

NFSA and the Public Distribution System: Welfare Populism in Modern India

Nanneboyina Ravi

Department of History and Tourism Management, Kakatiya University

Introduction

The National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 represents a watershed in India's social policy landscape, legally entitling nearly two-thirds of the population to subsidized food grains through the Public Distribution System (PDS). By transforming food security from a discretionary policy objective into a justiciable right, NFSA institutionalizes welfare on a scale unprecedented in post-1991 India. It thus reflects both a continuity of India's welfare commitments and a departure from the developmental planning paradigm, moving towards rights-based and legally enforceable entitlements. At the same time, NFSA exemplifies welfare populism, wherein the state provides mass-oriented, highly visible benefits to strengthen political legitimacy and electoral support. The Act's design covering rural and urban poor while prioritizing the most marginalized through the Antyodaya Anna Yojana ensures that benefits are both socially meaningful and politically salient. In this sense, NFSA illustrates how welfare in India is strategically deployed, balancing social protection with the imperatives of electoral politics in a liberalized economy marked by inequality, informal labor markets, and food price volatility. The Public Distribution System, as the primary mechanism for delivering NFSA entitlements, reinforces this logic. Its visible, monthly distribution of grains creates a direct connection between the state and citizens, embedding welfare in everyday life. This interaction not only addresses material insecurity but also builds enduring political credibility, highlighting the dual role of welfare as both a social safety net and a tool of political strategy.

Objectives of the study:

1. To align the welfare populism with NFSA-2013 and PDS System.
2. To Study the Socio-Economic impact of NFSA-2013 and PDS on People.
3. To Study the political impact of PDS.

Methodology:

This study is descriptive in nature. Both primary and secondary data collection techniques were utilized. The primary data was collected from the respondents randomly using Interview Schedule and the secondary data was collected from the reports, websites, News Papers and etc.

Welfare populism:

Welfare populism is a political strategy in which leaders use social welfare policies to gain popular support, presenting themselves as defenders of "the people" against elites. It merges populist rhetoric with programs such as pensions, healthcare, subsidies, or cash transfers, often prioritizing emotional appeal over long-term economic planning. These policies may favour particular groups, fostering an "us versus them" dynamic. While welfare populism can improve short-term well-being and strengthen political loyalty, critics argue it risks fiscal strain, social division, and prioritizes political gain over sustainable social development.

Post-Liberalization Context: Why Food Security Became Central

The economic liberalization of 1991 helped to high GDP growth, market expansion, and private sector dynamism in India. While these reforms accelerated aggregate economic

performance, they did not automatically translate into inclusive development or nutritional security. Key challenges emerging in the post-liberalization period included:

- **Persistent hunger and malnutrition:** Despite higher incomes for some, large sections of the population continued to face under nutrition, stunting, and micronutrient deficiencies.
- **Rising food price inflation:** Market liberalization and volatility exposed vulnerable households to frequent spikes in staple food prices, eroding purchasing power.
- **Informal employment and income insecurity:** Growth was concentrated in formal sectors and high-skill services, while the majority remained in informal work lacking social protection or regular income.

In this context, food security became a central policy imperative, not only as a matter of social justice but also as a mechanism to stabilize household welfare, manage political legitimacy, and mitigate the social costs of liberalization. The Public Distribution System (PDS) and later the NFSA emerged as key instruments to reconcile the promises of a market-driven economy with the urgent needs of its most vulnerable citizens.

Public Distribution System (PDS): An Overview

The Public Distribution System (PDS) is a state-managed food supply mechanism through which essential food grains—primarily rice, wheat, and coarse cereals—are distributed at subsidized prices via a nationwide network of Fair Price Shops (FPS). With the enactment of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, the scope and significance of PDS were substantially expanded. The Act mandates coverage of 75 per cent of the rural population and 50 per cent of the urban population, making it one of the largest food security programmes in the world. Under NFSA:

- Priority households are entitled to 5 kilograms of food grains per person per month at highly subsidized prices—₹3 per kg for rice, ₹2 per kg for wheat, and ₹1 per kg for coarse grains.
- Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) households, representing the poorest of the poor, receive 35 kilograms of food grains per household per month.
- The Act provides complementary nutrition through existing schemes. **Pregnant and lactating women** receive supplementary nutrition, **Children** benefit via the **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)** and **Mid-Day Meal programs**, addressing early-life under nutrition.

By conferring legal entitlement to subsidized food grains, NFSA transformed food security from a discretionary welfare measure into a justiciable right, positioning the PDS as a cornerstone of India's post-liberalization welfare architecture.

Evolution of PDS and Enactment of NFSA

The **Public Distribution System (PDS)** has undergone significant transformation since its inception, evolving from a limited welfare scheme into a **legally enforceable entitlement under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013**.

- **Pre-1991 PDS:** The system was **urban-biased and limited in reach**, primarily targeting food scarcity in cities, with irregular supplies and high exclusion of rural and marginalized populations.
- **Post-1997 Targeted PDS (TPDS):** Reforms introduced the **Targeted PDS**, focusing on Below Poverty Line (BPL) households. While this expanded rural coverage, the system remained **fragmented, inconsistent, and dependent on administrative discretion**.
- **NFSA (2013):** The Act represents a **rights-based transformation** of food security:

- **Legal entitlement:** Food access became **justiciable**, allowing citizens to claim their rights in courts.
- **Mass coverage:** Approximately **67% of the population** is now eligible.
- **Fixed subsidized prices:** Rice at ₹3/kg, wheat at ₹2/kg, and coarse grains at ₹1/kg, ensuring affordability.

This evolution reflects not only a **progressive shift toward rights-based welfare**, addressing historical inequities and hunger, but also a **politically strategic design**. By institutionalizing food entitlements and expanding coverage, NFSA enhances the **visibility of state welfare** and builds enduring **political legitimacy**, illustrating the dual logic of social protection and electoral strategy in post-liberalization India.

NFSA as Welfare Populism

The **National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013** can be seen as a paradigmatic case of **welfare populism**, where redistributive policies serve both social protection and political strategy. Its populist dimensions are evident across multiple axes:

➤ **Mass Appeal and Visibility**

Food, as a fundamental human need, transcends class, caste, and region, giving the National Food Security Act (NFSA) a universal and emotionally resonant appeal. The monthly distribution of grains through Fair Price Shops (FPS) creates a highly visible, everyday interaction between citizens and the state. Unlike indirect policies such as taxation or subsidies, PDS grains are tangible and perceptible, forging a symbolic connection between governance and welfare. This visibility strengthens political loyalty by embedding the state into the daily survival strategies of the poor, exemplifying a key feature of populist governance.

➤ **Electoral Calculus and Political Durability**

The **National Food Security Act (NFSA)** was enacted in a politically charged context, shortly before the 2014 General Elections, underscoring the link between welfare provision and electoral strategy. By codifying food security as a legal entitlement, the Act reinforced a pro-poor political identity for the government while making benefits difficult to reverse. This **“entrenchment effect”** ensures that welfare populism remains structurally durable, as subsequent governments face high political costs in rolling back entitlements, effectively locking in political capital through policy.

➤ **Compensation for Market Failures**

The **National Food Security Act (NFSA)** functions primarily as a social buffer rather than a market reform tool. It shields citizens from food price volatility and provides security against income fluctuations in India’s largely informal labour markets. Instead of tackling structural inequalities or promoting market-based solutions, the state directly transfers risk and relief to citizens. This approach exemplifies a central logic of **welfare populism**: prioritizing immediate relief over systemic reform, ensuring daily survival while simultaneously generating strong political visibility and loyalty.

➤ **Broader Implications**

The **National Food Security Act (NFSA)** illustrates the dual character of Indian social policy in the post-liberalization era, blending neoliberal growth imperatives with strong redistributive interventions. While critics may view it as a populist measure, the Act also **institutionalizes social rights**, offering legal recourse for the poor—a progressive shift from purely discretionary welfare. The resulting tension between electoral incentives and social justice objectives makes NFSA a compelling example of how **welfare populism** can coexist with, and

even reinforce, a rights-based approach to governance, embedding political loyalty while advancing citizens' entitlements.

NFSA and the Nature of the Indian Welfare State

The **National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013** represents a critical juncture in the evolution of India's welfare regime, reflecting the state's attempts to reconcile **market-oriented growth with social protection** in a complex, unequal society. Its significance can be understood along multiple axes:

➤ **From Developmental Planning to Entitlement-Based Populism**

Historically, India's welfare policies were rooted in the **planning state paradigm**, focusing on long-term developmental goals, infrastructure investment, and poverty alleviation through indirect, often discretionary, bureaucratic mechanisms. The **National Food Security Act (NFSA)** marks a decisive shift: it transforms food security from a policy objective into a **legal entitlement**, making the state directly accountable to citizens. This change exemplifies **welfare populism**, as social policy is framed as an immediate, visible benefit to the majority, simultaneously delivering social protection and reinforcing political legitimacy.

➤ **From Universal Provisioning to Targeted Mass Welfare**

Early welfare measures in India, such as the **Food for Work Programme** and **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)**, combined broad universality with limited coverage. The **National Food Security Act (NFSA)** shifts toward **strategically targeted welfare**, covering 75% of rural and 50% of urban populations, with special priority for the poorest households through the **Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)**. This targeting reflects a politically pragmatic approach—maximizing social impact and electoral visibility while controlling fiscal strain. It highlights the on-going tension between **equity and efficiency**, a defining feature of contemporary Indian social policy.

➤ **From State-Led Growth to Market Growth with Welfare Compensation**

Post-1991 liberalization in India emphasized market efficiency, private enterprise, and fiscal discipline, reducing direct state intervention in economic production. The welfare state shifted from a provider of goods to a guarantor of security, with the National Food Security Act (NFSA) acting as a buffer against market failures. The Act compensates citizens for food price inflation, income volatility, and informal labour insecurity, ensuring minimum subsistence without addressing underlying market inequities. In essence, NFSA embodies hybrid welfare logic, where market-driven growth is complemented by strategically targeted social protection, balancing economic liberalization with social stability.

➤ **Embedding Rights and Legitimacy in Governance**

By making **food security justiciable**, the **National Food Security Act (NFSA)** strengthens the rights-based dimension of the Indian state. Citizens gain **legal recourse** in cases of non-delivery, transforming welfare from a discretionary policy instrument into an **enforceable entitlement**. This rights-based framing simultaneously legitimizes populist redistribution while anchoring it in **legal, rather than purely electoral, authority**, effectively blurring the line between populism and institutionalized social justice.

➤ **Implications for the Indian Welfare State**

The **National Food Security Act (NFSA)** exemplifies a distinctive **"hybrid" welfare model**, blending neoliberal economic principles with expansive, highly visible redistribution. It illustrates the political logic of entitlements: benefits are **politically salient, difficult to reverse, and deeply embedded in daily life**, ensuring both social security and electoral durability. At the

same time, NFSA exposes on-going challenges, including **fiscal sustainability, delivery inefficiencies, regional disparities**, and the tension between providing short-term relief and pursuing long-term structural reforms. This duality underscores how welfare populism in India operates at the intersection of political strategy, social protection, and rights-based governance.

Socio-Economic Impact of NFSC and PDS:

1. Social Background of the respondents:

S. No	Social Group	Number	Percentage
1	Scheduled Castes	17	28.4%
2	Scheduled Tribes	11	18.3%
3	Backward Castes	24	40%
4	Minorities	06	10%
5	Others	02	3.3%
	Total	60	100%

The above table shows the distribution of the respondents. Among the total 60, majority of the respondents 24(40%) are from Backward Classes, followed by 17(28.4%) are from Scheduled Castes, 11(18.3%) are from Scheduled Tribes, 06(10%) are from Minorities, 02(3.3%) are from others.

2. Type of Ration Card:

S. No	Social Group	White	Antyodaya	TOTAL
1	Scheduled Castes	11	06	17
2	Scheduled Tribes	08	03	11
3	Backward Castes	21	03	24
4	Minorities	05	01	06
5	Others	02	00	02
	Total	47 (78.3%)	13 (21.7%)	60 (100%)

The above table shows type of ration cards holding by the respondents. Out of 60, Majority of the respondents 47(78.3%) are holding white ration card whereas 13(21.7%) of them holding Antyodaya cards. Among the antyodaya Cards, Scheduled Castes are at top, followed by Scheduled Tribes and Backward Castes.

3. Received Food Items:

Item	Number	Percentage
Rice	60	100%
Sugar	29	48.3%
Dal	23	38.3%
Wheat	07	11.6%
Any Other	07	11.6%

The above table shows the items received through PDS by beneficiaries. Out of total 60, 60(100%) of them receiving rice, 29(48.3%) are receiving sugar, 23(38.3%) are receiving Dal, 07(11.6%) each receiving wheat and some other items. This is proved that Rice is the major commodity distributed by PDS shops.

4. PDS Distribution Regularly and Timely:

Response	Number	Percentage
Always	05	8.4%

Mostly	47	78.3%
Sometimes	07	11.6%
Poor	01	1.7%
TOTAL	60	100%

Above table shows the data regarding whether the respondents are receiving commodities through PDS shops regularly and timely. Out of 60 respondents, majority of the respondents 47(78.3%) felt that mostly they received PDS distribution regularly and timely, followed by 07(11.6%) of them said few times only they receive the commodities on time, 05(8.4%) always received them on time and only one (1.75) said it is poor. Hence, the data proved that the PDS distribution is regularly and timely done.

5. PDS meets requirements of Family Adequately:

Response	Number	Percentage
Mostly	7	11.7%
Sometimes	19	31.6%
Never	34	56.7%
TOTAL	60	100%

The above table shows whether the PDS meets the family requirements adequately. Out of 60, majority of the respondents said the PDS never met the adequate requirement of the family, followed by 19(31.6%) of them said some times and 07(11.7%) mostly met the family requirements adequately. Hence, it is proved that the PDS never fulfil the family food needs adequately.

6. Impact of PDS:

Response	Significant	Moderate	Low	TOTAL
Accessibility of Food grains	03 (05%)	31 (51.7%)	26 (43.3%)	60 (100%)
Reduced Extreme Hunger	51 (85%)	09 (15%)	-	60 (100%)
Reduced Monthly expenses on food	31 (51.7%)	21 (35%)	08 (13.3%)	60 (100%)
Improved Nutritional Intake	19 (31.7%)	24 (40%)	17 (28.3%)	60 (100%)
Improved Economic Stability	17 (28.3%)	27 (45%)	16 (26.7%)	60 (100%)

The above table shows the impact of PDS on people life. Out of 60, 31 (51.7%) said PDS moderately impacted on accessibility of food grains, followed by 26(43.3%) said it is low and 03(05%) said it is significant. 51 (85%) of the respondents said it reduced the extreme hunger and 09(15%) of them said it is moderate. 31(51.7%) felt it significantly reduced the monthly food expenses, 21(35%) said moderate impact on food expenses and 08(13.3%) felt low impact. 24(40%) of them felt nutritional intake was moderately improved, 19(31.7%) of them felt it is significantly improved and 17(28.3%) felt less improved. 27(45%) of them felt their economic stability moderately improved, followed by 17(28.3%) of them said it is significantly improved and 16(26.7%) of them said less improved.

7. NFSA & PDS made any impact on your voting behaviour:

Response	Number	Percentage
----------	--------	------------

Yes	47	78.3%
No	13	21.7%
TOTAL	60	100%

The above table shows respondents opinion whether their voting behaviour was impacted with NFSA and PDS system. Majority of the respondents 47(78.3%) said yes whereas 13(21.7%) of the respondents said No.

Findings:

1. Majority of the beneficiaries of PDS are Backward Castes, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and minorities.
2. More than 78% of the respondents are holding white ration cards whereas nearly 22% of the respondents holding Antyodaya Cards.
3. In PDS Shops maximum numbers of the eligible people are getting rice only; nearly half of them are getting sugar along with rice. Maximum number of respondents not getting majority of the items apart from rice.
4. Approximately 86% of the PDS shops distributing the commodities regularly and timely. Remaining 14% of the PDS Shops facing some challenges.
5. Approximately 57% of the respondents felt that the PDS Shops never met the family food needs adequately whereas only 11.6% of them said the PDS fulfil the needs of their family.
6. With the PDS, the accessibility of food grains moderately improved, extreme hunger significantly reduced, monthly expenses on food significantly reduced, nutritional intake moderately improved and economic stability of the families is moderately improved.
7. The impact of PDS is very high on voting behaviour, 78% of the respondents felt that.

Conclusion

The NFSA-based Public Distribution System is a definitive example of welfare populism in post-liberalization India. While it has significantly enhanced food security and political inclusion, it also demonstrates how welfare policies increasingly serve dual purposes, Social protection and Electoral legitimacy. PDS impacted the lives of the deprived social groups at high. with this they are able to access adequate and nutritional food which causes reduce their expenditure on food and improved their economic stability. Despite of this, this scheme is also facing some challenges such as inadequate distribution of commodities and lesser number of commodities distributions. If the government focus on increasing number of items and quantity of commodities will helpful for the lower economic social groups. However, this scheme is more useful for the distribution of food for all which is also a desirable goal to be achieved by 2030 sustainable Goals.

References:

1. Aggarwal, A., & Mander, H. (2013). Abandoning the right to food. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(26-27), 64-70.
2. Chakraborty, S., & Sarmah, S. P. (2019). India 2025: The public distribution system and National Food Security Act 2013. *Development in Practice*, 29(2), 230-249.
3. Drèze, J. (2019). Food security and the public distribution system. In *Sense and solidarity: Jholawala economics for everyone* (pp. 175-203). Oxford University Press.
4. Patel, A. (2017). National Food Security Act: Areas that need focused attention. *International Journal of Research - Granthaalayah*, 5(1), 412-419.
5. Rao, N. (2022). Understanding the policy discourse within the formulation of the 2013 Indian National Food Security Act. *Food Security*, 14, 1159-1173.
6. National Food Security Act Portal. (n.d.). *Salient features of the National Food Security Act, 2013*. Retrieved January 24, 2026, from https://www.nfsa.gov.in/portal/Salient_Features_NFSA_AA