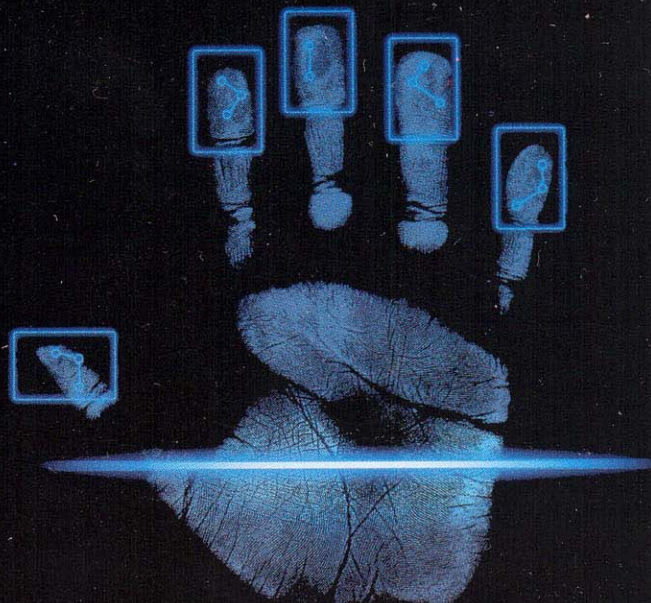


Biometrics is not sci-fi mythology

Not anymore. It will soon be an important, and integral, part of all reforms in governance



Vikas Singh

As India embarks on the census count along with the UID project, one of the largest citizen mapping and identification initiatives in the world, the issue of using the right blend of technologies will hold the key to its success. But beyond the way multiple technologies will seamlessly interact with databases, it's critical that for the end beneficiaries the technology translates into something which is user-friendly yet tamper-proof.

Application of biometric solutions makes immense sense in a country like India struggling with the problem of maintaining homeland security. For decades, many highly secure environments have used biometric technology for entry access at airports, borders etc. There have been various challenges in identity management like ID duplication. Such unproven identities are high in number, especially in case of the poor and they are ones that depend on government giveaways that depend on credible identity for effective delivery.

Inability to prove identity is one of the biggest barriers preventing the poor from accessing benefits and subsidies designed for them. These problems can be brought to an end using biometric solutions. Biometric techniques are gaining popularity in all financial institutions and fingerprinting technology is being used extensively by all the law enforcement organisations for criminal tracking and prosecution.

For eliminating the menace of identity theft, there should be layers of identification for determining the identity. This gives scope for technology like biometrics that has fast emerged as a promising tool for authentication and has already found place in various areas like security and identity management.

There are several examples which can be emulated in Indian environment like the UK biometric passport — a single chip inside the passport contains complete information about its holder. The chip containing the biometric and personal details has an antenna which can be read electronically. Using it, biometric checks can be used at border controls, especially at automated passport control gates.

Recently, the Gujarat government tied up with one of the largest OEMs

(Original Equipment Manufacturers) in India to introduce a biometric attendance system in government schools. This programme intends to monitor the attendance of girl children in schools and enable provisions to decrease the dropout rate. If successful in the pilot stage, the project plans to cover over 7,000 schools in the state with over 1,000 schools under the tribal department and over 6,000 schools under the education department.

More initiatives such as these will be taken to introduce biometrics in the field of education, healthcare and ancillary industries like insurance. A number of biometric specialist companies have started working with state governments to make healthcare insurance available to the rural population, while the usage of biometric component helps prevent unauthorised access at the point of authentication in the hospitals, it helps contain misuse of government machinery and funds.

The true value of biometric solutions can be realised only if put to use in simplifying the lives of common people. But this will require the cooperation of different organisations involved. For example, processing the workers' monthly wages into the respective bank

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accounts will require that the banking authorities work in tandem with the local government administration, with the biometrics serving as a base for authorising the transaction. Government schools today are beset with absenteeism and are at the juncture of a total revamp. Many teachers today have poor attendance records and some parents are misusing incentives offered for educating a girl child through various social schemes. Technology lies at the heart of the reform and it should drive change in the right direction.

It would be unwise to undermine the importance of biometric technology at any level. If utilised well, it can come handy in ensuring transparency and accountability in important sectors which further will benefit the underprivileged population. Ambiguous terms like financial inclusion will take concrete shape and will be instrumental in formation of an egalitarian society. This will not only curb malpractices but also add credibility and institutionalise the entire process of authentication and verification.

There is a popular tendency to regard biometric products as sci-fi mythology, but the reality is that biometrics is here to stay. It is quickly becoming recognised as the most accurate identification technology in the market, with credentials to back it up. The impact of biometrics in our lives is bound to be of significant importance. While today we see the implementation of the technology only

in pockets, at the rate at which its popularity is growing, it will govern our lives at every step. Biometrics is moving towards building a life cycle of identity. It is likely to create and store the individuality of 1.2 billion people.

Projects like these can determine the identity of an individual, authenticate a citizen on a standalone basis but can, possibly, throw up a history that tracks every progression of a person from education to marriage and reflects even the minutest details like those relating to a ration card or gas connection. In a way a single number will define a person's life and build a life cycle that authenticates him. Hence, it goes beyond just authentication and record maintenance; it is symbolic of every citizen's life history that sits on a single number residing on high-end biometric calculations.

Biometrics will soon play an important role in reforming identity life cycle and bringing about reforms at every level; from education, land records and hospitals to the social schemes rolled out by the government. ■

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**IT JUST
OCCURED TO US**

What was that wretched soul trying to do? Teach Sri Sri Ravishankar the Art Of Leaving?