Two-Day Workshop on Digitization of Identity and its Impact on the Migrant Masses
(CSCS-CRG initiative, Kolkata 29-30 June 2012)

1. In an official site dedicated exclusively to the subject, the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) defines the contours of the Unique Identification (UID) project or 'Aadhaar', to use the official brand name: "The UIDAI's mandate is to issue every resident a unique identification number linked to the resident's demographic and biometric information, which they can use to identify themselves anywhere in India, and to access a host of benefits and services."[1] The tone of the governmental expatiation on the subject is in the language of welfare. It speaks in terms of the benefits and advantages that would accrue to the people once they enrol themselves.

2. This description stokes three broad causes of anxiety. First, the citizen or 'resident', to use the official site's stated category, may fear an erosion of the right to privacy, and resist what he or she may believe to be intrusive surveillance. This aspect has been detailed by perceptive observers.[2] Second, people may find the Aadhaar project disabling, in that it tries to reduce plural identities to a statist mono-dimensionality. Third, the tax-paying *homo oeconomicus* may find the cost such a project would necessarily entail forbidding. Besides these three misgivings, there is also the anxiety, namely, that in order for the project to expeditiously draw the entire nation into its net it would require tremendous governmental will and bureaucratic alacrity, which, even the most conformist member of the citizenry would concede, is a dubious proposition, given India's underwhelming track record, and hence the project may become in future one more in the long line of India's half or poorly finished, or bungled and aborted, projects.

3. But, this is only one half of the problem that the UID project engenders; for beyond the ambit of citizenship, lurks the figure of the non-citizen, who is often the alien or the migrant, or the victim condemned for AIDS (similar to the leper in the past ages), or the person once suspected of terrorism and thus condemned forever. The UID debate therefore needs to consider the possible impact it would have on non-citizen residents. They make up, though a minority in terms of numbers, a significant cross-section of the resident population in India and find themselves in a society and polity that displays unique features in terms of how it regulates the presence and exit of foreigners in its territory, which is often configured and visualized in terms of circles. Thus one may be a migrant in one part of the territory, in another part not. One may be allowed to visit or settle in one area, in another not. Further, the incoherence of the legal and administrative mechanism regulating asylum seekers, refugees, and stateless persons in India has the potential to translate the lack of, or precarious, legal identities in social life of these individuals in ways that may negatively impact them.

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[1] UIDAI, Planning Commission, Government of India http://uidai.gov.in/index.php/aadhaar.html [Accessed on April 09, 2012]

[2] See for instance Usha Ramanathan, "A Unique Identity Bill", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. XLV, no. 30, July 24, 2010, pp. 10-14, Taha Mehmood, "The Fuzzy Logic of National Frontiers or a Frontier Nation: Reflections on the Multi-Purpose National Identity Card Scheme in India" in *Sarai Reader07 Frontiers*, New Delhi: Impress, 2007, pp. 144-158.

4. At the same time, it would be worth thinking aloud whether, on the contrary, the UID project would benefit migrants — labouring and non-labouring — in the Indian context given that their limited rights are not translated in reality into the existing social, economic, and political institutional set up. Questions of identity, surveillance, protection rights, and humanitarian considerations with regard to refugees/ stateless /asylum seekers are all the more relevant given the anxieties displayed by the Indian state in relation to them. It is in this specific context of resident non-citizens that this proposal for a workshop intends to comprehend the complexities of this project. The proposal also has in mind the fact that internal migrants may also suffer from some of the disabilities from which the immigrant or the resident non-citizen may suffer.

5. The UID of course claims that welfare considerations are uppermost in the government's mind in this project, as it says, "A crucial factor that determines an individual's well-being in a country is whether their identity is recognized in the eyes of the government. Weak identity limits the power of the country's residents when it comes to claiming basic political and economic rights. The lack of identity is especially detrimental for the poor and the underprivileged, the people who live in India's 'social, political and economic periphery'. Agencies in both the public and private sector in India usually require a clear proof of identity to provide services. Since the poor often lack such documentation, they face enormous barriers in accessing benefits and subsidies".[3] Yet, it has been argued that even though the measure is silent and denies either profiling or centralizing information, "convergence is a predictable and inevitable consequence of the UID project".[4] The convergence of UID with other initiatives such as the National Intelligence Grid (Natgrid) makes it clear beyond doubt that surveillance is one of the key objectives of the project.[5]

6. As we have already noted, refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other immigrants form a broad category of residents with fluid identity in India. A large majority of them share some form of ties with India – historical, religious, ethnic, linguistic. The legal basis for their stay is varied. For instance, Nepali nationals are allowed to live, own property and carry out economic activities under the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, 1950.[6] Refugees and asylum seekers usually have some form of identification[7] and are considered to live legally in India. This category includes nationals from the African continent (Somalis, Sudanese, Congolese, Ethiopians), those from within the South Asian region, including the Burmese, Sri Lankan Tamils

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[3] Ibid. p.10.

[4] Usha Ramanathan, A Unique Identity Bill, 24 July 2010, Vol XLV, No. 30, Economic and Political Weekly, pp. 10-14, at p.11.

[5] ibid.

[6] Article 6 and 7 of the India Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, 1950 are relevant.
Article 6 states, "Each government undertakes, in token of the neighbourly friendship between India and Nepal, to give to the nationals of the other, in its territory, national treatment with regard to participation in industrial and economic development of such territory and to the grant of concessions and contracts relating to such development".
Article 7 states, "The Governments of India and Nepal agree to grant, on a reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature."
http://untreaty.un.org/unts/1_60000/3/9/00004432.pdf (accessed 23 August 2010)

[7] They are required to register with UNHCR in Delhi and hold at least an Under Consideration Certificate, which is made infructuous until the decision on their refugee claim is made final.

and Sinhalese, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Afghans, and Tibetans and lastly others from outside of South Asia including the Palestinians, Iranians, and Iraqis. It is impossible to say with accuracy, at least in case of those who share common ties with those of the North East India for instance, whether they are foreigners or part of Assam, Manipur, Mizoram or Arunachal. Some others such as the stateless (for instance the Nepalis of Bhutanese origin who are unable to go back to Bhutan and are not recognized in India) and the refugees who do not submit a claim for protection to UNHCR in New Delhi are "illegal foreigners" and if detected, are subject to deportation. Most, if not all, immigrants falling within this category share some similarities with the local host population, as in case of Bangladeshis, the Burmese, Nepalis, Sri Lankan Tamils and Pakistanis. Immigration and immigration management is complex because under the broad framework of the Constitution and the laws applying to foreigners and citizens is a combination of mostly ad-hoc administrative policies, agreements and practices that reflect the nature of migration, the nationality of immigrants, India's foreign policy and the political relations between the two countries. While immigration control policy in such background has already assumed gigantic proportions, the issue is: What bearing will this project of UID have on the practices of care given that even factors such as geographic location or national identity of refugees/ asylum seekers/ stateless persons also assumes an important role and determines the response of various administrative bodies (for instance, recognized Somali refugees living in Delhi and those living in Hyderabad get treated differently, or Tibetans and the Chins are differently treated)? Even the supervisory and monitoring agencies are varied.

7. To discuss the issue of identity and identification, we need of course a historical perspective. To be sure, technologies of surveillance are not novel to the modern state, in particular a neoliberal state. Methods of imposing state-sponsored identity on individuals by way of documentation, or even by the direct inscription of such identity on bodies, thereby making them legible to the statist optic, are legion. And this is not by any means new or futuristic, as the standard Hollywood sci-fi fare, dishing out techno-babble, uchronia and insertion of microchips into the brainstem, would have us believe. It could be the *chehra* and *dagh* system — keeping detailed description of each soldier and each horse — of Alauddin Khalji, which, once introduced, became the standard procedure of military administration for all the Sultans and the Mughals later[8]; it could also be the colonial methods of identifying, cataloguing and monitoring criminal tribes, sometimes through the use of the notorious penal tattoo or *godna*, also through the development and deployment of "scientific means for the detection of the habitual criminal, and specialized police departments for record and identification."[9] From the 1890s, such 'scientific means' included anthropometric record as well as fingerprint identification. Apart from these, for the people in general there were always the standard colonial tool of demographic surveillance (the census) and geographic definition (cartography).

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[8] Ghulam Sarwar Khan Niazi, *The Life and Works of Sultan Alauddin Khalji*, New Delhi: Mehra Offset Press, 1992, pp. 45-70; For the Mughal practice of *dagh-o-tashih* and *chehra navisi*, see Banarsi Prasad Saksena, *History of Shahjahan of Dihli*, New Delhi: Central Book Depot, 1958, p. 284.
[9] Radhika Singha, "Settle, Mobilize, Verify: Identification Practices in Colonial India", *Studies in History*, vol. 16, no. 2, August 2000, p. 14; for an exhaustive account, also see, Clare Anderson, *Legible Bodies: Race, Criminality, and Colonialism in South Asia*, Oxford: Berg, 2004, in *passim*.

8. To understand what is 'new' about the neoliberal political motivation driving the UID project, or to flag the difference between the pre/colonial and postcolonial regimes of supervisory documentation, one needs to look at the issue from two perspectives. First, viewed as a matter of extent and intensity, it has to be admitted that the earlier regimes came nowhere close to the present postcolonial state in terms of penetration and coverage insofar as surveying its population is concerned. The transition from the colonial to the postcolonial nation-state, in fact, witnessed a hardening of supervisory will and the decades thereafter have seen the snowballing of state-sponsored monitoring. This has been aided above all by digital technology — the preponderance of electronic identity markers, be it the passport, the Electoral Photo Identity Card (Epic), Permanent Account Number (PAN), or now, the incipient UID. Second, while emphasizing the comparatively limited character of the colonial state, one must not make the mistake of assuming that it was in any way weak; it could administer relatively arbitrarily because it did not have to seek legitimacy from the people it sought to govern. The modern nation-state, of course, is answerable to the electorate and to the somewhat fickle public opinion, which has become undeniably more aware and informed due to the explosive growth of the media, print and audiovisual. This is somewhat paradoxical, since the very technology which allows the neoliberal state more penetration and coverage also imposes a check on statist arbitrariness by keeping the 'public' at large posted. However, the point to make here is that, given the exposure and accountability, the nation-state cannot simply talk in terms of security and foist intrusive surveillance on the people. It has to window-dress its agenda of securitization with the rhetoric of welfare. Or, to put it somewhat differently, the state professed commitment to ensure provisions of security of life and welfare leads inexorably to the securitization of the state and the polity. In the case of UID, too, the central government has resorted to such combination of argument (or, rhetoric if you like) of welfare and hard security thinking. The state wants to give an impression that welfarist objectives animate the project; however given the scale, costs and what it seeks to achieve in reality, it would be naïve to assume that such a system would leave non-citizens and migrants untouched, especially in the context of the high degree of anxiety over issues of both internal and external national insecurity.

9. Such technologies of surveillance — and the regime of digitized identities produced through these technologies — will inevitably force doctrinaire simplification of groups and individuals, totally at a remove from the real-life palimpsest-like textures of group and individual identities. This is likely to be most acutely felt by marginal and migrant groups, owing to their already-endemic precariousness. This has historically not seemed to bother the powers that be, insofar as supervisory technologies successfully render more visible the population at large and enable its harnessing to the logic of accumulation — be it colonial capital or finance capital of various types.

10. But, this is merely what the state-capital-security complex (somewhat like what John Kenneth Galbraith termed as, "military-industrial complex") wills. While it is true that such a regime of digitized identities aims at mapping and monitoring individuals *totally*, it is also true that the grand plan of state-sponsored surveillance is often resisted on the ground by individual actors who resist the logic of docile production and work out innovative techniques of self-making and survival. The conflictive, yet the mutually constitutive relation between on one hand statist

technologies of control cum surveillance, and on the other hand the subjective techniques of self-making and survival, finds an experientially rich and politically-economically dynamic manifestation in the liminal figure of the migrant, always-already marginal yet at the core of the statist anxiety about the ungovernable 'foreigner'.

11. All these issues need to be debated with regard to the welfarist claims of not only the UID for migrant population groups within the country but also for many such identificatory initiatives taken and operationalized by the states over time. Instances of discrimination are galore: A Bihari worker is shot dead in Mumbai. A Tamil worker is harassed in Karnataka. A Muslim Bengalee worker in the diamond-polishing industry is hounded out of Mumbai. Or, a Bihari farm worker is killed in Jammu and Kashmir, or Punjab, or a brick kiln worker from Eastern Uttar Pradesh is shot dead in Manipur or Assam. In many places migrant workers are discriminated in regard to local rights or social security considerations. How will a unique number or other state-sponsored schemes help migrant labour groups, existing as they are in a state of nearly complete disenfranchisement?

12. In the light of the observations made above, the proposed two-day workshop will move along four distinct, but intertwined, trajectories:

- The workshop will look at the historical experiences of surveillance and how they have intensified over time. The role played by the introduction of digital technology in the late twentieth century will be traced.
- Narrowing the field of inquiry, the workshop will, at another level, look at the UID project and the governmental aims underlining it. How dependable is the welfarist tenor of the state? What are the security concerns that under gird such tenor? Is security the only real issue and welfare is but empty shibboleth? Or is it possible, after all and from the migrants' point of view, to secure some amount of social security (as distinct from welfarist hyperbole) for the migrant through digitization of his/her identity?
- At a third level, the link between the UID project, migrant groups and their experiences of the project will be established through ethnographic reports. The possible impact of the project on migrants — labouring and non-labouring — will be assessed, not only in terms of what the state extracts or inflicts upon them but also by way of understanding how these people negotiate with, strategize against, submit to, and overwhelm the UID design.
- Finally, and through all these, the workshop will try to understand what it means to delineate the identity of a migrant in the framework of a state that runs on fixed notions of population, territory, loyalty, citizenship, etc., while the migrant represents a situation of transit in the process of accumulation of capital.

13. As the mechanism and institutional structures to implement the UID Project have been put in place recently and only few reports evaluating the pilot projects are available[10], this workshop

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[10] Surojit Mahalanobis, "People count gaining smooth momentum", *Times of India*, July 23, 2004, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/788272.cms (accessed August 21, 2010); Dipak Mishra, "Bihar government refuses to implement ID-Card Plan", *Times of India*, February 13, 2003, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/37306745.cms (accessed August 21, 2010); Tusha Mittal, "Falling

would arguably run the risk of speculation vis-à-vis the impact it would have on "foreigners". This workshop will seek to address this lacuna by juxtaposing historical lessons, analysis of stated political and governance imperatives, and ethnographic reports. Also it will be crucial to take note of local reports on various kinds of responses relating to documenting the migrants under the UID scheme.

14. Under the rubric of the UID project, other state-sponsored identificatory measures and the assessment of their impact on migrants in India, this workshop will aim at identifying the process whereby the language of welfare is inserted by states in their securitization plans, how digitization and surveillance have intertwined to etch new lineaments of a penetrative supervisory regime, and how this intertwining affects, distorts and morphs the way marginal individuals — the migrants, in this case — view themselves and their location in the polity and, how these men and women, faced with the ever-renewing series of dispossession, work out their own strategies of survival.

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between the barcodes, *Tehelka*, vol.6, issue 33, August 22, 2009, http://www.tehelka.com/story_main42.asp?filename=Ne220809falling_between.asp (accessed August 23, 2010)