

Shakti to Masses

e-Shakti project is a unique UID project initiated in Bihar to complement the NREGA scheme; to remove cash transactions and with it instances of corruption

Patanjali Pahwa

Nandan Nilekani launched the Unique Identification project last year. The project has been under criticism from activists who have objected to the inherent anti-privacy ramifications that are, they argue, bound to emerge sooner rather than later. The UID idea is an offshoot of the e-Shakti project that was initialised in Bihar, by chief minister Nitish Kumar. The project was awarded to Mumbai-based Glodyne Technoserve Limited. e-Shakti has been used to complement the NREGA scheme in turn making it cashless and thus reducing instances of corruption. One of the key positive points about the e-Shakti project was to eliminate de-duplication. Though this is a problem often laughed at, B K Mishra, the project head, described one such situation. "There were women who came to the next village with their clothes changed and their faces veiled to register twice."

To eliminate such issues and to negate corruption it was required to go electronic; the biometric centred e-Shakti project was launched to provide for identification means for five million people in Bihar.

The project

e-Shakti, which is the original form of the UID project was launched in 2009, with a focus on registering

the working population of Bihar electronically, merging their personal identification, through biometric forms with a bank account and generate employment. The project was one of the most ambitious undertaken. Glodyne was the first company in India to take up such a project on this scale. In addition to employing 10,000 people, e-Shakti will successfully help out in the national census.

The project starts with, not a card, but registration of the individual with a bank—Citibank. Volunteers and employees approach each family individually and help them in filling out bank details. Next they are asked to come to a town hall or a local municipal body office at an allotted time with a foil of the bank form. The forms for bank details are the first step to registering the individual in the database. The individual then has his fingerprints mapped, and the account number associated with the fingerprint. Each station contains a barcode reader and a palm scanner that maps all eight fingers and two thumbs. This information is relayed to the central data storage device—usually a laptop. This laptop at the end of the day relays all information to the data center.

"Fingerprinting is not the only way of identification, if an individual has damaged his fingers and a print cannot be picked up we also have iris scan- ▶



Women in line for getting their identity registered



Biometric data collection at a booth

ners," Mishra said. The information is then collected and passed through a Smart Card Management system. The key management system is then activated, which generates a key and stores it in the application. The relevant data is collated and then sent to printers who can print the cards.

"Mr Nitish Kumar needed cards that wouldn't be easily damaged by rain, dust or heat. He wanted something that couldn't be broken just by bending it. Something that was stronger than a credit card and the embossing wouldn't fade in a few months," Mishra said. Glodyne employed Anil Printers in Nashik who printed the data on a polycarbonate material with laser embossing thus increasing the life span to 15 years.

The cards are then given to individuals through post and sometimes even through direct delivery. An individual can now go to his allotted work site. However, experts believe this is where corruption starts. At the work site, the worker is under billed, paid in cash and the entire process of swindling begins.

"When the worker comes to the site, he will need to flash his card and fingerprint his way into the site. He enters his work timings using the same system. This establishes the number of hours worked and accordingly the government's account is debited and his account credited," Mishra explained. This rules out all cash transactions. Each site will be provided with a handheld PDA-like device which will have the application loaded and shall be synced through GPRS to the bank. The worker can now go to his bank, follow the same procedure and get this daily wage. The system, Mishra claims, "is at par with the US benchmarks."

Challenges

"The physical, real-life challenges were bigger than the technical challenges," said Annand Sarnaik, chairman and managing director, Glodyne. Sarnaik



Attendance at worksite through biometric identification

described the process of getting into the remote locations of Bihar. "The purda system was difficult to get around," Sarnaik explained. The teams often had to cut across caste lines to obtain the relevant information.

"Technologically, we realised we couldn't rely on constant electrical supply in the villages, we had to bring our own power," Mishra said. The ever growing Maoist threat did not trouble them. "After we explained what we were doing, the Maoists helped us maintain order," Sarnaik said.

The Rs 284-crore project has begun to find its feet and is slated to cover the entire state of Bihar by 2013. Offshoots in Maharashtra and the UID project however, have only just started.

"The pilot run for UID was smooth, and the operation is on in full swing. We should finish on time," said Mishra as he signed off. □



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CMD,
Glodyne Technologies

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