

## **Digital Populism and Welfare Politics in Post-Liberalisation India: A Study of Technology-Mediated Populist Policies**

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### **1. Introduction**

Economic liberalization in India, initiated in the early 1990s, represented a decisive departure from the post-independence model of state-led development. The reform process involved fiscal restructuring, deregulation, privatization of public enterprises, and integration with global markets. While these reforms contributed to higher economic growth and global competitiveness, they also transformed the role of the state in welfare provisioning. The earlier developmental state, which emphasized universal welfare programs and public sector expansion, gradually gave way to a regulatory and facilitative state.

This transformation had significant implications for social policy. Sectors such as education, health, agriculture, and employment witnessed declining public investment and increasing privatization. As a result, large sections of the population experienced economic insecurity, uneven growth benefits, and reduced access to welfare entitlements. These structural changes created fertile ground for the rise of competitive populism, wherein political parties sought to maintain electoral legitimacy by promising targeted welfare benefits, subsidies, and cash transfers.

In the last decade, the rapid expansion of digital infrastructure—driven by biometric identification systems, mobile connectivity, banking inclusion, and e-governance platforms—has reshaped welfare politics. Populism has increasingly become digital populism, where technology is used not only for administrative efficiency but also as a political instrument to cultivate direct state-citizen linkages. Digital platforms enable governments to bypass traditional intermediaries such as local bureaucracies, party cadres, and civil society organizations, thereby personalizing welfare delivery and political communication.

This paper examines the emergence of digital populism in post-liberalization India and analyzes its implications for democratic governance.

### **Research Problem**

While a substantial body of scholarship examines economic liberalization, welfare reforms, and populism independently, limited attention has been paid to their intersection in the Indian context. Specifically, there is a gap in understanding how digital technologies transform populist welfare politics and reconfigure state-citizen relationships.

### **Research Questions**

1. How has economic liberalization altered welfare provisioning and political accountability in India?
2. What role do digital technologies play in reinforcing populist political strategies?
3. How do digital welfare platforms influence citizen perceptions, electoral behavior, and democratic participation?

### **Objective**

This study investigates how India's evolving governance ecosystem uses technology to build direct state-citizen relationships, reinforcing populist narratives and centralizing political legitimacy.

### **Research Questions**

1. How has economic liberalization altered welfare delivery and political accountability?
2. What role does technology play in constructing new forms of populist appeal?

3. How do digital welfare platforms influence electoral behaviour and citizen perception?
4. Analyze how economic liberalization reshaped welfare delivery and political accountability in India.
5. Examine the role of digital governance in constructing contemporary populist narratives.
6. Assess the democratic implications of technology-mediated welfare systems.

## **2.Literature Review**

### **2.1 Economic Reforms and the Changing Role of the State**

The liberalization reforms of the 1990s, influenced by the Washington Consensus, fundamentally redefined the Indian state's role in economic management and welfare provisioning. Scholars argue that fiscal discipline and market-oriented reforms reduced the scope of universal welfare programs and increased reliance on targeted interventions. Welfare increasingly became conditional, selective, and politically framed rather than rights-based.

This shift altered the social contract between the state and citizens. Instead of guaranteeing broad social protection, governments increasingly relied on short-term welfare schemes designed to mitigate market-induced distress. These schemes often functioned as political assurances rather than institutional entitlements.

### **2.2 Populism and Electoral Competition**

Populism in India must be understood within the context of intense electoral competition and social diversity. Political parties use welfare promises to mobilize voters, particularly marginalized groups affected by economic reforms. Scholars describe this as compensatory populism, where welfare schemes serve to offset the social costs of liberalization.

Inter-state competition for investment and fiscal resources further intensifies populist strategies. Governments attempt to demonstrate governance efficiency and citizen responsiveness through visible welfare initiatives, often prioritizing immediacy over sustainability.

### **2.3 Digital Governance as Political Communication**

Digital governance has transformed welfare delivery into a highly visible and personalized process. Aadhaar-enabled DBT systems, mobile governance applications, grievance redressal portals, and social media platforms enhance the visibility of political leadership. Welfare delivery is increasingly framed as the personal initiative of political leaders, reinforcing leader-centric populism and emotional identification.

## **3.Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design that includes:

- Policy analysis of digital welfare schemes implemented across Indian states.
- Secondary data analysis using government reports, academic literature, and media sources.
- Comparative review of digital governance platforms integrated with welfare programs.

This methodological approach aligns with policy-oriented and state-wise analysis frameworks commonly used in governance and political economy research.

This paper uses:

1. Qualitative policy analysis of welfare schemes across different Indian states.
2. Secondary data from government reports, academic literature, and media sources.
3. Comparative review of digital governance platforms integrated with welfare programs.

This aligns with the seminar's methodological focus on policy, sectoral, and state-wise analysis[12],[13].

## **4 Findings and Discussion**

### **4.1 Liberalization and the Birth of Targeted Welfare Populism**

Economic reforms reduced the state's universal welfare mechanisms, leading governments to

adopt targeted cash transfers, subsidies, and electoral promises to restore public trust. This process created a form of compensatory populism, where governments address market-driven distress through selective welfare offerings [6],[7],[14].

#### **4.1 Digital Populism as a New Political Strategy**

Digital populism in India manifests through:

a) Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT)

Technology eliminates intermediaries, enabling governments to claim direct personal responsibility for welfare [9].

Political messaging frequently attributes benefits (pensions, scholarships, farmer support) to specific leaders rather than state institutions [10].

b) Real-Time Governance (RTG) and Command Centres

State-level command centres enable quick grievance resolution, projecting an image of a responsive, omnipresent leadership [11],[15].

This reinforces a leader-centric populist narrative.

c) Social Media Amplification

Digital storytelling, live interactions, and virtual rallies increase emotional proximity between leaders and citizens, bypassing traditional party structures [16],[17].

##### **1.1 Case-Based Illustrations**

#### **State A: Technology-Driven Cash Transfer Scheme**

A scheme delivering monthly cash assistance through a mobile app created a perception of benevolent leadership, significantly influencing electoral outcomes [6].

#### **State B: Digital Agriculture Subsidy Platform**

Online registration and instant approvals allowed farmers to experience faster service, framing the government as “people-centric,” though long-term structural issues remained unaddressed.

#### **State C: Women-Centric Digital Safety & Welfare Ecosystem**

A state-run women’s safety app doubled as a welfare registration gateway, extending political symbolism beyond safety to emotional trust-building.

These examples demonstrate how technology intertwines governance with populist imagery.

Collectively, these cases illustrate how digital platforms are not merely administrative tools but powerful instruments of political communication. By personalizing service delivery and accelerating visible benefits, technology reshapes citizen–state relationships in emotive and symbolic ways. However, such initiatives often prioritize perception and immediacy over systemic reform. This underscores the dual role of technology as both a governance mechanism and a vehicle for populist legitimation [6] [8] [10].

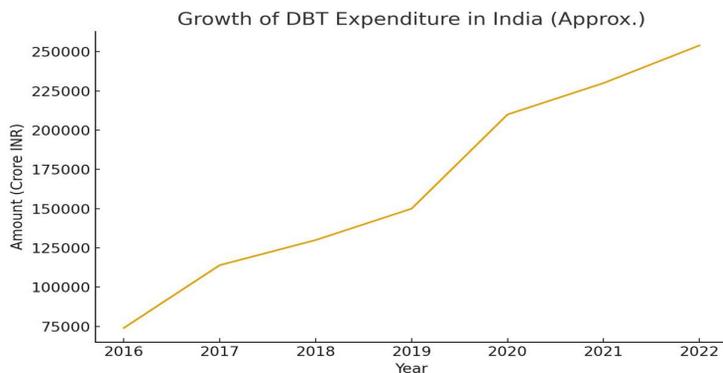


Fig: 1 Growth of Direct Benefit Transfers

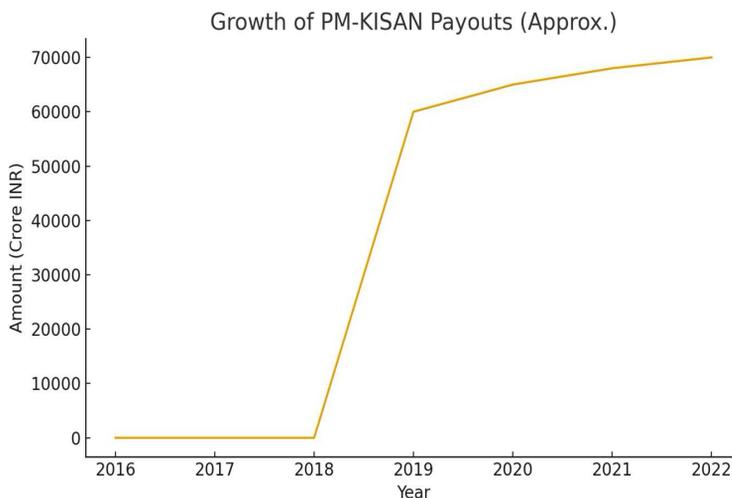


Figure 2: Growth of PM-KISAN Payouts

Fig 2: Growth of PM Kisan Payouts.

#### 4.2 Implications for Democracy Positive Outcomes

4.2.1 Increased administrative efficiency

4.2.2 Reduced corruption

4.2.3 Improved last-mile connectivity

4.2.4 Enhanced political engagement

#### Concerns

4.2.5 Over-centralization of political credit

4.2.6 Erosion of institutional accountability

4.2.7 Reduction of collective deliberation

4.2.8 Emergence of transactional citizenship, where citizens view benefits as political gifts

#### Long-Term Risk

Digital populism risks overshadowing structural reforms in health, education, employment, and agriculture. Welfare benefits may increasingly be perceived as political favors rather than democratic entitlements.

Digital populism can overshadow structural reforms in health, education, agriculture, and

employment—sectors already affected by post-liberalization shifts highlighted in the seminar document [6],[18],[20]

## 5. Findings and Discussion

### 5.1 Liberalization and the Emergence of Targeted Welfare Populism

Post-liberalization reforms reduced the state's capacity and willingness to provide universal welfare. In response, governments adopted targeted cash transfers, subsidies, and benefit schemes aimed at specific voter groups. These interventions function as political tools to restore public trust and electoral legitimacy.

Targeted welfare populism addresses immediate economic distress but often avoids addressing deeper structural challenges such as employment generation, agrarian reform, and public health infrastructure.

### 5.2 Digital Populism as a New Governance Strategy

Digital populism operates through multiple interconnected mechanisms:

#### a) Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT)

DBT systems transfer welfare benefits directly to beneficiaries' bank accounts, eliminating intermediaries and reducing leakages. While this enhances efficiency and transparency, it also allows political leaders to claim direct credit for welfare delivery. Welfare benefits are frequently associated with the image and identity of political leadership rather than institutional governance.

Figure 1: Growth of Direct Benefit Transfers in India (2016–2022)

This figure illustrates the rapid expansion of DBT expenditure, highlighting the growing reliance on digital welfare mechanisms.

#### b) Real-Time Governance and Command Centres

Real-time governance platforms enable continuous monitoring of welfare programs and rapid grievance redressal. These systems project an image of an omnipresent and responsive state, reinforcing leader-centric narratives of governance efficiency. However, they also centralize decision-making authority and reduce the role of local institutions.

#### c) Social Media and Digital Political Communication

Social media platforms facilitate direct emotional engagement between political leaders and citizens. Digital storytelling, live broadcasts, and virtual rallies bypass traditional party structures and enable personalized political communication. Welfare delivery becomes symbolic, reinforcing populist legitimacy.

### 5.3 Case-Based Illustrations

#### • State A: Digital Cash Transfer Scheme

A technology-driven cash assistance program delivered through mobile applications created strong perceptions of benevolent leadership and positively influenced electoral outcomes.

#### • State B: Digital Agriculture Subsidy Platform

Online registration and instant approvals improved service delivery and political goodwill among farmers, although structural agricultural issues remained unresolved.

#### • State C: Women-Centric Digital Welfare Ecosystem

A women's safety application integrated welfare access, extending political symbolism into emotional trust-building and gender-focused governance.

These cases demonstrate that digital platforms function as political communication tools as much as administrative mechanisms.

### 5.4 Implications for Democratic Governance

Positive Outcomes

- Enhanced administrative efficiency

- Reduced corruption and leakages
- Improved last-mile connectivity
- Increased political engagement

Figure 2: Growth of PM-KISAN Payouts (2019–2022)

This figure highlights the rapid expansion of farmer income support through digital platforms.

#### Democratic Concerns

- Centralization of political credit
- Weakening of institutional accountability
- Decline of collective deliberation
- Emergence of transactional citizenship

#### Long-Term Risks

Digital populism risks overshadowing structural reforms in critical sectors such as health, education, agriculture, and employment. Welfare benefits may increasingly be perceived as political favors rather than democratic rights.

### 5. Conclusion

Digital populism represents a transformative phase in India's political landscape. Emerging from economic liberalization and intensified by technological advancement, it merges welfare delivery with political communication, reshaping how citizens perceive the state. While it enhances efficiency and visibility, it risks weakening democratic institutions and fostering dependency-based political cultures. The paper concludes that digital populism is not merely an electoral tool but a reconfiguration of state-citizen relations, with profound implications for future governance.

Digital populism represents a significant transformation in India's post-liberalization political landscape. Emerging from economic reforms and intensified by technological advancements, it merges welfare delivery with political communication, reshaping democratic governance. While digital welfare systems enhance efficiency and visibility, they also raise critical concerns regarding institutional erosion, accountability, and democratic participation. This paper concludes that digital populism is not merely an electoral strategy but a deeper reconfiguration of state-citizen relations with long-term implications for Indian democracy.

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