

# Rhetoric and ground reality

Exposing the fallacies in claims made by Aadhaar's votaries

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If there's one book one ought to read to understand the various ills of the Aadhaar project – on its flawed digital architecture, its impingement of basic civil liberties, its deleterious impact on welfare programmes, its aid in creating the foundation for a surveillance state, and its utter undermining of democratic processes – it is this.

*Dissent on Aadhaar*, edited by Reetika Khera, comprises a set of 15 essays, which are both carefully put together and unabashedly principled. There are no token chapters seeking to balance views. For, as Khera, an associate professor in economics and public systems at IIM, Ahmedabad, puts it, the book's contributors comprise a 'community of dissenters'. These include journalists, such as Anumeha Yadav, whose reporting on Aadhaar for the website, Scroll.in, was pioneering, economists such as Khera herself and Jean Dreze, engineers, policy experts, and lawyers, including Shyam



**No gain** The essays expose the pain the Aadhaar project has inflicted on the most vulnerable, including the elderly and widows. K. MURALI KUMAR

Divan, who led arguments for the petitioners in the Supreme Court, and Usha Ramanathan, who, perhaps before anyone else, saw the dangers inherent in the Aadhaar project.

## Plugging leaks

In many ways, this book is an exercise in myth-busting. Collectively, its essays expose the fallacies in the tall claims made by Aadhaar's votaries. The first chapter, authored by Khera, discredits what is arguably the most important of these claims:

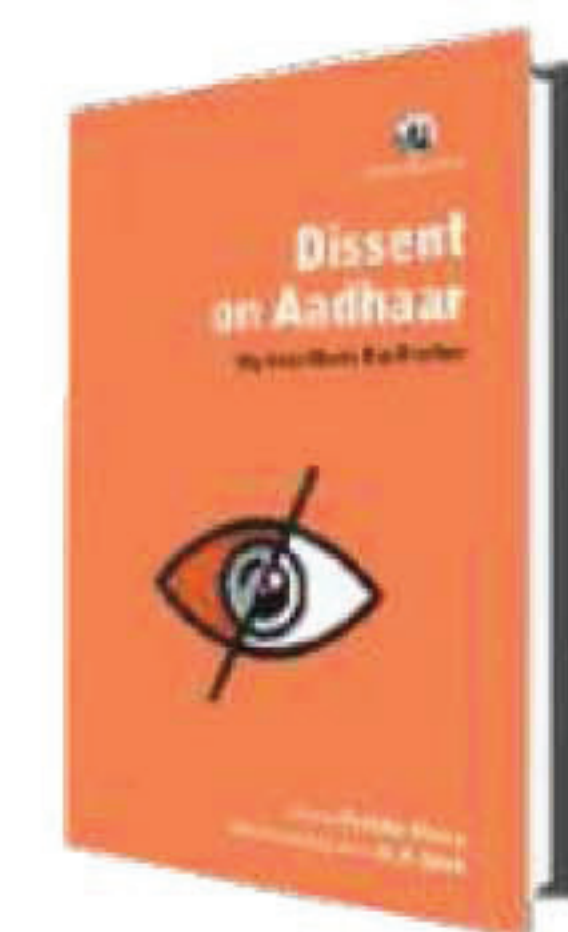
that Aadhaar is a revolutionary tool that will plug leakages in welfare programmes and reduce corruption in the PDS and in NREGA. As Khera shows us, not only does the available evidence fail to substantiate how gains have been made in welfare programmes but that quite to the contrary they only go to establish the considerable pain that the programme has inflicted, especially on the most vulnerable amongst us, such as the elderly and widows with young children.

Although the book was put

together before the Supreme Court gave its final, if reserved, imprimatur to the programme in September last year, some of the chapters have been updated to incorporate the judgment's effect. But notwithstanding this a reading of these essays also go to show how wrong the court's majority was and how much Justice D.Y. Chandrachud got right in his dissenting opinion. As the lawyer Gautam Bhatia writes in his chapter, the precursor to the Aadhaar judgment, in Puttaswamy, delivered in August 2017, in recognising the existence of a fundamental right to privacy established the basis for a fresh approach to adjudicating claims predicated on civil liberties.

## Weakening a guarantee

The judgment could have well proven transformative, but there was also every chance it could become a 'rhetorical lodestar'. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court's verdict on Aadhaar proved to validate the latter possibility, weakening, in the process, the Constitution's grandest guarantees.



**Dissent on Aadhaar: Big Data Meets Big Brother**  
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