



Evolution of India's Welfare State: Bridging Traditional Caretaker Principles with Modern Social Security Systems

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Abstract

This paper examines the unique evolution of India's welfare state, analyzing how traditional Indian principles of state as a caretaker have merged with contemporary social security mechanisms. Through comparative analysis with Western welfare models, the study highlights how India's welfare system represents a distinctive hybrid that combines ancient dharmic principles with modern governance structures. The research explores the historical trajectory, current challenges, and future prospects of India's welfare state, arguing that its success lies in its ability to adapt traditional concepts to modern needs while maintaining its cultural foundations. Additionally, the paper critically evaluates the emerging debates surrounding electoral "freebies" and universal basic income initiatives within India's evolving welfare framework, examining their philosophical underpinnings in traditional Indian thought and their practical implementation in the contemporary socioeconomic landscape.

I. Introduction

The welfare state represents one of the most significant socio-political developments of the modern era, transforming the relationship between citizens and governments worldwide. While welfare systems in Western nations have been extensively studied, the evolution of India's welfare state presents a fascinating case study of how ancient cultural principles adapt to contemporary governance challenges. India's welfare system does not merely replicate Western models but represents a distinct amalgamation of traditional Indian values of state responsibility with modern social security frameworks.

This paper argues that the Indian welfare state derives its conceptual foundations from ancient dharmic principles that emphasized the ruler's duty (rajdharm) to ensure the well-being of subjects. These principles have evolved through colonial and post-independence periods to shape a uniquely Indian approach to welfare. Unlike Western welfare states that emerged primarily from industrialization and labor movements, India's welfare system developed from a complex interplay of traditional ethical

frameworks, colonial legacies, independence struggles, and contemporary global influences.

As India navigates its path as the world's largest democracy with immense socioeconomic diversity, its welfare state faces unique challenges. The emergence of debates around electoral "freebies" and universal basic income schemes represents the latest evolutionary phase in this journey, raising fundamental questions about the state's role in ensuring citizen welfare. By examining these developments within their historical and cultural context, this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of India's distinctive welfare trajectory.

II. Theoretical Framework: Conceptualizing the Indian Welfare State

2.1 Western Welfare State Theories and Their Limitations in the Indian Context

Western conceptualizations of the welfare state, from Esping-Andersen's welfare regime typologies to Marshall's citizenship theory, have dominated academic discourse. These frameworks typically categorize welfare states as liberal, conservative, or social democratic, based on the degree of decommodification and stratification they produce. However, these theories prove inadequate when applied to India's context, as they emerge from specific historical experiences of industrialized Western nations.

The Western welfare state developed primarily as a response to industrialization, with formal labor markets, high urbanization, and relatively homogeneous populations. In contrast, India's welfare system evolved in a predominantly agrarian society with significant informal employment, varied regional contexts, and immense cultural diversity. Moreover, while Western welfare states often emerged through negotiations between capital, labor, and the state, India's welfare architecture was significantly influenced by nationalist aspirations, anti-colonial struggles, and indigenous ethical traditions.



2.2 Traditional Indian Concepts of State Responsibility and Welfare

Ancient Indian political thought, particularly as expressed in texts like Arthashastra, Dharmasutras, and various Smritis, presented sophisticated conceptions of state responsibility toward citizens. The concept of rajdharma (duty of the ruler) explicitly included ensuring the welfare of subjects. Kautilya's Arthashastra, dating back to around 300 BCE, outlined detailed prescriptions for rulers to address public welfare, including measures for famine relief, public works, and care for the vulnerable.

The traditional Indian state was conceptualized not merely as a security provider or tax collector but as *yogakshema vahakarata*—a guardian of citizen welfare and prosperity. This conception extended beyond material welfare to include spiritual and moral well-being, with the state bearing responsibility for creating conditions that allowed individuals to pursue the four *purusharthas* (aims of human life): *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (wealth), *kama* (desire), and *moksha* (liberation).

These traditional conceptualizations differed significantly from Western welfare principles by embedding welfare responsibilities within a broader ethical framework rather than viewing them as separate policy domains. The ruler's *dharma* inherently included welfare responsibilities, establishing a moral basis for state action that preceded modern rights-based approaches.

III. Historical Evolution of India's Welfare System

3.1 Pre-Colonial Welfare Practices

Pre-colonial India featured various indigenous welfare mechanisms that combined state action with community responsibility. Kings constructed public works like water reservoirs, roads, and rest houses, while also maintaining granaries for famine relief. Religious institutions like temples, *maths*, and *waqfs* served as crucial welfare providers, operating charitable institutions, educational facilities, and healthcare services.

The village economy incorporated traditional safety nets, including systems like *baluta* in Maharashtra, *jajmani* in North India, and *mirasi* in South India, which ensured basic subsistence for artisanal communities. These systems, while not without hierarchical limitations, provided social security through reciprocal obligations that mitigated extreme vulnerability.

3.2 Colonial Transformations and Early Welfare Legislation

British colonial rule fundamentally disrupted traditional welfare mechanisms while introducing new administrative frameworks that would later influence independent India's welfare approach. Colonial policies primarily focused on maintaining social order rather than comprehensive welfare, with interventions limited to preventing catastrophic outcomes that might threaten imperial stability.

Nonetheless, this period saw the introduction of modern welfare legislation in response to both humanitarian crises and political pressures. The Famine Codes of the 1880s established protocols for famine relief, while the Factory Acts of 1881 and 1911 introduced limited labor protections. The colonial state's approach to welfare remained minimal and reactive, intervening only to address extreme situations while dismantling many indigenous support systems through policies that transformed land relations and village economies.

3.3 Post-Independence Vision: Welfare in Constitutional Framework

India's constitution, adopted in 1950, represented a transformative vision that explicitly incorporated welfare responsibilities within the state's fundamental obligations. The Directive Principles of State Policy outlined an ambitious welfare agenda, directing the state to secure adequate livelihoods, fair distribution of material resources, public health, education, and protection for vulnerable populations.

This constitutional vision reflected the influence of multiple ideological streams, including Gandhian village-centered development, Nehruvian socialism, and liberal democratic principles. The result was a distinctive hybrid that recognized socioeconomic rights while working within a democratic framework. Unlike purely socialist models, it preserved private property and market mechanisms while directing the state to ensure equitable distribution and protect vulnerabilities.

The constitution thus established welfare not as charity but as a fundamental state obligation, laying the groundwork for subsequent policy development. However, by placing most welfare directives within non-justiciable Directive Principles rather than fundamental rights, it created a particular tension between aspirational welfare goals and their implementation that continues to shape India's welfare system.



IV. The Distinctive Features of India's Modern Welfare Architecture

4.1 Planned Development and State-Led Industrialization (1950s-1980s)

The early decades after independence prioritized planned development under Nehru's leadership, with Five-Year Plans becoming the primary instruments for welfare advancement. This period witnessed the creation of core welfare infrastructure, including major irrigation projects, public sector enterprises, and educational institutions. The state assumed responsibility for both economic development and social welfare, viewing industrialization as the pathway to overcome poverty.

This approach differed from European welfare states by combining developmental and welfare objectives rather than treating them as separate domains. While European welfare states emerged in already industrialized economies and focused on redistribution, India's welfare approach was inseparable from its development strategy, addressing basic needs while simultaneously building productive capacity.

The establishment of a public distribution system for food security, reservation policies for disadvantaged groups, and rural development programs like Community Development Programme represented distinctive Indian innovations that attempted to address massive poverty through state intervention while recognizing social diversity.

4.2 Liberalization and Targeted Welfare Approach (1990s-2000s)

The economic liberalization initiated in 1991 marked a significant shift in India's welfare approach. As the state retreated from direct economic management, welfare policies became increasingly targeted rather than universal. This period saw the emergence of beneficiary-focused programs like the Targeted Public Distribution System, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), and National Rural Health Mission.

Unlike Western neoliberal transitions that often dramatically reduced welfare expenditures, India's liberalization paradoxically coincided with expanded welfare programs. The state withdrew from production while increasing its role in social protection, particularly through rights-based legislation such as the Right to Education Act and National Food Security Act. This represented a distinctive Indian adaptation that preserved welfare commitments while embracing market reforms.

The shift toward targeted interventions also reflected increasing recognition of India's diverse

vulnerabilities across caste, gender, region, and occupation. Rather than a uniform welfare model, programs increasingly addressed specific disadvantages through categorical benefits, creating a complex mosaic of welfare interventions rather than a unified system.

4.3 Technology-Enabled Welfare Delivery and Direct Benefits (2010s-Present)

The most recent phase of India's welfare evolution has been characterized by technological integration and direct benefit transfers. The JAM trinity (Jan Dhan bank accounts, Aadhaar identification, and Mobile connectivity) has enabled a fundamental transformation in welfare delivery mechanisms, allowing benefits to flow directly to recipients while reducing administrative layers.

Programs like PM-KISAN (providing income support to farmers), Ayushman Bharat (healthcare insurance), and various scholarship schemes now utilize direct transfers, representing a shift from providing services to enabling access through financial support. This approach emphasizes choice and agency while attempting to reduce leakages and corruption.

This technology-centered welfare approach represents a distinctive Indian innovation that differs from both traditional state-provider models and market-based alternatives. By combining state funding with digital infrastructure and direct transfers, it creates a hybrid model that maintains state responsibility while reducing bureaucratic intermediation.

V. "Freebies" and Electoral Welfare Politics

5.1 The Emergence of Competitive Welfare Politics

India's democratic framework has produced a distinctive phenomenon of competitive welfare politics, where political parties increasingly compete through welfare promises. Since the 1960s, starting with Tamil Nadu's pioneering universal mid-day meal scheme and subsidized public goods, states have introduced various welfare measures that combine traditional caretaker principles with electoral incentives.

This pattern has intensified in recent decades, with political manifestos prominently featuring welfare schemes ranging from subsidized electricity and water to cash transfers, free healthcare, and educational support. Critics label these as "freebies" or "revdi culture" (distributing sweets for votes), suggesting they represent fiscally



irresponsible populism rather than sustainable welfare.

However, this characterization overlooks how these programs often address genuine needs and represent democratic responsiveness to citizen demands. Many such programs have demonstrably improved nutrition, educational outcomes, and reduced vulnerability among marginalized populations. The political competition for welfare delivery has frequently driven policy innovation and expanded state responsiveness, particularly to previously neglected constituencies.

5.2 Philosophical Tensions in the "Freebies" Debate

The debate around electoral welfare promises reveals deeper philosophical tensions regarding the state's role in ensuring citizen welfare. Traditional Indian political thought positioned welfare as *rajdharmā*—an inherent duty of rulers rather than a transactional benefit. From this perspective, providing for citizen well-being represents fulfillment of ethical obligations rather than electoral bribery.

Contemporary criticisms of welfare "freebies" often implicitly draw on neoliberal assumptions that valorize market solutions and individual responsibility while viewing state provisions with suspicion. Yet this framework sits uneasily with India's constitutional vision and cultural traditions that recognize collective responsibility for ensuring minimal dignity for all citizens.

The debate also reflects tensions between competing conceptions of citizenship—whether citizens are primarily viewed as economic contributors whose benefits should be proportional to their market participation, or as equal members of a political community entitled to certain baseline provisions regardless of their economic position. India's welfare politics continually navigates these tensions, producing distinctive hybrid approaches rather than adhering to any single ideological model.

VI. Universal Basic Income: Traditional Principles in Modern Form

6.1 Ancient Roots and Contemporary Applications

The concept of universal basic income (UBI), while seemingly modern, resonates with traditional Indian principles of state responsibility for ensuring basic subsistence. Ancient texts like the *Arthashastra* discussed the ruler's obligation to provide for those unable to support themselves, while

practices like the village grain reserves ensured minimum food security during times of scarcity.

Contemporary UBI proposals in India, as outlined in the Economic Survey 2016-17 and various state initiatives like Telangana's *Rythu Bandhu* and Odisha's *KALIA* scheme for farmers, represent modern adaptations of these traditional principles. Rather than presenting a radical departure, these initiatives can be understood as technologically updated expressions of the state's traditional caretaker role.

These programs differ from Western UBI proposals, which typically focus on addressing automation-driven unemployment or simplifying complex welfare systems. Indian UBI initiatives more explicitly target ensuring minimal economic dignity and addressing persistent vulnerabilities in the agricultural sector and informal economy.

6.2 Challenges and Prospects for Universal Welfare Approaches

The implementation of universal welfare approaches in India faces substantial challenges, including fiscal constraints, institutional capacity limitations, and political resistances. Critics argue that universal benefits may dilute resources needed for the most vulnerable, while advocates suggest universality reduces exclusion errors and administrative costs while enhancing dignity.

Pilot programs, including Madhya Pradesh's basic income experiment (2011-2013) and various direct benefit transfer initiatives, have demonstrated potential benefits, including improved nutrition, healthcare utilization, and economic agency among recipients. However, scaling these approaches nationally requires addressing fundamental questions about funding mechanisms, delivery infrastructure, and relationship to existing welfare programs.

The debate around UBI and universal welfare approaches in India represents not merely a technical policy discussion but a fundamental reconsideration of state-citizen relationships. It raises questions about whether citizenship itself entitles individuals to certain baseline economic provisions—a question that connects contemporary policy debates to ancient Indian conceptions of the ruler's *dharma*.

VII. Comparative Analysis: India's Welfare State in Global Context

7.1 Distinctive Features Compared to Western Models

When compared with Western welfare states, India's model reveals several distinctive features. Unlike European welfare states that developed primarily through class-based politics in



industrialized economies, India's welfare system emerged through nationalist struggles in a predominantly agrarian society with complex social stratification beyond class.

While Western welfare states typically evolved through expansion of worker protections before developing broader social safety nets, India simultaneously pursued industrial development, social security, and poverty alleviation. This produced a distinctive layering where modern formal sector protections coexist with targeted antipoverty programs and traditional community systems.

India's welfare approach also differs in its continued reliance on family and community support systems alongside state programs. Unlike the individual-centered Western welfare models that often replaced traditional support networks, India's system explicitly works alongside and through families, religious institutions, and community organizations.

7.2 Lessons from the Indian Experience

India's experience offers valuable insights for welfare theory and practice globally. It demonstrates that welfare systems need not follow a single evolutionary pathway but can develop distinctively based on cultural contexts and historical experiences. The Indian case illustrates how traditional ethical concepts can be reinterpreted and operationalized within modern governance frameworks rather than being displaced by imported models.

India's welfare innovations, particularly in combining technology with direct benefits while preserving state responsibility, represent potentially significant contributions to global welfare thinking. As developed economies struggle with sustainability of traditional welfare models and developing nations seek appropriate frameworks, India's hybrid approach offers an alternative that balances state obligation with implementation flexibility.

VIII. Conclusion:

Future Trajectories of India's Welfare State

India's welfare state continues to evolve as it navigates contemporary challenges including demographic transitions, climate vulnerabilities, changing employment patterns, and fiscal constraints. Its future development will likely continue to follow its distinctive pattern of adapting traditional principles to contemporary contexts rather than converging toward any standardized global model.

The ongoing debates around "freebies" and universal basic income represent the latest

manifestation of India's continuous process of reimagining state responsibilities in changing contexts. These debates, rather than indicating policy confusion, reflect the dynamic tension between ancient ethical principles and modern implementation challenges that has characterized India's welfare journey.

The success of India's welfare state ultimately depends not on reproducing external models but on creating authentic approaches that respond to its unique socioeconomic conditions while remaining faithful to its constitutional vision and cultural foundations. By continuing to bridge traditional caretaker principles with modern social security mechanisms, India's welfare state can address contemporary challenges while maintaining its distinctive identity.

In navigating this path, policymakers and citizens alike must engage with fundamental questions about the purpose of the welfare state itself—whether it exists primarily to address market failures, ensure basic needs, enable human capability development, or fulfill broader ethical obligations of the state toward citizens. India's traditional conception of the state as *yogakshema vahakarata*—guardian of citizen well-being—offers a compelling foundation for this continuing evolution.

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