Conclusion

An IT-enabled, accessible national ID system would be nothing less than revolutionary in how we distribute state benefits and welfare handouts; I believe it would transform our politics.... A national ID system would make these porous distribution mechanisms and our dependence on the moral scruples of our bureaucrats redundant.


The Unique Identification (UID) project, in many ways, dramatizes the history of identification and welfare in India. It links entitlement and identity to various technologies of the body on a scale that has never been attempted before. If these technologies themselves (fingerprinting, iris identification, photography) are not new, they were never used concertedly within the national framework of a single identification project in India. The Aadhar card represents a major spatial shift in projects of identification: if earlier, such initiatives were authored by state governments and their allied agencies, the UID marks a national investment in the question of identification.

It has been widely stated that Nandan Nilekani was formulating a vision in his primer, *Imagining India* – a vision of financial inclusion, departmental linkage, welfare reform and some would even say, citizenship. The book has, on the strength of this composite vision, been cited and animatedly debated by technocrats, journalists, scholars, activists and political figures. It even launched its author into a bureaucratic career at the highest echelons of government as the Chairman of an office, the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) that enjoys executive authority to issue

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1 Several states have in the past experimented with smart card and biometric technologies. Bihar government’s e-shakti experiment under Nitish Kumar to issue electronic job cards and muster rolls which incorporated iris and fingerprint identification is one example. “Backward Bihar goes for the smartest cards”, http://swaminomics.org/?p=1708. The Delhi government’s initiative called Mission Convergence which attempts to provide single window access in the form of a biometric card to various welfare schemes for the urban poor is another example. Here, the Delhi government relied on NGOs, District Resource Centers, Gender Resource Centers and Samajk Suvidha Kendras to carry out surveys and identify eligible persons from vulnerable groups like slum residents, homeless persons, residents of unauthorized slums and resettlement colonies, disabled persons, single woman-headed households, informal sector, etc. “Samajik Suvidha Sangam: A Mission Convergence Model for Empowering Poor”, publication details unknown. Document procured on request from the Food and Supplies Department, Delhi
unique numbers to every Indian resident. While everybody who has read it would probably be willing to acknowledge that it contains a vision, few would discern in *Imagining India* the kernel of a conceptual-historical narrative (of welfare distribution). Critical to many of the ideas and submissions Nilekani makes in this book are certain historical assumptions about the post-colonial welfare establishment in India. Subsequent to the creation of the UIDAI and the enumeration drives allied to the UID project, Nilekani and other spokesmen made several presentations, public speeches and wrote articles in journals, newspapers, aided projects in research institutions, addressed university audiences and spoke in various public forums. Through these various representations, this concluding chapter argues that the UID authorities have fashioned a conceptual narrative of welfare distribution in India.

By way of a conclusion, this chapter explores the postcolonial narrative implicit in the UID project which is organized around many prominent themes such as the idea of the vulnerable identification document, the superior norm of the ‘individual’ (in identification documents such as the ration card) and the concept of a stable residence. In attempting a deconstruction of this narrative, this chapter will try to gesture at potential sites of the political implicit in documentary practices of identification and elucidate, for the last time, this dissertation’s conceptual points of intervention.

**The intervening years: The vulnerability of the identification document**

The current debate on the UID partially turns on categories of the ration card that were fleshed out post-1990, namely APL, BPL and Antyodaya. They find mention in the 2001 PDS Control Order though they were invoked in a national sense in the year 1999 within the Targeted Public Distribution System. This dissertation does not spill into these intervening years (between the V.P.Singh initiative and the UID project) which herald a new epoch of liberalization, populism, welfare distribution and global change all of which impinged on the biographies of the ration card. This epoch

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2 The UIDAI was set up in the year 2009 as an office attached to the Planning Commission. It has not yet received statutory backing. Today, work is under way to collect demographic and biometric information under two separate projects, the National Population Register, under the Citizenship Act, 1955 and the UID project allied to the Department of Information Technology. One newspaper deemed the initiative headed by Nandan Nilekani, the Chairman of the UIDAI, to be “the world’s biggest, most advanced, biometric database of personal identities”. For more details about the setting up of this office, see the UID website, [http://uidai.gov.in/about-uidai.html](http://uidai.gov.in/about-uidai.html)
therefore warrants a dissertation or a research project all by itself. An academic tour of the various articles on the subject of Public Distribution System and housing in the *Economic and Political Weekly* yields the predominant themes of identification that provoked concern in these middle years between the V.P. Singh initiative and the UID project. These themes ranged from anxieties over malpractices like duplication, ghost cards, bogus cards and governance-related themes like misclassification of beneficiaries (inclusion errors, exclusion errors). Both the themes of malpractice and misclassification unleashed the specter of leakages in welfare distribution which has continued to hover persistently in narratives of the identification document. Increasingly, trust in technology (in the form of biometric and smart card features) in these middle years was invoked to re-order the social and economic field in which identification documents were used. An aversion to middle channels in welfare distribution informed the clamour in many circles for the transition from cash payments in person and food subsidies to bank accounts and cash transfers respectively. In most narratives of welfare practice, the middleman, whether he took the form of the Food Inspector inspecting homes, the clerk accepting forms in ration offices, the FPS dealer doling out food rations was the weak link that had to be severed. Intermediaries were everyday “collaborators” who benefited from the ‘vulnerability of the document’ and the culture of discretion that permeated the welfare establishment in postcolonial India. The Food Inspector represented petty power and everyday corruption as he collaborated with FPS dealers, slumlords and politicians to oversee copious leakages in wedding functions, ration shops and malpractices such as the siphoning of foodgrains from godowns to the black market. FPS dealers could not be held up to standards of probity as they were complicit in “the blurred nature of the boundaries between the state and the intermediate classes;

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3Benjamin N.Lawrence, Emily Lynn Osborn and Richard L.Roberts, Introduction to *Intermediaries, Interpreters and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa*, eds. Benjamin N.Lawrence, Emily Lynn Osborn and Richard L.Roberts, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 6. The authors deem African intermediaries to be “collaborators, for they aided and abetted the expansion of the colonial state”. This is a book that examines the role of intermediaries such as clerks, interpreters and translators in producing knowledge to run the vast empire of colonial Africa.

4 While the UID authorities do not use the phrase ‘vulnerability of the document’ anywhere, they imply that it is a liability hindering welfare delivery mechanisms in discussions of leakages, duplication and ghost beneficiaries. Interestingly, this phrase was actually deployed by colonial authorities in discussing ways to anticipate and counter impersonators and other petty criminals during the war. See Chapter 2 for more details.
between the official state and a very large ‘shadow’ state; and between social identities and official state roles.5 The UID project regurgitates these narratives of the lack of efficient identification as the barrier to delivery of welfare benefits. It believes that biometric technologies will help surmount the liabilities presented by phantom cards and “thieving middleman”6 to ensure that entitlements reach intended recipients. This glib conviction in the latest technologies of identification as delivering where the material document has failed has been rigorously challenged by activists, lawyers and scholars. Nilekani and the other UID authorities have argued in various public forums that “immense benefits” may be accrued from “a mechanism that uniquely identifies a person and ensures instant identity verification”.7 This mechanism is believed to work because it relies on the impersonal medium of technology that will take the form of a unique number and a central database holding limited demographic information. In the subsequent debates surrounding the UID, it has been pointed out by a few scholars that technologies are “socially constructed”8 and that they possess the social potential to affect “how institutions function”.9

This concluding chapter does not wish to enter the debate which is often crudely framed as the document (amenable to subjective interpretation) versus technology (incapable of feeling and hence being partial), cash transfers via bank accounts versus food subsidies. Having not studied these middle years at length, this chapter does not wish to venture any analysis of the functions or the spheres of circulation of these recent technologies of identification. What it (the chapter) does seek to challenge are the tacit assumptions behind the UID project, cash transfers and biometric ID card suggestions10 that welfare mechanisms in the postcolonial years were beleaguered by

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9 Ibid, 36.
10 See Arka Roy Chowdhary and E.Somanathan, “Impact of Biometric-based Transfers”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46, no.21, (2001); The emphasis on leakages within a food subsidy scheme and the suggestion that the creation of bank accounts will plug leakages is a hint at the presence of middlemen such as FPS card-holders, etc.
the category of the vulnerable identification document. In this narrative, the document was vulnerable because it was captive to the caprices of middlemen who were either money-minded and/or favoured candidates on ascriptive grounds. In fact, there is an eerie sense of accord between the UID visionaries and their critics who both believe in the vileness of the middleman. In the excerpt from *Imagining India* at the beginning of this chapter, Nilekani alludes to bribe-taking officials as impeding smooth welfare distribution. A vociferous critic of the UID in her post on the popular blog *Kafila* enlists support against the UID where she pinpoints the crisis of welfare distribution as the quintessential problem of the middleman in India. The middleman ranges from the ration shop-owner to the supervisors, the paymaster and the teacher.\textsuperscript{11}

Even those scholars who critique biometrics and cash transfer schemes do not challenge the notion that middlemen equals corruption and leakages. Reetika Khera, another rigorous critic of biometrics and the UID has given examples in her analysis of current welfare schemes like NREGA of the “collusion between non-working job cardholders and implementing officials” (emphasis mine)\textsuperscript{12}.

This dissertation attempts to complicate this historical narrative of the vulnerable identification document weighed down by petty leviathans\textsuperscript{13}, colluding collaborators and complicit officials. The intermediary, whether he took the shape of the *dalal*, the food official or the FPS dealer played deeply productive roles, rendering services which reordered the economy of entitlement. In demonstrating the myriad ways in which officials construed, felt and enforced rules, this dissertation tried to undercut perceptions of officials as disembodied brokers of power pursuing pecuniary advantage and as mere opportunists. At the same time, the 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} chapters showed that intermediaries did not fulfill socially mandated roles; instead, they acted consciously to breach or overlook rules regarding documents when they interfered with their ethical perceptions of violations. Their actions did not stem from their subjective or social selves but from the social life of the document. The Daily Diary and the ration card were two rationing documents that opened up a world of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{11} Read Kalyani Menon’s post on Kafila, \url{http://kafila.org/2010/10/04/eight-reasons-why-you-should-oppose-the-uid-stop-uid-campaign/} as accessed on 27 April 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Shiv Visvanathan and Harsh Sethi, *Foul Play*, op.cit, 6.
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possibilities for the “implementing official” to fashion himself. In a similar mould, the Master Register, the Stock Register and the complaint book presented endless opportunities of ethical choice to the FPS dealer. The middleman may be the bête-noire of welfare practice in India but his role was much more nuanced than what has been believed. The document may be a productive site for understanding the “crucial roles of lower-level employees in the making of colonial rule”\(^\text{14}\) as well as the multifaceted roles of the official, the dalal and the clerk who worked inconspicuously to produce and subvert the information regimes of postcolonial India. The great dream of the UID to phase out the intermediary in welfare mechanisms may be both disempowering and disingenuous\(^\text{15}\). In order to curtail the presence of the intermediary, structures of informality and informal assistance will have to be dismantled. If this dissertation tried to illustrate the tremendous power of informal networks in the margins, it also insinuates that the termination of these networks would entail a breakdown of local processes of enfranchisement.

**The return of the ‘individual norm’?**

In many forums, UID representatives have stressed the individual as a more accurate unit of identification. When they repeatedly use terms like de-duplication and eliminating ghost beneficiaries, UID authorities, by implication, privilege the individual norm over the household norm. It is lacunae in identifying the individual that impedes welfare distribution processes, UID documents point out. “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”\(^\text{16}\), says a UID document. In his book as well as in his addresses at various forums, Nilekani stresses the benefits of identifying the individual and verifying individual-specific information. “Public as well as private sector agencies across the country typically require proof of identity before providing individuals with services”,

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\(^\text{14}\) *Intermediaries, Interpreters and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa*, op.cit, 7. While the book suggests the ways in which these intermediaries used “opportunities created by colonial conquest”, it omits to reflect at length on the materialities of the document which generate such opportunities.

\(^\text{15}\) Such a move would be dishonest because the UID project turns on the services of new kinds of intermediaries. Enrolling agencies of the UID could be hospitals, NGOs or municipal bodies. In order to make the UID number portable, authorities will require the services of local vendors who can operate card-readers. “Unique Identification Authority of India: A Unique Identity for Every Resident in India”, op.cit.

\(^\text{16}\) Presentation by Nandan Nilekani, “Unique Identification Authority of India: A Unique Identity for Every Resident in India”, op.cit, 1
the document reiterates. In the postcolonial context, the UID authorities believe that a failure to entrench the individual norm of identification has menaced the welfare establishment. The unique number has the unique benefit of accounting for every individual lurking behind the head of the family in the household ration card. By ushering in an initiative that biometrically captures every dodgy individual recipient of welfare, the authorities celebrate the individual as a unit of the verification of identity. “Aadhar is a unique number and no resident can have a duplicate number since it is linked to their individual biometrics; thereby identifying fake and ghost identities which result in leakages today”, says the Aadhar Handbook for Registrars.

The UID narrative turns on a very “inert” administrative definition of family which is unpacked to mean head of the household and other members of the family. It does not take into cognizance the historically entangled relationship of the nation with the cultural and affective category of ‘family’ post-independence. The belief of the UID narrative that the unique number will enable a return to the individual norm and to more efficient welfare practice is flawed because it does not take into account the enduring linkages between the family and the nation. This dissertation argues that the family norm was present not as an administratively neutral category but as one that was embedded in affect. A mere administrative ‘return to the individual norm’ will not be able to purge rooted definitions of family from welfare dispensations. Let me illustrate this a little.

If in the initial wartime period, the individual norm was prevalent, post-war, the family norm was consolidated. Post-independence, the categories of the family ration card, namely the ‘head of the family’ and ‘dependents’ ignited the postcolonial national

17 Ibid, p.4.
19 Take for instance, the Aadhar Handbook’s delineation of the role of the head of the family. He must endorse a family member’s belonging based on Proof of Relationship documents. The relationship between the UID document-holder and his or her family is envisaged to be a blood-tie that can be “proved” by ID documents, ibid, 15.
20 In the interests of reducing excess consumption, the individual norm was preferred to the family norm. So, after the first six months of rationing where family cards were introduced, Adviser to the Government of Bombay during the Second World War, Henry Knight records individual cards to have been widely circulated in India during the war. There were, perhaps, regional variations to this norm.
21 Post-war, the family ration card was thought to be more economical as it saved printing charges and permitted simpler accounting. The logistics of issuing cards to every surveyed individual resident were also overwhelming.
imagination. Administratively, the family as a unit never failed to spawn information panics, fears of imitation and ghost members of the ration card. Every time rationing was introduced, misgivings about families hosting visitors, relatives, servants and adding them as dependents on the ration card surfaced. The various Control Orders passed after independence therefore devote paragraphs or sections to defining the administrative unit of the household and who it may comprise. The dissertation compared some of the definitions of household in these Rationing/Control Orders to those in the Delhi Censuses.

But, ‘family’ was not an inert administrative category in the postcolonial national imagination. The intimate relationship between the postcolonial state and the family was forged partly by the Partition that infused life into the equation of home with watan or nation, a relationship captured and critiqued ubiquitously in Indian English literature on the Partition. The question of the abducted women’s family and which side of the border they belonged to was central, for instance, to the postcolonial imagination. Scholars examining court cases under the Abducted Women (Recovery and Restoration) Act illuminate the act of conflation of citizenship with family that governments on both sides of the border undertake. Disputes about citizenship of these women in these instances lingered over where their real families were. A couple of scholars like Vazira Zamindar and Anupama Roy explore how permit and passport restrictions came into play in debates that conjure this problematic relationship between family and citizenship. These scholars present the centrality of documentary restrictions to the debates over Partition-dislocated children and the families they belonged to (which side of the border), thereby illustrating this deep-seated investment of the nation in the family. The family loomed large in the national consciousness once more in narratives of the Emergency where ration cards were denied to those with more than a stipulated number of family members. This layered and enduring historical entanglement of the nation with family is often obscured by the deployment of the impersonal construct of ‘household’ in the ration card.

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22 See the writings of Saadat Hasan Manto, Bhisham Sahni, Yashpal and the work of Urvashi Bhutalia in this connection.
enforcing ration card-related rules of food consumption at weddings, the Food Inspector was guided by affective considerations of family. The food official in the V.P.Singh initiative attempting to issue a single ration card to every household was attempting to regulate the affective space of the family.

The UID with its emphasis on a unique ID number for every resident in India would seem to suggest a return to the individual norm as the basis of welfare distribution. UID authorities cite administrative rationales of the transparency and visibility of every individual to counter the “phantoms” of the household ration card. They believe that the family card, with all its pores permitting leakages, is a microcosm of the permeable welfare establishment in India. These phantoms take the familiar form of bogus cards, ghost beneficiaries and impostors.

Even in a purely administrative sense, a belief that a unique number will entrench the norm of the individual in welfare dispensations is flawed. In order to render the family norm obsolete, future governments would have to dismantle and reconfigure the architecture of the mechanisms of welfare distribution which presently is closely aligned to the figure of the head of the household and the member of the family. Work under the NREGA scheme is made available to single members of the household and health insurance schemes like the RSBY are routed to BPL family card-holders. Job cards and BPL cards may henceforth have unique numbers for every individual member of the household but the family norm may remain the 'filter' of welfare schemes for a while to come. But more critically, the postcolonial discourse of family may never be absent from the enumeration, identification and authentication of individual identity in welfare schemes. Research in India on the intersection of the individual and family norms, how they interact with each other, make space for and contradict each other within unfolding dynamics of technology (in the field of welfare distribution) has yet to be done. It would be exciting to also see the ways in which documentary practice conspires to produce and complicate interactions between family and nation.

24 Nilekani asks us to consider the single citizen ID as a means to get rid of “the phantoms” that render the welfare “distribution mechanisms” “porous”. Nandan Nilekani, Imagining India, (New Delhi: Allen Lane, 2008), 363, 369.
Decentering the historical norm of stable residence

At the end of his first volume on *Capital*, Karl Marx records identification practices such as branding, amputation and licenses underpinning 15th century penal regimes to restrict mobility. He writes of the practices in England of issuing beggars’ licenses to those old and unable to work and the branding of those above 14 years of age found to be begging. The branding of vagabonds, slaves, beggars and rogues was often accompanied by whipping, flogging and amputation and the repeat of offences such as idling about, vagabondage and begging could warrant executions. Marx deemed such identification practices to be modes of disciplining agricultural people (who were forced out of their homes and into vagabondage) into a labour force that was required to sustain the wage system and create a surplus population.25 The practice of identifying persons through some mode of writing to circumscribe mobility such as the nomadic pass, the penal tattoo, the anthropometric passbook has been a perennial modern feature of governing populations as many scholars, in the last decade, have shown us26. The beggars’ certificate and the homeless ration cards that the Delhi government issued do not however belong to this early modern paradigm of marking mobile groups. A document like the homeless ration card or the refugee certificate inscribed the postcolonial moment. This moment comprised the postcolonial state’s normative commitment to provide for liminal subjects while, at the same time, tracking their ambivalent legal statuses.

A study of the social life of the ration card featured the enactment and the re-enactment of the ambivalence of the postcolonial state vis-à-vis mobility. Sometimes, identification apparatuses were needed to circumscribe mobility temporally and spatially (as for example, the visitor and the homeless ration cardholder whose cards are valid for a limited period of time) and at other times to criminalize it (the prohibition of using the ration card across states). A certain normative obligation to the residents of fragile homes and subjects who led mobile lives was conspicuously present in the V.P.Singh enumeration initiative which embedded deep compassion for

the ubiquitous slum resident in Delhi. This norm of caring for the itinerant (and presumably impoverished) subject is more enigmatically present in the latest endeavor to enumerate and identify migrant subjects who may be held back by the liability of the norm of stable residence inscribed in identity documents. The UID’s claim to sharing this normative burden of the postcolonial state is more suspect given that its immediate predecessor was the MNIC, an ID card initiative that sought to police the local resident who could be a terrorist or an illegal migrant poaching on the welfare establishment by receiving rations and other subsidies. The UID authorities have however persistently construed their attempt to dematerialize the document through number portability as one that is benign towards the migrant labourer and the travelling ration cardholder. The partnerships and by implication, the linkages that the UID project purports to create between itself and ‘Registrars’ like the PDS, MNREGA and the RSBY are believed to enable number portability. The claims of the UID authorities that their initiative will reverse histories of discrimination against migrant workers and residents of fragile homes have found some acceptance. The UID has been widely believed, for instance, to rectify the dependence of the banking system on the residential norm implicit in banks’ requirement of a permanent address.

M.K.Venu, one of the Editors of the Financial Express writes that the unique number “will be the only authentic, mobile identification number for over 250 million poor Indians on the move.” Another journalist argues that the unique number will ease the migrant into “social integration” so far denied to him owing to his lack of an interstate identity. The enrollment of vast numbers of slum residents across the cities of India, in the first phase of the implementation of the UID project, has been cited as

27“Inclusion of vulnerable groups is the summum bonum and metaphorically speaking, the heart and soul of Aadhar Project”, says the UID concept paper on social inclusion. “Social Inclusion and Aadhar: Introduction and Concept Paper”, Unique Identification Authority of India, Planning Commission, New Delhi, 2012, 3. “For the poor, whether in rural or urban areas, lack of any documents to prove their identity works in a circular way where they find it difficult to extricate from the throes of poverty and condemns them to remain in a vicious circle of poverty”, the same document clarifies elsewhere, http://uidai.gov.in/ as accessed on April 21, 2012.

28“Unique Identification Authority of India: A Unique Identity for Every Resident in India”, Presentation by Nandan Nilekani, op.cit, 7


30 This journalist cites the example of an NGO which issued ID cards to migrants following which they faced lesser harassment at the hands of police officials. Malia Politzer, “Resolving the Identity Crisis”, http://www.livemint.com/2011/01/10235903/Resolving-the-identity-crisis.html as accessed on 1 May 2012.
credible evidence of the present government’s predisposition to decenter the norm of stable residence and enfranchise the inhabitants of vulnerable homes and those who lead itinerant lives. The UID at the same time wishes to make entitlements less contingent on local residence and to render identification processes more efficient.

Nilekani rightly indicates that the postcolonial model of enumeration was marked by instability and porosities. Through interviews with Food Inspectors, field visits to a slum cluster and several readings of Control Orders, Manuals and Censuses, this dissertation demonstrates how the fact of stable residence in the postcolonial applications of ration card claimants could never be decisively established. But this instability, this dissertation argues, unlike Nilekani does, had the effect of often ensuring that there is lesser discrimination and arbitrary treatment of marginal subjects. The application process for a ration card, in the 70s, the 80s and well into the 90s, could neither determine the identity of the Bangladeshi resident\(^{31}\) nor could it define the parameters of the house, where one family started and the other ended in the space of the slum cluster\(^{32}\). In many senses, such ambiguity was kinder to the slum resident as it implicated coercive legal mechanisms of proving and disproving identity. It paved the way for entitlements like Delhi’s *Jhuggi* Ration Card (JRC) extended to slum residents who lacked proper ID documents. JRCs under BPL schemes for slum residents were floated from time to time and were issued even when certain documentary protocols were not met.\(^{33}\) Food Inspectors could decide to issue ration cards to desperately poor slum residents who may or may not be Bangladeshi, who may or may not fall under the official poverty line and they did, as the interviews with Jadeja and Mukhija in chapter 5 shows. In addition, the administrative stipulations stating that a ration card must be issued only to those who can prove that

\(31\) One of the necessary factors for determining the fact of stable residence was the inquiry into the identity of the applicant. Where did the applicant come from, what was his nationality – these were crucial questions to deciding the status of his residence, whether he was a legal resident or not.

\(32\) See the administrative definition of a house as comprising a family and a stove in the Rationing Orders I cite in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

\(33\) While the JRC was a progressive measure, it was diluted by the emphasis on affidavits that the applicant had to submit in lieu of documents like his previous ration card. The affidavit had to be issued by one of certain select authorities like the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM), the authorized Notary Public or an Oath Commissioner. In addition, the applicant had to produce photocopies of the updated voter list. Order No. F.15 (44)/CFS (D)/2003/PF. Food and Supplies Department, Delhi.
they own or rent a house were also repeatedly flouted. The inability that this dissertation demonstrates in previous chapters to unambiguously determine the question of the legal status of the applicant, residence and documents establishing legal residence all constitute a failure to enforce the norm of stable residence. But such failure to identify the individual was often benevolent to residents in marginal spaces as this dissertation argues. To be sure, the instability and the informality of identification processes were not always empowering for the slum resident. Such instability translated into political manipulation of the Bangladeshi resident and police coercion against him or her in slum spaces. However, they meant that the channels for discretionary ethical evaluation of applications were not closed. Nilekani’s gesture to make identity infrastructure portable, and thereby more democratic, may be benign. But its corollary of ensuring accurate identification processes and closing the pores may break down ethical though discretionary, and productive though easily coercive, channels of procuring entitlement.

The expanded site of the political

This dissertation is an attempt to render objects political. It questions the hierarchy of humans over things in social histories. It tries to critique scholarship that treats documents as instruments of state control. The identity document is not driven by ideology or political purpose. Yet, the document is able to produce contexts of imperial governance, cultural nationalism, postcolonial conflicts on eligibility of the welfare claimant and corruption. The dissertation mobilizes various kinds of archives (both the official state archives and popular archives generated by memories of individuals) and fieldwork to understand the nature of the document. The multiple meanings, forms and functions of the document sprang from every source this dissertation consulted. In all these sources, the document insinuated itself into different spheres of social and political life, setting up correspondences between official and subject, political leader and subject, subject and subject, institution and official, political leader and official, etc.

The social life of the document as a framing device allows us to move beyond merely commenting on the multiple imperatives and the disciplinary impulses of colonial and postcolonial rule. Freed from a strictly Foucauldian analytic of governmentality,
documents take unexpected turns, engender unforeseen acts of information-sharing, complicate bureaucratic rationality and provide temptations of inhabiting authority in the everyday. The identification document thwarts all attempts to systematically theorize sovereignty, disciplinary power and resistance. The “social life of the document” argument rejects theoretical moves that fore-ordain the perfection of disciplinary mechanisms as the contrivance of all attempts to enumerate and identify persons and groups. Such an argument is also averse to a treatment of documents as merely the “weapons of the weak”\textsuperscript{34} in the hands of subaltern subjects. For instance, while this dissertation tries to capture the subaltern critique of legal authority, it demonstrates two things. One, the dissertation shows how slum residents’ critiques of legal authority were often haphazard and highly contingent.

Two, the sixth chapter challenges the usefulness or the instrumentality of democratic processes to such critiques. In their work on subaltern subjects, both Partha Chatterjee and Solomon Benjamin carve out a space for democratic processes of political vote-capturing and the electoral clout of unauthorized colonies. While they both describe differently the process through which a slum colony or a neighbourhood acquires political clout, they are in agreement over the benefits of electoral politics which, according to them, help procure advantages (legalization of status, residential space, provision of electricity and other amenities) for marginal subjects\textsuperscript{35}. A study of the biography of the rationing document in the spaces of a slum cluster substantiated again and again the breakdown of political bridges between the leader (the politician or MLA) and the office (ration offices, housing offices). The democratic potential of populist politics was muted and often unreliable in the spaces of the Govindpuri slum cluster.

Many contemporary scholars have challenged Chatterjee’s dichotomy between political society and civil society with their defined statuses and aspirations. Using field


\textsuperscript{35} Solomon Benjamin’s narrative of the process of acquisition of political clout is somewhat different. He outlines the gradual growth of a manufacturing economy in the “unregulated disorder” of “neighbourhood settings”. The clustering of industrial firms in the urban neighbourhood of Vishwas Nager and the transformation of land into productive work environments enabled the residents (of this neighbourhood) to acquire political clout. Solomon Benjamin, “Productive Slums: The Centrality of Urban Land in Shaping Employment and City Politics”, \textit{A Report for the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy}, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005.
examples, this dissertation shows that applications for ration cards, even when they were accompanied by letters of recommendation by political leaders, were neglected for years before a ration card was issued to residents. Sometimes, cluster leaders and activists—who-also-residents were more successful than political leaders in helping the resident renew his ration card or using the ration card for withdrawing rations. By presenting and circulating imitations of the identity card, for instance, slum residents illustrated their deep discontentment with democratic processes of negotiation with political authorities to acquire a plot. By using their ration cards to intimidate FPS dealers into giving them (or other slum residents) their weekly supply of rations and policemen into giving them bail, they were visibly bypassing political society’s rules of electoral bargaining. This dissertation records slum residents to be using a rich repertoire of political practices or diverse forms of negotiation with the local state. While it is not averse to the suggestions, this dissertation does not argue that slum residents’ narratives amount to a critique of citizenship, the condition of the urban poor or the state. Documentary practices were more contingent in their operation; they aided slum residents in realizing different political aspirations, to become more politically bold and assertive, to safeguard the slum from scheming dalals and interlopers and at other times to use their services, to honour the memory of a leader, to insure one’s family against the local state’s arbitrary evictions, so on.

Conclusion

Identification and documentary practices have accomplished strange things for individuals in the modern post-industrial era. In one scholar’s construction, Gandhi’s disillusionment with the colonial fingerprint registration project in South Africa led him to discover his aversion to modernity and liberal civilization that he formulated in Hind Swaraj. Initially, Gandhi believed in the scientific virtues of the thumbprint which, he thought, provided an efficient basis for the administrative identification of illiterate Indians (mostly indentured labour). He also considered the fingerprint superior to the photograph in ID documents as it did not interfere with religious stipulations. He was opposed to the fingerprint only as a racial principle that tainted and criminalized Indians as a whole; he even engineered an agreement with Smuts

where fingerprint registration was introduced as a voluntary measure\textsuperscript{37}. The failure of authorities to uphold the voluntary clause and the discovery of the potential of the identification document to put in place a virulent system of political control and taxation shocked Gandhi into disillusionment with technology and liberal leadership, this scholar, Keith Breckenridge argues. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi wished to dispel naiveté vis-à-vis technology and its incursions into our moral life.

Gandhi was only one of many Indians who realized the pedagogic potential of identification documents. The lived experiences of the various people, (officials, refugees, slum residents, *dalals* and other actors) in this dissertation would suggest that identification documents schooled them in negotiating administrators, rules and procedures around entitlements. But the encounter with documents was not educative in a functional and utilitarian sense alone. It enabled subjects to form ethical judgments and shape their personalities and politics systematically while teaching them to arrange their lives around presenting, construing, decoding, imitating and subverting the “*lingua franca* of the state”\textsuperscript{38}.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 332.
\textsuperscript{38} Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories*, op,cit, 10