

Populist Policies and Subaltern Empowerment: Bridging the Promise-Performance Gap in Post-Reform India

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Introduction

The course of the welfare rule in India post-liberalization is an interesting paradox: the unprecedented growth of social protection programs at the same time as the continuing deficit of implementation, discrediting their transformative action. Since 1991, subsequent governments have initiated far-reaching welfare programmes against subalterns of the nation, i.e., the subordinate stratum of Indian social structure, according to caste, class, sex, and geographical setting. However, the disparity between what policy proclaims and what is happening on the ground remains an issue that is debilitating the very concept of inclusive development.

The populism in India has changed a lot when comparing it to the Garibi Hatao slogan of the 1970s under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, to the modernized version of competitive welfare provisions. Nowadays, political parties of all ideological hues are using welfare schemes not as a tool of poverty eradication but as an elaborate electoral instrument to develop voter allegiance. The change provokes some fundamental questions concerning the nature of state-citizen relationships in the Indian democracy: Do welfare recipients become empowered as rights-bearing citizens, or are they created as thankful beneficiaries of political favors?

The paper is located at the cross-over point of welfare studies, subaltern theory, and democratic governance to analyze the promise-performance gap in the major welfare programs in India. The main argument is that populist policies have realised some tangible benefits in reducing poverty and providing services, yet their success is limited due to institutional flaws, archaic beneficiary identification strategies, electoral manipulation, and the same contradiction between universal rights and targeted patronage. The study is based on the recent policy documents, secondary data, and literature to give a detailed evaluation of the welfare situation in post-reform India.

Theoretical Framework: Subaltern agency and welfare populism

The welfare beneficiaries in the Indian political economy can be viewed through the prism of Antonio Gramsci, who introduced the subaltern concept as a fruitful way of examining the role of the latter. Gramsci defined subaltern groups as individuals who did not participate in any meaningful way in hegemonic arrangements of power- a category which in India includes castes, tribal groups, landless agricultural laborers, urban informal sector laborers, and women with intersectional inequalities. The most important question of subaltern studies is whether state interventions lead to real empowerment or simply the reinstatement of the conditions of under rule.

In the contemporary literature of welfare populism, two modalities of social protection are differentiated. Rights-based welfare systems, such as the National Food Security Act (2013) and the MGNREGA, set up legal claims that citizens may force the state to fulfill. Discretionary welfare or patronage, on the contrary, makes the beneficiaries the recipients of the benevolence of the government instead of people with rights that can be asserted in court. The Indian welfare

architecture is ambiguous on the normative basis of social protection since it has both modalities

The freebie populism phenomenon is a specialized type of welfare politics that entails competitive electoral offers of goods and services. This method, as observed by political scientists, is making elections into a contest of competitive populism where policy visions, government reforms, or governance debate are phased out by a growing welfare than thou. The economic viability of these commitments and their effects on the long-term developmental investments are of great importance in this context.

Significant Welfare Programs and their Area

Since 2014, the Indian government has centralized and increased welfare provision by various flagship programs to address the subaltern groups. The magnitude of these projects is more than anything ever seen in the administrative history of India, as it is not only a real developmental intention but also an electoral vote-seeking strategy. This requires knowing how they are designed and what they cover to determine the promise-performance gap.

Food Security and Nutrition Programs

The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) is one of the largest food security programs in the world, which offers free food grains to more than 80 crore citizens every month. The program is based on some 5.4 lakh fair price shops under the National Food Security Act, and it includes 75 percent of the rural population and 50 percent of the urban population. Also, in line with Mission Poshan 2.0 and Saksham Anganwadi, nutrition-related programs are used to tackle malnutrition in women and children, yet India remains a source of 49 percent of wasting in the world, according to recent estimates.

Rural Housing and Employment Guarantee

The Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G) is the proposed plan of building pucca houses with basic facilities to the rural households, whose target will include 2.95 crore houses by March 2024, and 2 crore houses have already given a go-ahead to be constructed between 2024 and 2029. All the beneficiaries would be provided with 1.20 lakh in plain regions and 1.30 lakh in hilly regions. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) provides rural households with 100 days of wage work, with 13.08 crore active workers enrolled at the moment. The scheme has created 2,923 crore person-days of work between 2014-15 and 2024-25.

Direct Transfers and Financial Inclusion

With the Jan Dhan Yojana, the bank has been able to provide banking services to the unbanked populations, facilitating the Direct Benefit Transfer, which does not involve intermediaries. The PM Kisan Saman Nidhi is an income support to landholding farmers, which is an annual program of 6,000 rupees, with a yearly cost of around 75,000 crore. In the PM Ujjwala Yojana, more than 10.3 crore LPG connections have been given, and household tap water connections have increased by 14.50 crore in March 2024 as compared to 3.23 crore in August 2019 (Jal Jeevan Mission

Table 1
Coverage of Major Welfare Schemes in India (2024)

Scheme	Beneficiaries (Crore)	Year of Data
PMGKAY (Food Security)	81.35	2024
PM Ujjwala Yojana (LPG)	10.30	March 2024

Scheme	Beneficiaries (Crore)	Year of Data
DAY-NRLM (SHG Women)	10.04	March 2024
Jal Jeevan Mission (Tap Water)	14.50	March 2024
Atal Pension Yojana	6.20	January 2024
MGNREGS Active Workers	13.08	2024

Note. Data compiled from Press Information Bureau, NITI Aayog, and respective Ministry dashboards.

Evidence of Poverty Reduction

India has reported a major improvement in its poverty levels in the post-reform era despite the difficulties in implementing the reforms. In a discussion paper on multidimensional poverty published by NITI Aayog, it is said that multidimensional poverty was avoided by around 24.82 crore individuals in the period 2013-14 to 2022-23. The number of multidimensional poverties decreased by 17.89 percentage points, and the headcount ratio decreased by 29.17% in 2013-14 to 11.28% in 2022-23. This has propelled growth at an increased rate, which means that India will reach its Sustainable Development Goal of at least halving multidimensional poverty by 2030.

These trends were verified by the World Bank in the Spring 2025 Poverty and Equity Brief, which has recorded that extreme poverty, as measured by the World Bank at the poverty line of \$2.15 per day, dropped to a significant percentage of 22.5 percent in 2011 to a mere 5.3 percent in 2022-23. It is worth noting that rural poverty decreased at a higher rate than urban poverty, and the rural-urban poverty gap reduced by 7.7 percentage points to 1.7 percentage points. There was a decline in the poverty rate of 378 million people as the poverty levels dropped beyond 61.8% in 2011-12 to 28.1% in 2022-23 at the lower-middle-income mark of \$3.65 a day.

Table 2

Multidimensional Poverty Reduction by State (2015-16 to 2019-21)

State	People Escaped Poverty (Crore)	Reduction (% Points)
Uttar Pradesh	5.94	-14.20
Bihar	3.77	-18.13
Madhya Pradesh	2.30	-15.62
Rajasthan	1.87	-12.35
All India	24.82	-17.89

Note. Adapted from NITI Aayog Discussion Paper: Multidimensional Poverty in India since 2005-06 (2024).

The Promise-Performance Gap: Problems of Implementing

Although there is overall improvement, large disparities between the promises of welfare and the outcomes of welfare implementation still exist. These gaps are observed on various levels: accuracy of the targeting, quality of services, use of funds, and the delivery of the products to the end consumers. These concerns have been pointed out by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development many times, stating that the old-fashioned databases of beneficiaries and poor monitoring systems destroy the usefulness of the schemes.

Error of Targeting and Exclusion

One of the fundamental problems that face welfare delivery is the fact that it still uses the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) 2011 data to identify beneficiaries. This data, which is thirteen years old, cannot bring demographic shifts, the mobility of households, and changing

the deprivation patterns. The Standing Committee has faulted PMAY-G because it has not been able to distinguish between the genuine beneficiaries, thus excluding the eligible households as well as including the ineligible categories. These issues are aggravated by the fact that there has not been a new census, hence schemes such as the National Social Assistance Programme and Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY are left to work with outdated eligibility standards.

Execution Lags and Quality Shortfalls

Still under PMAY-Urban, of 11.2 million houses sanctioned, only 5.6 million were completed so far, as of 2023, 50 percent. Several states, such as Bihar, Haryana, Punjab, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, and Delhi, have met less than 30 percent of the projected shortage of housing. The Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY scheme does not exhibit any lesser patterns: although about 20 crore cards were issued between 2022 and July 2024, only 9,372 more hospitals were empanelled during the period. The CAG audits have reported poor infrastructure, a shortage of equipment, and a human resource shortfall in the empanelled facilities.

Budgetary limitations and Financial resource use

Ambitions have not been matched by budgetary allocations on key welfare programs. The pendencies in MGNREGS allocations are very significant, i.e., nearly Rs. 20,751 crore negative balance (as of April 2024). The stagnant amount of the National Social Assistance Programme pension of the elderly at 200 since 2007, and women and persons with disabilities at 300 since 2011, has left the state governments with a gap to fill. Budget allocations (PM Matru Vandana Yojana and related SAMARTHYA sub-schemes) reduced by 2.5 per cent between 2023-24 and 2024-25 (Rs. 2,582 crores to Rs. 2,517 crores), and this reflects a lack of commitment of money to the needs by the fiscally.

Table 3
Implementation Gaps in Major Welfare Schemes

Scheme	Key Gap Identified	Source
PMAY-Urban	50% completion rate (5.6M of 11.2M houses)	CBGA India, 2024
PMAY-Gramin	Outdated SECC 2011 beneficiary data	Standing Committee, 2025
Ayushman Bharat	Hospital infrastructure deficits	CAG Report, 2023
MGNREGS	Rs. 20,751 crore fund deficit	LibTech India, 2024
NSAP (Pensions)	Pension stagnant since 2007-2011	IDR Online, 2024

Note. Compiled from government reports, CAG audits, and civil society assessments.

Competitive Populism and Electoral Welfare

Competitive populism has been a phenomenon that has fundamentally altered the welfare political economy in India. It is a practice developed in Tamil Nadu in the late 1960s with the subsidized rice scheme of C.N. Annadurai, but has extended to other states irrespective of party ideology. States such as Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Punjab are today competing in terms of offering ever-increasing generous welfare packages that, in many cases, are electorally blatant rather than sustainable in terms of development.

In the 2023 Karnataka elections, the Congress Party campaigned and guaranteed five schemes, such as free bus rides for women under the Shakti scheme, which has been shown to boost the number of women joining the labor force and visiting temples by about 18 percent on average. The Maharashtra 2024 elections had massive promises of direct cash transfer, and the

Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana was reported to have influenced more than half of all beneficiaries into supporting the ruling alliance. Equally, 24-hour free electricity in Telangana to farmers since 2018 was a first of its kind, which was a considerable fiscal obligation that determined the future electoral results.

Fiscal implications of competitive populism are becoming very evident. States that make subsidy payments under pressure on their budgets restrict their investment in education, health, and infrastructure. It has been reported that Punjab consumes almost half the budget on subsidies and servicing the debts. According to the report published by the RBI in 2022, the revenue collection among states dwindled, and governments did not want to increase the taxes but instead expanded spending on welfare programs. This leads to what economists call a fiscal illusion in which the present benefits are funded by the future liabilities.

Discussion: Bridging the Gap

The analysis shows that there is a mixed picture where the reduction of poverty is significant, but there is also a lack of implementation, as well as new fiscal viability concerns. The promise-performance gap can only be closed with interventions of various dimensions of the welfare delivery architecture.

To start with, it is important to revamp beneficiary identification systems. The fact that it still uses the data of SECC 2011 compromises the accuracy of targeting and does not cover households that are actually deserving. A dynamic registry that includes real-time information on various administrative databases, such as Aadhaar, ration cards, land records, and income tax returns, could enhance the point of identification accuracy and minimize the error of noninclusion.

Second, there is a need for institutional fortification at the implementation level. The difference between approved and built houses through PMAY, deficient hospital infrastructure through Ayushman Bharat, and slow payment of wages through MGNREGS indicates the limitation in capacity at the state and local level. Delegation of administrative capabilities, monitoring systems, and redressal of grievances may improve the effectiveness of delivery.

Third, there is a need to have fiscal transparency in terms of welfare spending. A clear presentation of scheme costs, financing sources, and sustainability reviews would allow knowledgeable democratic discussion concerning the priorities of welfare. The difference between rights-based entitlement and discretionary benefits is to be defined in words; the former is to be protected against political interference with the law.

Fourth, input-oriented monitoring must be substituted with outcome-based evaluation. Existing evaluation models put focus on coverage figures: number of houses sanctioned, number of cards issued, number of connections given, instead of livelihood changes, improvements in health, and ability building. The transition to outcome metrics would be more appropriate in the case of the measurement of the transformative effect of welfare interventions on subaltern populations.

Conclusion

The unprecedented growth of welfare interventions serving subaltern groupings has been experienced in post-reform India and has delivered quantifiable benefits in the reduction of poverty, access to services, and coverage of social protection. The report of 24.82 crore people getting out of multidimensional poverty and significant gains on indicators of sanitation to financial inclusion are the real developments. Nonetheless, the promise-performance gap, as it exists in the form of delays in implementation, errors, inadequacies of quality, and the fiscal

sustainability issue limit the transformational nature of such initiatives.

Competitive populism has transformed the politics of welfare, making social protection a form of electoral currency as well as questioning long-term development investments. The Indian democracy faces the challenge of ensuring the welfare of recent decades, and at the same time, to have a shift in the system of distribution between patronage and the rights-based entitlements, where subaltern citizens can be mobilized as claimants to this system, not beneficiaries. This change not only wants an administrative reform but a redefinition of the state-citizen relationship in the Indian system of democracy.

The next wave of research ought to explore the political economy of state-level welfare implementation, technological influences of improving or harming citizen access, and the gendered aspects of welfare provision. Since India is dreaming of a status of a developed nation by the year 2047, it is not only a policy requirement, but a democratic imperative to ensure that welfare investment yields actual subaltern empowerment.

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