

Why the Aadhaar-voter ID link must be stopped

- The Election Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2021 which facilitates amendment to the Representation of People's Act, is a step toward implementing online-based remote e-voting for which the use of Aadhaar will be the primary identity.



- The linking of Aadhaar with one's voter ID was primarily to build a biometric dependent voting system from the very beginning.
- The claim was made to support this change was to fight "fraud and duplicates" in the electoral rolls.
- At the same time, in practice, in places where it was used — done by the mashing of Electors Photo Identity Card (EPIC) data with surveillance databases — it facilitated a selective removal of voters from the lists.
- In the 2018 Telangana Assembly elections, for instance, the consequence of such a measure led to the deletion of an estimated two million voters.

ELECTORAL ROLLS-AADHAAR LINKAGE

The Criticism

- Voters may be disenfranchised
- Hurdle to voting
- Aadhaar not proof of citizenship
- Data quality issues



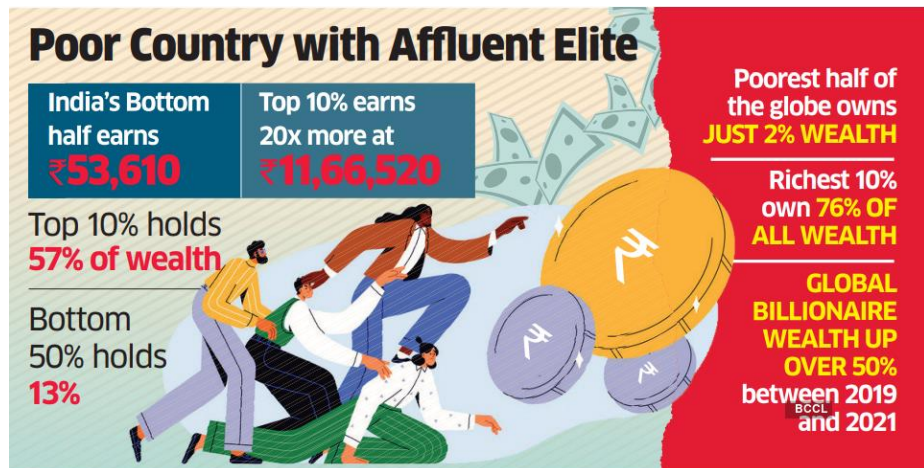
Challenges:

1. The methodology followed by the ECI to find duplicate voters using Aadhaar is unknown to the general public. Nor is the information available in the public domain.
2. The role of the ECI to verify voters using door-to-door verification has been subsumed; a software algorithm commissioned by the Government for purposes unknown to the public and maintained by a private IT company is in control now.
3. While the role and autonomy of the ECI itself are speculative, subjecting key electoral rolls to surveillance software damages the concept of universal adult suffrage. What the experience in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh highlights is voter suppression and disenfranchisement.
4. A mock election (in October 2021) was conducted in Telangana by the State Election Commission with smartphones using facial recognition, voter ID, Aadhaar number and phone number for authentication while voting. This method kills the "secret ballot".
5. In a situation where the role of money makes a mockery of the democratic process, linking Aadhaar will be futile. Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), if foolproof, put an end to the days of booth capturing prevalent in the days of paper ballots.
6. But these manifestations are about to bring the age back. E-voting can also be gamed using malware to change the outcome of an election. While the Bill does not look into large-scale e-voting, there is an issue of ensuring electoral integrity.
7. An Aadhaar-voter ID linkage will also help political parties create voter profiles and influence the voting process. Online trends on the day of voting and micro-targeting voters using their data will make it easier for political parties in power to use data for elections.
8. A ruling coalition will always have an advantage with the data it possesses. An example is of the Chief Ministers from certain States being asked to get the data of the beneficiaries of welfare schemes. How this data was used in the 2019 elections is a pointer.

The linking of Aadhaar with voter ID will create complexities in the voter databases that will be hard to fix. This process will introduce errors in electoral rolls and vastly impact India's electoral democracy.

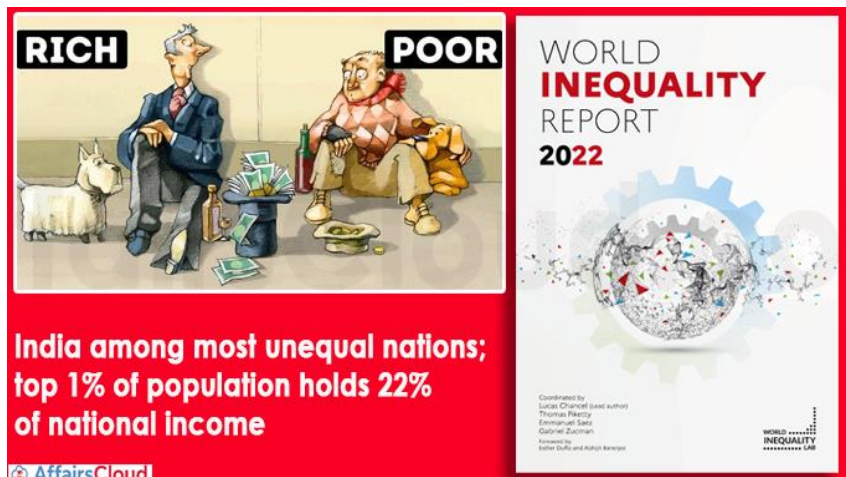
The cold truth about India's income inequality

- The latest edition of the World Inequality Report has confirmed that the world continues to sprint down the path of inequality.



- Global multimillionaires have captured a disproportionate share of global wealth growth over the past several decades: the top 1% took 38% of all additional wealth accumulated since the mid-1990s, whereas the bottom 50% captured just 2% of it.

- India's case is particularly stark. The foreword by Nobel laureate economists, Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, says, "India is now among the most unequal countries in the world."



- This means that the gap between the top 1% and the bottom 50% is widest for India among the major economies in the world. The gap is wider in India than the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Russia and France.

Poverty has persisted

- The journey of this inequality over time reveals that "socialist-inspired Five Year plans contributed" to reducing the share of the top 10% who had 50%

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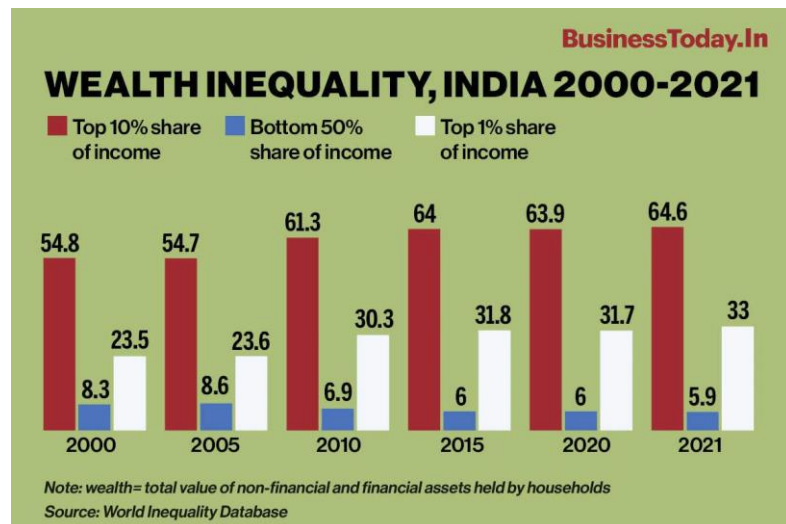
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of the income under colonial rule, to 35%-40% in the early decades after Independence.

2. However, since the mid-1980s, deregulation and liberalisation policies have led to "one of the most extreme increases in income and wealth inequality observed in the world".
3. While the top 1% has majorly profited from economic reforms, growth among low- and middle-income groups has been relatively slow, and poverty has persisted.
4. In recent years, on the economic front, India, post-2014, seems to have got into a phase of an even greater reliance on big business and privatisation to fix economics and the result has been to beget even more inequality.



5. The latest World Inequality Report firmly concludes that the "bottom 50% share has gone down to 13%. India stands out as a poor and very unequal country, with an affluent elite".

Static growth rate: Answer lies in Social structures

1. But beyond all this, what bears emphasis is the observation about what was happening to the income of the bottom 50% in India since 1951. This grew at the rate of 2.2% per year between 1951 and 1981, but what is telling is that "the growth rate remained exactly the same over the past 40 years".
2. This makes it clear that irrespective of the economics or politics at play, the state of the bottom half of India barely changed, with an abysmal rate of income growth.
3. That inequality in terms of the immobility of those at the bottom (at least one half of India) stood, irrespective of the economic policies adopted, is an irrefutable fact. It was because of the social conditions and constraints in India.



4. Clearly, the very social structure that underpinned India, encouraged and fanned this inequality. Plenty changed after India's Constitution was adopted. In the Nehruvian years — and after that too — a bid was made to battle the basic absence of social democracy in India, but it remained confined to States and regions.
5. Therefore, one sees a little more mobility and well-being in States such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Parts of Karnataka and Andhra also recorded attempts at smashing social structures that had pushed those at the bottom to live in perpetual poverty and deprivation, and those attempts showed in better economic prospects.
6. So, beyond these economic policies which have been fanning inequality, it is the ruling party tying faith directly into politics and backing of old social structures — far from getting rid of them, strengthening them each day — that should set alarm bells ringing.
7. The linkages between our social structures and income inequality and poverty must be faced up to.



Survey and data

1. Globally, the economic transformation of people and particularly the lessening of inequality has never happened unless socially regressive mores have been challenged.
2. Path-breaking research across 106 countries in 2018 tackled the elephant in the room when researchers from the Universities of Bristol in the U.K. and Tennessee in the U.S. used data from the World Values Survey to get a measure of the importance of religion spanning the entire 20th century (1900 to 2000) and found “that secularisation precedes economic development”.

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3. Furthermore, the findings show that secularisation only predicts future economic development when it is accompanied by respect and tolerance for individual rights.
4. That can only happen when beyond the sufferance of diversity or tolerance, a society is able to see all shades of humans, of varying castes, creeds, faith, colour, gender and choices as equal.
5. The central aspect of secularisation is delinking of religion from public life. It leads to respect for each citizen irrespective of their faith and for science and rationalism.
6. This is clear from the European experience over centuries or of Asian countries such as China, Vietnam, South Korea and others — the old social structures need to be smashed and not resurrected.

'One size nation' is flawed

1. The rapid movement of India in the reverse direction of secularisation has severe economic consequences too and the widening income inequality only reflects that.
2. The quick descent into a 'One size nation', does not fit its many diversities. The avenues available for all kinds of citizens to make a life, informal if not formal, is deeply inhibited by India's social fabric being torn by the Government's new priorities and policies.
3. Criminalising the freedom of religion and choices, which is what the Indian compact is based on, by hunting out the diverse, mixed or cosmopolitan as inauthentic has consequences, both social and economic.
4. It was exactly this that B.R. Ambedkar had warned of: "In politics, we will be recognising the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value.
5. B.R. Ambedkar had issued a grim warning in 1949 that if we continue to deny social and economic inequality for long, we could "blow up the structure of political democracy". We risk much more.

There is no 'destiny' of nations foretold. Choices are made and destinies are created. By choosing to reverse the idea of modernisation, linking religion firmly into the public sphere, trying to unmake the modernity India had tried to set for itself as an ideal, we may be already setting ourselves on a narrow path that ends in places that scores of nations in the world and several in our neighbourhood have already arrived at, only to their peril and dismay.