The Irrational Opposition to Aadhar

What is the issue?

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- Opposition to Aadhar in India has a lot of similarities to the voices that opposed the SSN in the US back in the 1930s.
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- These arguments back then as it is now, lack logical prudence and clarity.
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What is the American Case?

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- The US enacted the landmark “Social Security Act” in 1935, giving birth to the Social Security Number (SSN), which was highly controversial then.
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- Many congressmen vociferously opposed the bill as they feared that people will be reduced to mere numbers and the integrity of institutions would be ruined.
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- But over the years Social Security and its counterpart, Medicare, have become the only safety nets for a majority of America’s elderly.
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- SSN has arguably been overused for purposes that it was not intended for, and there have also been many instances of leakage of information linked to it.
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- Nonetheless it continues to be the backbone of citizen interactions with the state as there is no better alternative.
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How does it compare with India’s Aadhar?

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- The arguments being made against Aadhar seem to be on the same lines on which SSN was opposed – the right of people to be left alone.
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- The fear-mongering has been about a possible totalitarian regime with a giant electronic mesh that would aid a complete surveillance state.
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- **Political -** The most important difference is that opposition to SSN was rooted in the opposition to Social Security programs by right-wing capitalists.
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- In stark contrast, the movement against Aadhaar is led by a small group of Left-leaning activists, who usually advocate more government in people’s lives.
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- Understandably, they do not sound credible when they invoke the bogey of Big Brother, who to most poor Indians is the benevolent state that brings succour.
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- While they have been the loudest voices against mismanagement of welfare schemes in the past, they now suggest that Aadhar won’t make things better.
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- **Biometrics -** Another crucial difference between the SSN and Aadhaar is that the latter employs biometrics, which unlike other data can’t be changed.
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- While this is indeed a privacy challenge, the Supreme Court justices observed recently, that there are already multiple more damaging databases.
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- Notably, social media giants, mobile operators, and even our own voter lists carry damaging personal information over which we have no control.
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- Besides, it is to be noted that none of the Aadhaar data breaches that have been reported thus far involves fingerprints or iris scans.
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- So, the argument that biometrics somehow make a more compelling case against Aadhaar simply does not hold water.
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- Contrarily, considering our large population and our history of systemic fraud in every past ID programme, it is indeed the biometrics that brings credibility.

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How does the future look?

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- Having realised the potential Aadhar, the present union government seems determined and more internally united in its push for the program.
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- UIDAI has also shown considerable seriousness to privacy protection by adding more layers of security such as the virtual Aadhar initiative.
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- It has also been an active part in crafting a national data protection law, all of which off-course wouldn’t suffice vociferous irrational opponents.
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- As the Supreme Court is hearing arguments from both sides currently, it is hoped that it would arrive at a prudent conclusion that balances all concerns.
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- Undoing Aadhar would be high retrograde and a blow to better administrative constructivism on a larger scale.
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Source: The Hindu

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