



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on September 14, 2010

Biometric ID Scheme for 1.2 Billion Indians Meets Resistance

The controversial ID numbers will include biometric data, fingerprints, iris scans, personal information, a microchip for easy scanning, and more. The scheme is being led by a new government agency called the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI). It is expected to cost upwards of \$3 billion, but as with all government projects, will likely be far more expensive.

"The UID is soft infrastructure, much like mobile telephony, important to connect individuals to the broader economy," software magnate and UIDAI boss Nandan Nilekani told the *Inter Press Service* news agency, claiming the poor would benefit most from the new identification system.



And indeed, one of the selling points for the new scheme is the notion that it will become easier to receive government handouts. "This will mean maids and laborers ... a hundred or two hundred million people — will be able to access welfare benefits for the first time without any questioning who they are," Nilekani, one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people, told the U.K. [Guardian](#).

But of course, there is a flip side to that as well. Several ulterior motives have been raised in regard to the project. For one, UIDAI chairman Nilekani has also been working on creating personal "carbon" accounts for all Indians. And as the [Washington Post](#) reported recently, the regime is also hoping the system will get more people paying income taxes. "National security," of course, is another admitted purpose of the scheme.

Nilekani, however, defends the developing system. "The UID number, with its 'anytime, anywhere' biometric authentication, addresses the problem of trust," he claimed.

But not everybody agrees, and a broad coalition is putting up a fight under the banner of the Campaign For No-UID. Among the groups joining forces against the ID plan are, as reported by [Inter Press Service](#), the Alternative Law Forum, Citizen Action Forum, People's Union for Civil Liberties, Indian Social Action Forum, and the Centre for Internet and Society.

The anti-ID coalition actually held a conference in New Delhi late last month. And the criticism came from all angles. Among the various arguments against the new system — it will be a treasure trove for identity thieves, massively expensive, and filled with glitches.

Another problem highlighted by critics is the fact that the system will be used for caste (a rigid class system that still exists in India) profiling, since the government decided to include caste as a category. And of course, accusations of "Big Brother" tracking and the creation of a "surveillance society" are running rampant. Some [analysts](#) are even speculating that the system could eventually be used for payments, possibly even to phase out cash transactions.



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"There's already no accountability in regard to violations of human and civil rights," Indian human-rights attorney Nandita Haskar told the [Guardian](#). "In this atmosphere what are the oversight mechanisms for this kind of surveillance?"

Another lawyer working to stop the ID regime is Usha Ramanathan. "We do not want an intrusive, surveillance state in India," he told the [Washington Post](#). "Information about people will be shared with intelligence agencies, banks and companies, and we will have no idea how our information is interpreted and used."

Even the press has called the system Orwellian. "It is surely the biggest Big Brother project yet conceived," wrote Rhys Blakely for [the Times](#), a British newspaper. "If the cards were piled on top of each other they would be 150 times as high as Mount Everest — 1,200 kilometres." The Indian *Financial Chronicle* wrote about the scheme under the headline '[Nilekani's faceless Indian gets prisoner number.](#)'

While registering for a biometric ID is still technically "voluntary," the UIDAI is already working with state authorities, banks, telecom firms, driver's license officials, insurance companies, and even health-care providers to ensure that all Indians must carry their IDs. There will be no way to avoid the system, and critics have pointed out that even domestic travel will become impossible without the ID in the near future.

Even officials with UIDAI admit that it will essentially be required. "The UID number may not be mandatory by law, but in the other sense it will be as in the US where people cannot move a step without the social security number where also it is not mandatory," BB Nanawati, deputy director-general of the UIDAI, told the [Financial Chronicle](#). "It will become necessary rather than mandatory."

And it isn't just humans who will get a "Unique Identification Number" (UID). "Since UID will potentially be used as a primary identifier in several transactions in the financial, health, food distribution, job creation schemes and transactions, it is important to assign an entity ID to the service delivery organization," said an unnamed UIDAI official quoted by the [Business Standard](#). "We plan to give every registrar an entity ID," the official added.

Americans may consider the ID scheme preposterous, but a push to create a similar system in the U.S. has been gaining steam recently. As reported by *The New American* this April in an article entitled '[Obama & Co. Want National Biometric ID,](#)' a "bipartisan" group of legislators is working with the administration to implement such an unconstitutional identification regime. Around the world, numerous other countries either already have or are working on similar schemes.

India, widely referred to as the world's "largest democracy" with its 1.2 billion inhabitants, should reject this draconian identification system. The potential for abuse is enormous, while the benefits — if there are any — are negligible at best. But Americans, too, must remain on guard. A coalition of government power mongers and businesses with a financial interest in these sorts of schemes is building strength and gaining momentum around the world. And so, people must resist.



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