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Launched in 2009, Aadhaar – also known as the Unique Identification Scheme – is one India's latest large-scale poor-poor initiatives. With the goal of providing all of the country's residents with unique, biometric-based identification numbers, Aadhaar is a particularly ambitious project, which has been depicted by the Indian government as a transformative step that will enable the poor and marginalized to access public services and welfare entitlements. At the same time, Aadhaar has also attracted a fair amount of public critique, pivoting around what is seen as the scheme's potential for state monitoring and surveillance. This essay is an attempt to move beyond the normative polar opposition that composes the public debate on Aadhaar. Instead, it seeks to place this extensive government project within the framework of dreams about the state and its relations with citizens. Aadhaar, it is argued here, rests on an ideological formation that combines utopian, technological, and neoliberal notions about state and society. On a symbolic level, the scheme expresses a desire for responsive disintermediation in state-society relations, to be achieved specifically through a reformation of government ventures in the image of an entrepreneurial information technology start-up. This essay thus provides an analysis of Aadhaar as a state hi-tech fantasy, which can offer an insight into the (post-)neoliberal Indian state.

A historic step

In September 2010, Tembhli, a remote tribal hamlet in the Indian state of Maharashtra, earned “a special importance in the map of India,” it was declared by Sonia Gandhi, president of the ruling Congress Party (quoted in Byatnal 2010). Ten of Tembhli’s inhabitants became the first Indians to receive a Unique Identification (UID) number, as the government’s novel UID scheme was launched in the small village, marking – to quote Mrs. Gandhi again – “a historic step towards strengthening the people of our nation” (ibid.).

India's ambitious UID project began taking shape in 2009 with the establishment of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) (UIDAI 2010c), a governmental agency with the mandate to issue every Indian resident a 12-digit identification number that is linked to unique personal biometric markers such as fingerprints and iris scans (UIDAI 2010a). With nearly 630 million enrolled so far, every second Indian already has a UID number, and 1.2 million new numbers are being generated every day (Economic Times 2014).

While various versions of biometric identification systems and databases have already been introduced in different parts of the world (fingerprinted passports in several EU countries or the United States Visitor and

Immigrant Status Indicator Technology known as USVISIT, for instance), India’s UID scheme is the first ever to be taken on such a massive scale (UIDAI 2010a; Rai 2012). According to UIDAI officials, with its current coverage the scheme already surpasses any other biometric database in the world (Kurup 2012).

It is not only in scope, however, that the Indian venture is unique; perhaps more significantly, it is also distinct in its conceptualization. Whereas most governments have been formulating discussions about technologically advanced identification measures in terms of national security (Maringanti 2009), India's UID project is couched in purely developmentalist terms. The scheme is depicted by UIDAI and the Government of India as a means to realize “a larger vision of inclusion and development . . .” (UIDAI 2010c), resonating with the transnational language of inclusive growth and more specifically ICT4D (Information and Communication Technology for Development). Aadhaar’s main focus, we are told, is on the poor and marginalized (UIDAI 2010a), whose inability to provide proof of identity is a major barrier preventing them from accessing public facilities and services, participating in the modern economy, and receiving state welfare benefits (UIDAI 2010c).

With no birth certificate, passport, driving license, or proof of address, the argument goes,

most of the poor have no possibility of opening a bank account or availing of markets to sell their goods (Nilekani 2010b), and surely “no one would be so foolish as to lend them money” (*Economist* 2012). Moreover, while the Indian government operates large welfare schemes such as the Public Distribution System (PDS) and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), providing subsidized food grains and guaranteed wage employment to the poor respectively, indigents’ lack of an ‘official’ identity means that they “struggle to lay hands on what they have been promised” (ibid.). An estimated two-thirds of the food items delivered through the PDS are reportedly stolen or siphoned by middlemen (ibid.; McGivering 2011), and a large share of the funds provided through the NREGS are embezzled using fake job cards of ‘ghost workers’ or forged attendance sheets (Bhattacharya 2011; Drèze & Khera 2008).

It is this kind of problems, besetting India’s public welfare and social protection system, that the UID scheme is argued to address, and this by removing the ‘identity obstacle’: the UID number effectively gives its holder an “identity with respect to the state” (Nilekani 2010b). Such an identity will allow the poor, first of all, to access public services (banking is a commonly cited example); and second, to securely receive the social benefits they are entitled to. Moreover, the UID scheme

is claimed to enable national welfare programmes such as the PDS and NREGS – for whose delivery the new authentication system was envisioned to be utilized from the very start (UIDAI n.d.[a], n.d.[b]) – to include population segments hitherto cut off from them, become more transparent, and actually reach the right individuals (Nilekani 2010a, 2010b). (And so, while enrollment in the UID scheme is not compulsory, service and welfare delivery is likely to become increasingly dependent on it.¹)

A single and universal identification system, UIDAI says, will be “transformational in eliminating . . . duplicate identities” across welfare programmes, and in eradicating the prevalent fraud and pilferage of benefits that have become associated with them (Government of India 2011: 78; Nilekani 2010a). Just imagine: grain would be delivered “not to poor people in general but to named individuals who could confirm receipt by scanning their fingerprints,” and ghost workers would have to “undergo an iris scan before being paid” (*Economist* 2012). Giving the final seal to its inclusive, pro-poor vision, the UID scheme has since its inception been renamed

¹ For example, 50 districts nationwide have been selected for a pilot project in which the distribution of PDS grains is linked with the UID system: ration shops provide the food items to beneficiaries by taking their fingerprints and accessing their UID data (Sankar 2012). In the NREGS, although payment to workers should currently not depend on the possession of a UID card, it was reported that labourers without UID cards had been denied wages (Hindu 2014).

Aadhaar, which in Hindi means ‘support.’ Its launch in the bucolic village of Tembhli was also a statement of purpose about the people that Aadhaar “hopes to benefit the most” (UIDAI 2010b).

Yet it was not long before other voices began to surface, lambasting the new shiny government initiative – in a manner not unfamiliar from critiques hurled at other national biometric identity projects – as a project of state surveillance and monitoring. Aadhaar, according to its critics, emerged not from ideas about welfare and inclusion, but from security concerns and warnings about India’s inadequate surveilling capability (Ramakumar 2009, 2010). In this vein, the opposition argues, the digitized collection and convergence of vast amounts of personal and biometric data that Aadhaar facilitates will be an instrument for profiling, tracking and tailing of denizens by the state and its agents (Bidawi 2010; Gupta 2010; Ramanathan 2010a; Ramanathan 2010b; Sandilya *et al.* 2010). Aadhaar, in short, will serve as the basis for a new surveillance regime. As colourfully depicted by Jean Drèze, the eminent naturalized Indian economist, in an opinion piece published in the *Hindu*:

It is quite likely that a few weeks from now someone will be knocking at your doors and asking for your fingerprints. If you agree, your fingerprints will enter a national database, along with personal characteristics (age, sex, occupation, and so on) that have *already been collected*

from you [emphasis in original], unless you were missed in the ‘Census Household Listing’ earlier this year. The purpose of this exercise is to build the National Population Register (NPR). In due course, your UID (Unique Identity Number, or “Aadhaar”) will be added to it. This will make it possible to link the NPR with other Aadhaar-enabled databases, from tax returns to bank records and SIM (subscriber identity module) registers. This includes the Home Ministry’s National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID), smoothly linking 21 national databases. For the intelligence agencies, this will be a dream-come-true. Imagine, everyone’s fingerprints at the click of a mouse, that too with demographic information and all the rest. Should any suspicious person book a flight, or use a cybercafé, or any of the services that will soon require an Aadhaar number, she will be on their radar. If, say, Arundhati Roy makes another trip to Dantewada,² she will be picked up on arrival like a ripe plum. Fantastic! (Drèze 2010)

Aadhaar, then, certainly sparked a lively public debate, carried out with considerable animation over both the pages and e-pages of newspapers, journals and blogs³, and consisting of two main antithetical images. On one side, as promulgated by Aadhaar’s architects and supporters, we have the benevolent state, which initiates a gargantuan project first and foremost to facilitate social inclusion in access to public and welfare services, and rid the latter

² In 2010, the writer-activist travelled to the district to meet with and interview outlawed Maoist groups (Roy 2010).

³ The aforementioned *Hindu*, the influential *Economic and Political Weekly*, and the blog *Say No to Aadhaar* (saynotoaadhaar.blogspot.com) – to name just a few.

of the endemic corruption that has come to plague it. There is, as Ramanathan notes (2010b: 10), an unequivocal benignancy that is attributed to the scheme by its leaders. The official rhetoric of Aadhaar depicts an image of an Indian state that is caring and protective, one that veers toward restoring some of the notion of the developmental welfarism which was, as Corbridge and Harris (2000: 169) and others have shown, so critically eroded during the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s. Take, for example, the response of UIDAI's director general, R. S. Sharma, to an article in *Economic and Political Weekly* (Ramanathan 2010b) that critiqued Aadhaar's oppressive potential. That article's author "would do well to acknowledge," Mr. Sharma writes,

. . . that it is the government which spends on the delivery of social benefits such as food, health, education and work, and the government is consequently keen to ensure that these benefits actually reach the people they are intended for. This is the animating principle behind Aadhaar. Without building better and more secure social welfare nets, and ensuring access for the poor to education and health, our efforts against inequality and poverty will come to naught. Aadhaar is the foundation on which we can provide the services and resources individuals need to ensure their dignity, and their right to a better life. (Sharma 2010: 103)

In stark opposition, on the other side of the Aadhaar debate pendulum – the one put forward by the project's main detractors – a

very different picture is drawn. Here we have the sinister state, whose new flagship scheme is actually about creating an "infrastructure of authoritarianism" (Drèze 2010) and exerting "social and executive control of the people" (Ramanathan 2010b) through novel capacities to surveil, monitor, track and profile. Here, the state does not attentively work on behalf of the masses, but treats them as potential suspects that need to be trailed; its main concern is not with ensuring welfare, but with policing and controlling.

My aim in this essay is to move beyond the normative polar opposition that dominates the public debate on Aadhaar. Instead, my intention is to take the discussion on Aadhaar to another level of analysis, where the scheme can be read as an expression of certain underlying notions about the state and its interactions with citizens in post-liberalization India. I argue that on an ideological-symbolic level, Aadhaar – similarly to its spiritual father, the idea of e-governance – is a symptomatic manifestation of two interconnected desires. The first is for state-citizen relations that are transparent and immediate; the second is for the employment of the knowledge economy as a basis for these relations, whereby state ventures (such as Aadhaar) are envisaged in the form of a hi-tech start-up. I explore and explain these two desires, and their relation to Aadhaar, in the essay's following two sections. What I wish to do overall, then, is place Aadhaar

within the context of a dream about transparent visibility in state-society interactions, which is specifically enabled by bringing entrepreneurial, information technology and private sector notions into the domain of state and society. What I argue, in other words, is that Aadhaar is, in essence, a state hi-tech fantasy.

Disintermediation

“Anytime, anywhere, anyhow' authentication” (UIDAI n.d.[c]), Aadhaar's unofficial tagline reads, giving expression to what the scheme is most fundamentally trying to achieve: making citizens, through their personal Aadhaar numbers, ubiquitously recognizable to the state. By extension, this reciprocally applies to the state as well: what Aadhaar symbolically marks is not only the transparently viewable citizen for the state, but also an always-visible, transparent presence of the state for the citizen. What's more, this kind of presence also implies directness. Corbridge *et al.* describe how technology is envisioned as “one means for bringing the citizen and the state into a supposedly unmediated encounter that offers each party an undistorted sighting of the other” (2005: 44). Technology, in other words, is frequently thought of as an (anti-political) force that is able to penetrate the layers of mediation that come between the state and the citizen in their interactions – layers inhabited

by the various middlemen, intermediaries, brokers, fixers, and even politicians who, with their concealed motives and plays of power, encumber the relations between state and society, and blemish their representations of one another.⁴ Such a view of technology is above all apparent in the discourse of e-governance.

The attempt to bring technology into government operations is often traced back to the 1980s and then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, who gained the nickname “Computerji” thanks to his prominent habit of bringing his laptop and using it in meetings (Mazzarella 2006: 482; Nilekani 2009). Yet despite Mr. Gandhi's early (and rather isolated) attempts to ignite a very preliminary form of ‘g-governance,’ it was not until the new millennium that, following the flourishing Indian information technology industry, more and more calls arose for the employment of this kind of technology in government, and specifically in public service delivery. One of the most prominent voices was Nandan Nilekani, then a highly successful hi-tech entrepreneur who now happens to be the chairman of UIDAI. A considerable portion of Nilekani's 2009 book *Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation*, in which he lays out his visionary outlook for the country, is

⁴ In the literature, these people are often described as blurring the boundary between state and society (see for example Gupta 1998, 2005).

dedicated to what he sees as the transformative potential of incorporating information technology in Indian governance. For Nilekani, it is there that technology can most usefully be leveraged, and help to determine the “kind of society” India will be (Nilekani 2008: 349, 2009). I come back to the figure of Nilekani below.

Since the early 2000s, projects of e-governance – broadly defined as the use of information technology “in the public sector to improve its operations and delivery of services” (Kumar and Best 2006: 1) – have been gaining significant momentum. One of the first, a project called Sustainable Access in Rural India (SARI) that started in 2000, involved setting up electronic portals in villages for the online provision of a variety of government services such as issuing caste certificates and lodging grievances (ibid.: 2-3). Such computerization of people's interactions with government, it was believed, “will in the long run cut red tape, make the government-citizen relationship more friendly, and ultimately reduce the corruption that has eaten into the vitals of the country” (Akhileshwari quoted in Mazzarella 2006: 481).

Under India's National e-Governance Plan, launched in 2006, more than 130,000 similar rural terminals have so far been installed. These information technology-enabled “front end service delivery points”, known as Common Service Centres, are part of the aim

“to introduce e-governance on a massive scale” and make the delivery of government services “accessible to the common man in his locality” (Government of India n.d.[a], n.d.[b]).

Covering over 600,000 villages, the network of Common Service Centres is according to the Indian government the world's largest state-initiated, web-based public service system (Government of India n.d.[c]).

Indeed, enthusiasm about e-governance (and more broadly ICT4D) has been on the rise, not only in India. Considerable funding has been injected into ICT4D programmes around the world, and far-reaching projects are in development⁵. The World Bank, for instance, in 2010 launched its e-Transform Initiative, which supports developing countries in applying information technology to “transform public service delivery” (World Bank 2010). Aadhaar, for its part, is a central component of India's National e-Governance Plan, and indubitably its largest and most ambitious project. As such, it has been heralded, in the words of Sonia Ghandi, to finally bring into realization “Rajiv Gandhi’s faith that information and technology could be used to make lives better” (quoted in Byatnal 2010).

But the appeal of e-governance, I argue following William Mazzarella (2006), goes

⁵ In construction, for example, is a fully electronically governed city, where all administrative transactions with residents are to be conducted via electronic devices installed in apartments (Saini 2011).

deeper than buoyant promises to ameliorate lives and reengineer development endeavours. As an ideological formation, Mazzarella suggests, the idea of e-governance is on a fundamental level animated by a “frictionless ideal of disintermediation” (Mazzarella 2006: 496). Extending from this ideal is a utopian dream – of which I take Aadhaar to be one chief manifestation – in which the relationship between state and society is transparent, immediate and unmediated, whereby government and citizen communicate, interact and respond to each other directly, freed of the mediating entities that so often hurdle their communication. Not less importantly, the idea of disintermediation also carries with it a sense of an understanding intimacy. The central appeal of e-governance, argues Mazzarella, lies in its promise to coalesce rational technological effectiveness with an “affectively charged ideal of communicative immediacy” (ibid.: 481). In the e-polity, he notes, government and citizen would respond to each other not only with “minimal mediation,” but also “exquisite sensitivity,” conveyed through e-governance’s “claim to represent a more caring and more locally embedded principle of social inclusion” (ibid.: 485).

Aadhaar, then, seems to me to be placed at the centre of a dream of technocratic optimization of governance that is nonetheless not rendered coldly affectless by its level-headed rationality, but is rather the foundation

for a relationship between the state and its citizens that is not only transparent and immediate, but also empathisingly responsive and attending. The personal Aadhaar number is here a symbolic token of participation in this relationship. Already with e-governance, the “provision of a channel of expression, irrespective of actual government response or action, was in itself a therapeutic gesture” (ibid.: 486). Aadhaar now takes this one step further, and with much greater figurative force: the unique numerical identity it provides to every citizen serves as their universally valid access ticket to the state; a personal, biometrically custom-made gift from the state to its denizens, reaffirming its approachability.

Interestingly, however, while the dream behind Aadhaar speaks the language of affective politics and invokes (like e-governance) an appeal to direct democracy, it at the same time relies on an appeal to economic market principles. In what follows, I try to show how in the fantasy underlying Aadhaar, the transformation in the relationship between government and citizens is enabled specifically through an importation of the neoliberal notion of a knowledge economy into the sphere of state-society relations.

Governtrepreneur

Transparency, that utopian figure that is with Aadhaar applied to state-society relations, is

also a quality that is often brought up in relation to markets in neoclassical economic thought: the idea that in the ideal market sphere, 'much is known by many', that information (financial or trade) is readily available, that capital is visible. In the literature on the instruments of contemporary capitalism, however, scholars such as LiPuma & Lee (2004) and Mitchell (2007) have allowed us to see how 'transparency' is in fact part of a market myth, a (mis)representation that produces an illusion of regularity, rationality, efficiency, and prosperity. LiPuma & Lee, in their analysis of financial derivatives, debunk the economistic assumption that the market can accurately quantify and 'price' risk, which rests *inter alia* on a notion of a transparent marketplace, in which financial risk can be objectively predicted, measured, and acted upon (2004). Mitchell, in his discussion of formal and informal economic arrangements, challenges the persistent distinction between an 'inside' and 'outside' of the capitalist market, which relies on the idea that within the boundaries of the market – unlike in informal, nonmarket arrangements – wealth and assets are visible, and therefore formal, 'live' (in Hernando de Soto's term), and productive (2007).

My point here is that it would seem that the same fantasy of transparent visibility that is assigned with Aadhaar to state-society relations is also part of the aura of the entity that is the

market. And indeed, as this ideological link may imply, Aadhaar is certainly also rooted in an essentially economic market logic. This becomes evident from the scheme's consumer-oriented discourse of *choice* – a catchword fundamental to current consumerism (Miller 1994).

Just like in the marketplace, chairman of UIDAI Nandan Nilekani tells us, Aadhaar will finally enable people to choose when it comes public service providers (Nilekani 2010b). Through offering a "mobile identity, with mobile rights and entitlements" (Nilekani 2010a.), Aadhaar means that one will no longer be confined to the local provider of services – no more obtaining food grains only from the single, corrupt PDS ration shop in the village, or sending your child to the only nearby, underperforming public school. Instead, people will be given the appealingly potent possibility of choice – "a choice that essentially transfers the negotiating power from the supplier to the customer" (Nilekani 2010b).

In fact, the Indian discourse of e-governance is in large part about the "consumerist-populist notion of empowerment" (Mazzarella 1996: 481), and a statement such as Nilekani's has to be read in the context of a broader process of reconstruction of state-society encounters, in which, in private sector semantics, citizens come to be regarded as clients of the state (Corbridge *et al.* 2005). And

if citizens are clients, then the state – as is already suggested from the neoliberal concept of 'governance' and its focus on the administrative and managerial – should, simply put, function like a company. Indeed, that government should be run like a business has become an increasingly used trope, recently argued for by Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, former eBay CEO Meg Whitman in her run for governor in California, former CEO-turned-governor Rick Scott, and presidential candidate Mitt Romney in his 2012 campaign (Bloomfield 2013). And while such a notion in itself may by now not sound unfamiliar, what Aadhaar does add to the story is that it gives this 'company' a distinct form: the entrepreneurial hi-tech start-up.

As part of "a wave of good governance reforms in developing countries", public-private partnerships have been increasingly used for the delivery of hitherto government-provided services (Kuriyan and Ray 2009). This is especially the case with the implementation of ICT4D projects, where computer kiosks or telecentres providing government services in rural regions are progressively privately-run. Such telecentres, Kuriyan and Ray (2009) suggest, delivering public services but managed by micro-entrepreneurs, are associated with the private sector and therefore with efficiency and responsiveness, contrary to government

services' reputation of lethargic sluggishness and poor quality.

Indeed, the arguments for delivering ICT4D services through public-private partnerships go back to the idea of the citizen-customer. With their emphasis on customer satisfaction, it has been argued, the private sector has in effect established a yardstick for government services and their evaluation by citizens (Mazzarella 2006: 484). The proponents of public-private partnerships stress the importance of treating the citizen as a customer, as opposed to a recipient of handouts from government representatives inattentive to citizens' needs (Corbridge *et al.*; Kuriyan and Ray 2009). The Indian government, too, has adopted entrepreneur-owned telecentres as a key element in its e-governance reform (Kuriyan and Ray 2009). The Common Service Centres programme under India's National e-Governance Plan is being implemented through a public-private partnership, whereby these information technology-enabled kiosks are being "operated and managed by Village Level Entrepreneurs" (Government of India n.d.[b]). Ultimately, Kuriyan and Ray (2009) argue, the partnering with and outsourcing of this form of service delivery to private entities provide the state with a way to upgrade its image before its citizens – and more broadly to renegotiate its relations with them.

Aadhaar, I would suggest, takes this agenda one step further: here, the refashioning

of state image and relations with society is taking place not through the outsourcing of the state to micro entrepreneurs, but through *in*-sourcing large-scale information technology entrepreneurship into the state itself. This shift is neatly emblemized in the figure that was chosen by the Indian government to lead Aadhaar,⁶ already briefly introduced earlier. “The Bill Gates of Bangalore”, as he was described in the *Guardian* (Roberts 2009), and former *Forbes*’ Business Man of the Year, Nandan Nilekani is one India’s biggest software entrepreneurial moguls. As the founder of Infosys Limited, a provider of information technology-enabled solutions and one of India’s largest multinational companies, Nilekani has been a foremost icon of the Indian information technology boom.

Superlatively combining a zest for technology with a spirit of entrepreneurship, Nilekani is also a man with sturdy opinions about the benefits of information technology in government, as well as about the advantages of the private sector over the public one in terms of “efficiency, accountability and initiative” (Nilekani 2008: 36). Nilekani’s ideas on these issues make up a large portion of his abovementioned book, in which lays out his information technology-oriented vision for a

future India. Like other Indian political pinups of the recent period, Nilekani positively encourages his identification “not with the political, historical, or mythological heroes of the national imaginary but, rather, with contemporary corporate colossi” (Mazzarella 2006: 483) – and yet more specifically with the hi-tech industry. With Nilekani in charge, then, Aadhaar doesn’t simply denote the return of the technocrat, or even the further rise of the “laptop politician” (ibid.: 495). Rather, what Aadhaar seems to indicate is the emergence of a novel figure in this chain, namely – to borrow the title of a *Forbes* article on Nilekani (Jayashankar 2010) – the hi-tech *governpreneur*. And so, in the dream of affectionate transparency that is driving Aadhaar, the responsiveness of the state is marked by not only state-citizen disintermediation, but also by the inventive efficacy and customer courtesy linked with the private, entrepreneurial, information technology sector – in other words, by an idealized representation of a major state venture as an innovative, efficient, and service-oriented hi-tech start-up.

What such an idea of the state implies is the final entering of the knowledge economy – the development and application of knowledge-intensive technologies in the market economy (see for example Castells and Hall 2000) – into the distinct domain of government and state-society relations. In the social sciences, the

⁶ Since being appointed chairman of UIDAI, Nilekani has also been selected to head the Indian government’s Technology Advisory Group for Unique Projects (TAGUP), advising the regime on ICT initiatives in areas such as treasury management, tax, and pension (Hindu 2010).

concept of the knowledge economy has been used mostly to study current forms of capitalism and new economic phenomena in the private sector, for example the software outsourcing industry (Upadhyaya 2009) or science parks (Massey *et al.* 1992). And so, while the state has not been entirely absent from the discussion, the analysis of the knowledge economy has largely not taken place with regard to the concept of the state itself, as would seem to follow from a government initiative like Aadhaar. In their critical study of hi-tech parks, which became established in increasing numbers in the United Kingdom (and elsewhere) during the 1980s, Massey *et al.* (1992) do move in the direction of such a theorization when placing the knowledge economy within the Thatcherite (say neoliberal) project and its vision of the future of production and work.

Such an observation is certainly valuable in prompting us to see how Aadhaar, while ostensibly representing an immense 'social' investment from the side of the state, is also in fact very much embedded within neoliberal ideas of market-driven strategies and private sector-oriented models as the basis for effective development. But even Massey *et al.*, like others who have written about the knowledge economy, could not have predicted that the state itself would come to envisage government ventures as knowledge economy start-ups, and its relation with citizens as based

on such an economy. It is here that Aadhaar allows linking the discussion on the knowledge economy – hitherto largely limited to the context of the market and the workplace – to that on the workings and (self-)image of the neoliberal state. The idea of a flagship government scheme as an entrepreneurial hi-tech entity, providing better and more attentive services to its citizens-customers, is central to the symbolic concept of the state that is projected through Aadhaar, and to the dream of reconstituted state-society relations that underlies it.

An emerging state

Since liberalization, write Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan, “. . . more has been written about the decline of the [Indian] developmental state than about the state that is emerging in its place” (Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan 2010: 3). In a sense, the kind of analysis of Aadhaar that I have pursued here could contribute to shedding some light on precisely this emerging state. My intention in this essay has been to push the discussion on Aadhaar beyond both the inclusive pro-poor and panoptic Big Brother discourses that have comprised the public debate on Aadhaar, and show that on an ideological level, this flagship national project may be illustrative of something quite different than a turn toward either reinvigorated welfarism or authoritarianism. Instead, I have

argued that Aadhaar has to be seen within the framework of dreams about state and society. While epitomizing and pushing forward both the ideal of disintermediation and the “market-molded managerial ethos” that are captured in the idea of e-governance (Mazzarella 2006: 499), Aadhaar is animated by a fantasy of ubiquitous visibility of state and citizen in relation to each other, which in turn rests on an (essentially neoliberal) envisagement of the relationship between them as part of hi-tech-oriented knowledge economy. On this level of

analysis, then, Aadhaar is part of a fantasy about a reconfiguration of state-society relations, through a reshaping of the conceptual form and practice of the state. Approached this way, I believe Aadhaar can provide us with an insight into the ideological design of the contemporary Indian state – and more broadly contribute to our understanding of the post-neoliberal state – by pointing to some of the dreams that underscore it, and which translate into novel and distinctive forms of government development projects. 🤖

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