Aadhaar, and that it was the source of inspiration for similar pilot projects in Morocco and Estonia. Furthermore, he claimed that the Aadhaar development team had been approached directly by several other countries with requests to help develop their own Universal ID systems, which the team had refused. Even though this was unprompted, at the time it made sense that Ashok wanted to communicate to me the excitement surrounding Aadhaar, and its positive reception by international authorities, because within India Aadhaar is the subject of ongoing, pointed critique.

Some context: the Aadhaar universal ID program is a national database that assigns a 12 digit unique identifier to each Indian resident, regardless of citizenship. This identifier is then associated with select biometric markers and biographical data. These data are stored in a highly encrypted database, which officials claim prevents the possibility of data breaches and misuse. And yet, information security experts have repeatedly sounded the alarm about the vulnerability of this data, in large part because of how prevalent Aadhaar has become in daily life. An Aadhaar number is now required for essential tasks such as paying bills, filing taxes, and enrolling in pension plans. As a result, over 1.2 billion Indians – approximately 93% of the

population – have voluntarily registered for an Aadhaar ID number. The overwhelming success of this enrollment drive is one of the primary reasons for the warm reception Aadhaar has received internationally. The other is the promise that Aadhaar will help to minimize corruption and streamline the provision of rations and other welfare services to India's poor. This promise moralizes India's techno-rational strategy of governance in a way that appeals to ideas about India as a poor, developing country in need of intervention, that international governing bodies (like the ones Ashok used to provide Aadhaar's bonafides) already hold.

While this developmentalist framework may help to justify Aadhaar in the face of commentators' concern about potential surveillance, the flip side is that by relying exclusively on digital infrastructures to distribute rations to rural communities that lack digital infrastructure, the Indian government is also creating a context whereby any potential breakdown in the system – a fingerprint that is unreadable by the Aadhaar biometric scanner, for example, or a village that is not within range of Internet cables or cell towers – can result in the denial of what could be a person's only reliable source of food. In fact, attention grabbing headlines about the lethal failures of this system are the source of some of Aadhaar's most poignant critique. So why, we should ask, is the Indian government so insistent on distributing welfare through the Aadhaar system, despite the recognition that frequent breakdowns of the system infrastructure are often deadly?

In spite of the heavy critique of the Aadhaar project that circulates within India, Aadhaar has been lauded by members of the international community, and so suggests interesting questions about how the Indian government, rather than individual beneficiaries, might be benefitting from such a well-publicized national development project, when it frequently and publicly fails to connect recipients of state aid to the state itself.

Outside of the commentary that largely takes place in national and international news media, there is a small but apparent body of academic literature that has analyzed how Aadhaar reconstitutes Indian residents' relationship to the state, but that overlooks how Aadhaar might affect India's relationship to other states. Theorist of biometric governance Keith Breckenridge argues that "Computerized biometrics are driven by the fantasy of administrative panopticism—the urgent desire to complete and centralize the state's knowledge of its citizens" (2005, 271), which is certainly an element of India's Aadhaar-based governmentality. The state's desire for heightened surveillance, however, does not fully explain Ashok's quickness to defend the efficacy of Aadhaar in terms of its impact on other countries.

Also concerned with the ways that computerized biometrics mediate the relationship between the state and its subjects, Ursula Rao and Vijayanka Nair (2019) suggest that one of the effects that Aadhaar has had is to transform the state from a paternalist provider of care into a neoliberal platform that transfers the onus to connect residents to state services *from* the state onto the residents themselves. They suggest that "By pushing the Indian state towards 'datafication', it changes the way the government 'sees' the population and the way power is distributed and experienced" (ibid., 471). Taking up this cyber-systems metaphor, the rest of this paper shifts the focus from questions of subject-nation relations to the ways that Aadhaar and other national biometric programs of governance transform states' relationships to the international community. This move takes seriously Ashok's emphasis on the positive reception that Aadhaar had received internationally, and treats the international headlines about Aadhaar as essential parts of the global governance apparatus.

Aadhaar ostensibly allows the Indian government to govern its residents efficiently by collecting and measuring data points about their lives, such as information about a person's

caste, age, and average income. I suggest that the emphasis Aadhaar's architects place on the international reception of the program indicates India's own subjection to international governing bodies. Ultimately I will offer a framework that enables us to understand how international development benchmarking, international reactions to national development projects, and India's perception of its own international reputation connect Aadhaar with the broader system of global government. Further, I entertain what it would mean to consider this system as "biometric."

Because this global system transforms individual Indian subjects' relationships not just to the state but also to the international community, I think of this system as a cyborg. In her seminal work, "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1991), Donna Haraway introduces the concept of cyborg as a social category that is an assemblage of the Other. While this can be any entity that challenges hegemonic practices of boundary maintenance, the cyborg concept is often used to emphasize the fact that humans are no longer bounded in and of themselves. Instead, we live our lives in perpetual relation to one another, mediated through technologies that connect us to others both horizontally and vertically. Haraway emphasizes the potential global scale of cyborgs, offering both war and international feminist movements as examples of global cyborg assemblages. Addressing the cybernetic rationality inherent to these assemblages, Haraway explains that "communications sciences and modern biologies are constructed by a common move — the translation of the world into a problem of coding, a search for a common language in which all resistance to instrumental control disappears and all heterogeneity can be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment, and exchange" (ibid., 164)

Evidently, this emphasis on the homogenization of populations through technological control would seem to be in line with Aadhaar's use of metrics. In addition to figuring the nation

as a service platform, as discussed previously, Rao and Nair argue that Aadhaar and other massive national biometric projects are instrumental in transforming populations into pure data. In doing so, Aadhaar makes subjects visible to the State. But given the ways that Aadhaar is used to regulate the life and legitimacy of India's population, Aadhaar is clearly *also* a biopolitical program – something that Haraway, interestingly, claims cannot be cyborg. In fact, Haraway anticipated, and objected to, the potential relation of cyborgness with biopolitics, writing that “Michel Foucault's biopolitics is a flaccid premonition of cyborg politics” (ibid. 150), and that “The cyborg is not subject to Foucault's biopolitics; the cyborg simulates politics, a much more potent field of operations” (ibid., 163). I wonder: Do these claims still stand when governments use the fact of cyborg-ness itself as a biopolitical tool?

In India's case, Aadhaar is part of the broader Digital India national development program. It joins other programs nested in the larger Digital India umbrella, like Make in India and Incredible India, in being heavily marketed to international audiences – largely in an attempt to demonstrate India's technological strengths and lure businesses into building their headquarters and manufacturing within India. As such, Aadhaar is advertised through its success in transforming 1.2 billion residents into collections of data points, or rather, building the world's largest cyborg citizen assemblage, rather than its efficacy in actually delivering the social services that Aadhaar promises. So in the case of Aadhaar, when this unambiguously biopolitical program fails to administer, optimize, and multiply life, and yet succeeds in garnering international acclaim, it suggests a shift in the boundaries of the Aadhaar cyborg.

Haraway states that the “cyborg simulates politics” (ibid., 150), meaning that the regulations and extensions of power appear to be between discrete entities, but actually take place within the same cyborg macro-system. Returning to my conversation with Ashok that

opened this piece, it first appeared to me that Ashok was talking about two different things. We had been discussing the material realities of Aadhaar and focusing on how it connected Indian subjects to the Indian government, when he pivoted to the rhetorical perceptions of Aadhaar internationally, and as such, how that connected the Indian state to other nations.

Following Haraway, I now understand these two seemingly distinct topics as part of the same cyborg system. Welfare recipients governed through Aadhaar became specific kinds of subjects as a result of the data collected on them by the Indian national government, a process which determines whether or not they are entitled to state aid. Zooming out, India *itself* is subject to a similar kind of data driven judgement – namely that of international development metrics, which these days are skewed in favor of the technologically savvy. Further, India’s international social capital is in many ways a result of whether it is still classified as “developing” or if it has achieved recognition as a burgeoning global power – a process that takes place in part through formalized development rankings, and in part in the discussions about India’s “development” held in the international news media. These metrics and other technologies of international governance have the effect of compelling nations to position themselves as the good neoliberal subjects of international governing bodies. In India’s case, the international push for digital development created the context for Digital India and for Aadhaar itself.

Let me give an example of how this works. As part of their sustainable development goals for the new millennium, the United Nations identified providing legal identities for all to be a key step needed to achieve goal 16, which outlines the need to “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” (United Nations, 2015). While not explicitly a focus of Aadhaar’s own promotional materials, goal 16 is often used as a metric

against which Aadhaar is measured in the media. However, the massive potential for surveillance inherent to the Aadhaar project – which again, has enrolled and is tracking the activities of 1.2 billion people – tends to run up against other international standards of ethics. The Human Rights Watch, for instance, has recently submitted a report to the United Nations specifically about Aadhaar, warning about the possibility of unnecessary and harmful surveillance (HRW, 2019). This threat of international perceptions of surveillance, corruption, and general “backwardness” is what Ashok was responding to when he began to defend the value of Aadhaar to me, unprompted. In doing so, he wanted to instead demonstrate how well India was meeting targets like Sustainable Development Goal 16, and so drew on other nation’s attempts at mimicry as evidence of Aadhaar’s success.

To conclude, we can now revisit Rao and Nair’s argument that the Indian population has been transformed first and foremost into data, and consider the function that a population-as-data might have in a global cyborg assemblage. By performing Aadhaar as a success that aligns with international metrics of economic progress like goal 16, India is engaged in a process of transforming its population not just into internally governable data points, but into internationally visible metrics of development. Further, by using its citizens as data in order to make itself legible to the international governing community, India itself becomes the docile subject of international governance.

Because this framing moves the governable subject from the individual to the nation-state, I believe we can understand the nation itself as subject to something akin to biopolitical control, whereby Indian citizens are reduced to metrics that signal the health of the Indian-government-as-international-subject. Extending the metaphor, the Indian state then becomes a

cyborg body – comprised of individual Indians and held together through identity infrastructures
– made visible and governable by the international community.

References

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