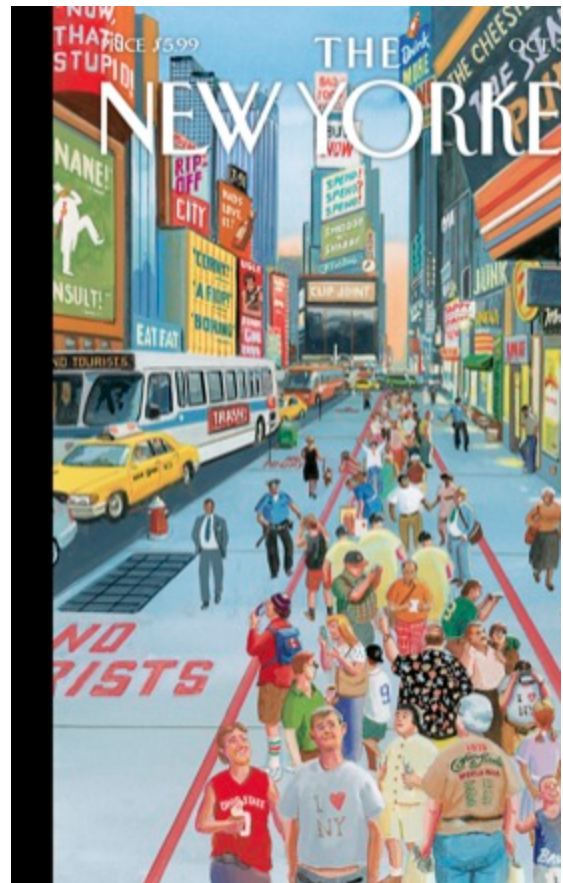# THE NEW YORKER

THE I.D. MAN

Can a software mogul's epic project help India's poor?

by Ian Parker

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ABSTRACT: PROFILE of Indian billionaire Nandan Nilekani. One afternoon last December, inside a tent pitched beside a busy road in New Delhi, a group of homeless workers were standing in line for I.D. numbers. They were being drafted into a public scheme known as Aadhaar, launched by Nandan Nilekani, a genial software billionaire, which intends to create a national biometric database ten times larger than the world's next-largest biometric database. The aim is to help reduce the extraordinary economic distances between those who have benefitted from India's boom of the past two decades and those who have not. The effort has been called "the biggest social project on the planet." Skeptics see a threat of state intrusions, or detect patriotic vanity. Mentions Farooq Ali. India has no equivalent of Social Security numbering, and just thirty-three million Indians, out of 1.2 billion, pay income tax, and only sixty million have passports. The official opacity of hundreds of millions of Indians hampers economic growth and emboldens corrupt bureaucrats. Mentions the headquarters where Nilekani works, the Unique Identity Authority of India (U.I.D.A.I.). If the project is successful, India would abruptly find itself at the forefront of citizen-identification technology, outperforming Social Security and other non-biometric systems. Nilekani co-founded Infosys, an outsourcing company, in 1981, when he was twenty-six. In 1993, he and his co-founders became rich when Infosys went public in Indian. In

1999, Infosys was the first Indian company to be listed on a North American exchange. Three years later, Nilekani became C.E.O., and the company's rate of growth accelerated, reaching fifty per cent in 2005. He published a best-selling book, "Imagining India," in 2008, and in it he made a case for unique I.D. numbers. The process of building a government department from scratch after he left Infosys, in July, 2009, was "a huge dislocation" from Nilekani's comfort zone. Within weeks, he and a small team of civil servants and tech experts had established much of the project's architecture. Aadhaar would subcontract enrollment, which would be voluntary, and available to all residents. And there would be no I.D. cards—just I.D. numbers. In September, 2010, Rajana Sonawane became the first holder of an Aadhaar number. Three months later, Aadhaar's intake had risen to forty thousand a day. Mentions Srikanth Nadhamuni. In India's N.G.O.s, think tanks, and universities, opposition to Aadhaar has been full-throated. Mentions Jean Drèze. Alongside arguments about social policy, there is also some Indian disquiet about Aadhaar's threat to privacy. Mentions Mohammad Intezar Khan.

Ian Parker, Profiles, "The I.D. Man," The New Yorker, October 3, 2011, p. 26

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