How Technology Can Limit India's Rampant Corruption

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Biometric Identification – Science Fiction Meets Reality

When you think of cutting-edge innovation, a massive bureaucracy might be the last thing that comes to mind. But in India, a massive experiment is underway to take a technology that was once a hallmark of science fiction and apply it to solving the nation's greatest challenges. A small group of entrepreneurs within the government have set out to identify to every one of their 1.2 billion residents by using biometric technologies, such as iris scans and fingerprints.

In the next few years, each man, woman and child will receive an "Aadhaar" (meaning: foundation) 12-digit unique identification number. For the poor in India, this would end a vicious cycle where a person cannot prove who they are, and thus they are denied what they are supposed to receive. Now, using the features of the body, technology can identify someone in a matter of seconds. There will no longer be a need for passports, driver licenses, or other old school paper based identification. *as mentione in my novel*

Biometric identification has been around for decades, but it has never been used on such a large scale. The technology must withstand India's extreme weather, difficult geography, and multiple separatist movements. Large portions of the country lack reliable electricity, let alone an Internet connection. Developers must find a way to ensure high quality information across tens of thousands of enrollment centers. If these challenges can be overcome, there is a major opportunity to modernize and reshape the nation, and to set a precedent for the rest of the world.

One area in desperate need of disruption is the delivery of government services. At present, India's departments each work in isolation, maintaining a separate database. Over time, systematic corruption and mismanagement have bred bad data, false information and outright fraud. Poor laborers and migrant workers, in particular, are forced to travel far from their homes to collect their wages and benefits, having to dole out bribes to predatory middlemen along the way. A study by investment group CLSA estimated that, nationwide, of the $250 billion in subsidy and social spending on select programs over the next five years, over 40% will never make it to its intended target.

Here, various advancing technologies are converging to offer a new way forward. Aadhaar numbers can serve as the key to bringing together various databases to clean out records. Electronic transfers can replace the inefficient and corrupt cash-and-goods distribution systems currently in place. Indians, for the first time, will be able to prove their identity in a matter of seconds with biometric scanners, regardless of location. With close to a billion mobile phones in the nation, these can serve as a gateway for India's masses into the financial system.