

Journal of Management & Public Policy

Vol. 17, No. 1, September 2025 Pp. 26-30

ISSN 0976-0148 (Online) 0976-013X (Print)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47914/jmpp.2025.v17i1.004>

Case Study

**Checking-in Without a Baggage:
Hidden Costs of Hassle-free Experience at Indian Airports**

Srirang Kumar Jha*

ABSTRACT

This case study triggers prodding questions regarding the hidden costs of adopting Digi Yatra for hassle free air travels. While Digi Yatra has made check-in at the airports easier, stakeholders complain about breach of consent which is obtained through coercion or deceit of infrastructural bottlenecks. Moreover, Digi Yatra users have serious concerns about their privacy as all their identity markers and travel details are up there in the digital ecosystem without absolute safeguards. Despite good intention of the government of India, Digi Yatra is viewed by user as a necessary evil. Can we do something about it? The case study sets the ground for animated discussions on several uncomfortable questions: what should the government do to ensure consent of users of Digi Yatra is taken in a fair and unintimidating way? How can the lawmakers usher policy and legislative reforms to address the genuine concerns of the users of Digi Yatra? How can Digi Yatra Foundation be made more accountable for data breach and concomitant consequences? Are there any alternatives to replace Digi Yatra without compromising on the ease of travelling? It is time to reflect before we really sign-up Digi Yatra next time.

KEYWORDS: Digi Yatra, Air Travels, Privacy Concerns, India

* Associate Professor, Apeejay School of Management, New Delhi, India
E-mail: jha.srirang@gmail.com

BACKGROUND

The face is the utmost indispensable part of the human body, and because of its distinguishing traits, it is decisive for recognizing people (Guleria et al., 2024). Digi Yatra has turned faces of travellers into their boarding passes (Heggde et al., 2022). The unique digital application is maintained by Digi Yatra Foundation, a non-profit company established under the Companies Act, 2013 in February 2019. It is driven by the mission ‘to redefine the travel experience by seamlessly blending innovation, technology and safety’ through facial recognition technology. It is an initiative of the Ministry of Civil Aviation, Government of India. Digi Yatra facilitates collection, processing and validation of travel and identity related data of passengers traveling on air. It works as a mobile application. The passengers must first download the application on their device and then fill in their credentials which are validated through Aadhar. Subsequently, the passengers have to provide details of their air tickets every time they need to check-in at the airports. Digi Yatra covers 13 airports viz. Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Cochin, Delhi, Guwahati, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Kolkata, Lucknow, Mumbai, Pune, Varanasi, and Vijayawada.

According to Ministry of Civil Aviation, Government of India (Govt. of India, 2021), Digi Yatra has been envisaged with following broad objectives:

- Enhance passenger experience and provide a simple and easy experience to all air travellers;
- Achieve better throughput through existing infrastructure using digital framework;
- Result in lower cost operations through removal of redundancies at checkpoints and enhanced resource utilization;
- Digitize current manual process and bring better efficiencies;
- Enhance security standards and improve current system performance;
- Rollout of Digi Yatra system with a digital ID backed by a strong verifiable government issued identity like Aadhar, Driving License, Passports and other, enabling a seamless travel experience for passengers at all airports across India.

Digi Yatra application for mobile devices was developed by DataEvolve Solutions, a Hyderabad-based technology start-up and caught the attention of the government through a National Start-up Challenge organized by NITI Ayog under Atal Innovation Mission (MoneyControl, 2023). Suresh Khadakbhavi, Chief Executive Officer of Digi Yatra Foundation rightly observed: ‘We realized that identity and travel document validations were done by

different systems, and we could unify them digitally’ (D’Monte, 2025). The proverbial Journey of Digi Yatra commenced on 17 January 2017 with an ambitious pilot project rolled out at Kempegowda International Airport in Bengaluru in collaboration with Jet Airways. Within five years, it was ready for the launch at a larger scale. Digi Yatra currently supports about 30-35% of the domestic flyers in seamless check-in experience daily. Yet, ride of Digi Yatra has been anything but smooth. There are controversies and concerns shrouding Digi Yatra which cannot be ignored. Can we move forward, though?

MISSING CONSENT

While Digi Yatra is said to be an opt-in and entirely voluntary service at Indian airports, there have been instances in which the passengers were onboarded in Digi Yatra ecosystem without their express consent (D’Monte, 2025). Software Freedom Law Centre highlighted reports of passengers ‘either being forced into or unknowingly enrolled in Digi Yatra’ (D’Monte, 2025). Logistic barriers at airports which make check-in process cumbersome inadvertently push passengers to go for Digi Yatra under duress. If the check-in process is made smooth, the passengers may not like to subscribe to Digi Yatra out of volition.

Further, Digi Yatra ecosystem uses a defective model of consent that compromises individual autonomy (Sukriti, 2024). Reports of coercion by airport personnel meted out to passengers to sign up for Digi Yatra is not uncommon. Ministry of Civil Aviation, Government of India has issued clear instruction to the airport authorities to keep Digi Yatra registration completely optional and sensitize the Digi buddies about the consent (Chandra, 2024). Even the Ministry of Company Affairs, Government of India has taken cognizance of such complaints and cautioned the airport staff to refrain from coercing passengers to sign up for Digi Yatra (Sukriti, 2024).

COMPROMISED PRIVACY

Internet Freedom Foundation has raised serious concerns about how facial recognition technology and personal credentials of the susceptible passengers are used by Digi Yatra ecosystem without adequate privacy safeguards. Though Digi Yatra claims that the organization is fully committed to protect privacy of the users, public concerns continue to grow. According to Digi Yatra Foundation, user data shared with the airport authorities are deleted within 24 hours of departure. Yet, there is no guarantee regarding traces of digital footprints and their possible misuse. Even ‘Don’t Know Your Customer’ campaign –a witty

reversal of traditional KYC has failed amuse the users. Indeed, Digi Yatra has failed miserably in discharging its transparency obligations that further endangers privacy of its users. It has been observed that adoption of more holistic ‘privacy by design’ framework in sync with blockchain technology may help Digi Yatra to ward off concerns regarding protection of personal data (Srivastava et al, 2024).

THE WAY FORWARD

The dangers of using Digi Yatra are real. While the number of users ‘voluntarily’ onboarding Digi Yatra is increasing every day by leaps and bounds, the questions regarding missing consent and compromised privacy remain unanswered. Now, what should the government do to ensure consent of users of Digi Yatra is taken in a fair and unthreatening way? How can cyber thugs be prevented from harming Digi Yatra users? Can the lawmakers usher policy and legislative reforms to address the genuine concerns of the users of Digi Yatra? How can Digi Yatra Foundation be made more accountable for data breach and concomitant consequences? Are there any alternatives to replace Digi Yatra without compromising on the ease of travelling? Let us take a stand before it is too late...

REFERENCES

- Chandra, J. (2024). Airports to ensure Digi Yatra registration is voluntary and consensual: Scindia. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/airports-to-ensure-digi-yatra-registration-is-voluntary-and-consensual-scindia/article67782525.ece>
- D'Monte, L. (2025). The man cleaning up our airport check-in mess. The Mint.
- MoneyControl. (2023). This Hyderabad-based startup is behind the airport walk-in app DigiYatra. <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/this-hyderabad-based-startup-is-behind-the-airport-walk-in-app-digiyatra-9989271.html>
- Govt. of India. (2021). Digi Yatra biometric boarding system: Reimagining air travel in India. Ministry of Civil Aviation, Government of India. <https://www.civilaviation.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-07/Digi%20Yatra%20Policy%20%28DIGI%20YATRA%29.pdf>
- Guleria, A., Krishan, K., Sharma, V., & Kanchan, T. (2024). Global adoption of facial recognition technology with special reference to india—present status and future recommendations. *Medicine, Science and the Law*, 64(3), 236-244.
- Heggde, G., Khanka, S., & Damodaran, A. (2022). DigiYatra—a digital experience for air travelers. *Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies*, 1-20.

- Srivastava, A., Upadhyay, Y., & Joseph, J. J. (2024, December). Adoption of Facial Recognition System for Secured Mobility: Challenges and Future Implications of Using Digi Yatra as a Facial Recognition System. In *International Conference on Information and Communication Technology for Competitive Strategies* (pp. 359-367). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Sukriti. (2024). Digi Yatra and the defect in the idea of 'consent'. Tech Policy. <https://www.techpolicy.press/digi-yatra-and-the-defect-in-the-idea-of-consent/>