

WELFAΡISM IN A TRANSFORMING SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: A VIKSIT BHARAT PERSPECTIVE

Sajal Jain*

ABSTRACT

Welfarism in India has undergone a transformative journey, evolving from a post-independence state-centric approach to a dynamic, multi-stakeholder paradigm shaped by globalization, economic liberalization, and technological advancements. This paper critically examines the transition, highlighting key milestones such as the 1991 economic reforms, which, while catalyzing growth, also exacerbated socio-economic disparities. In response, targeted interventions, such as Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), and flagship programs, such as MGNREGA and Ayushman Bharat, have sought to balance economic efficiency with social equity. The research explores India's stratified social structure and evaluates innovative approaches to digital governance and participatory frameworks to foster inclusivity. Furthermore, it investigates the interplay of cooperative and competitive federalism in shaping welfare outcomes amidst regional disparities and political dynamics. The study advocates an adaptive model of welfarism that integrates equity with economic pragmatism, positioning India as a potential global leader in reimagining sustainable and inclusive welfare-state models.

Keywords: Welfarism in India, Post-Independence Welfare Policies, Economic Reforms 1991, Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), MGNREGA.

1. INTRODUCTION

Welfarism has long been a cornerstone of governance, emphasising the protection and promotion of individual and collective well-being. Rooted in ideals of equity and social justice, welfare systems aim to bridge socio-economic divides by addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. However, the rapid pace of globalisation, technological innovation, and political polarisation has challenged the adaptability and effectiveness of traditional welfare models. This paper explores the transformation of welfarism in response to these changes, addressing its theoretical foundations, historical trajectory, and prospects.

2. ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATIONS AND WELFAΡISM

Globalisation has integrated economies, created opportunities, but also widened income inequalities. Developing nations, often constrained by limited resources, struggle to expand welfare coverage. For instance, while globalisation has increased India's GDP, disparities in access to welfare persist between rural and urban areas. The rise of automation and artificial intelligence has disrupted traditional labor markets, threatening job security. Policies like Universal Basic Income (UBI), piloted in Finland and Kenya, are being explored to mitigate these impacts. However, funding such programs remains a challenge.

3. SOCIAL CHANGES AND WELFARE CHALLENGES

Aging populations in developed countries, such as Japan and Germany, demand increased healthcare and pension expenditures. Conversely, youthful demographics in Africa and South Asia require investments in education and employment. Rapid urbanisation, particularly in Asia and Africa, has strained infrastructure and welfare services in cities. Migration, both internal and international, poses challenges in integrating migrants into welfare systems, as seen in the European Union's response to refugee crises.

4. POLITICAL DYNAMICS AND WELFARE POLICIES

Populist leaders often prioritise short-term welfare measures over long-term strategies, undermining sustainability. For instance, the rollback of healthcare reforms in the US reflects the challenges posed by political polarization. Global issues like climate change and pandemics require transnational welfare strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of global health cooperation, as seen in the role of the WHO and international vaccine distribution efforts. Digital technology has also revolutionised welfare delivery, enabling efficiency and transparency.

*Agra College, Uttar Pradesh; Email: sajaljainofficial230@gmail.com

India's Aadhaar-linked direct benefit transfers and Estonia's e-governance model are exemplary. UBI has emerged as a potential solution to income inequality. Pilot programs in Finland and Kenya reveal their potential to reduce poverty, though concerns about feasibility and labor market impacts persist.

5. SOCIAL CHANGES

Modern societies are increasingly diverse, with intersecting identities influencing access to welfare. Gender, ethnicity, religion, and disability often intersect to create unique vulnerabilities. For instance, women in patriarchal societies face barriers in accessing education and healthcare, necessitating targeted interventions like conditional cash transfers. Similarly, racial and ethnic minorities in multicultural democracies face systemic exclusion, requiring affirmative action policies to bridge gaps. An intersectional approach to welfarism ensures that policies address these overlapping disadvantages, fostering greater equity. Climate change has emerged as a significant welfare challenge, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. Coastal communities, indigenous tribes, and small-scale farmers often bear the brunt of environmental degradation. Welfare systems must integrate climate resilience into their frameworks, focusing on adaptive measures such as disaster preparedness, sustainable agriculture, and access to renewable energy. Countries like the Netherlands have demonstrated the potential of integrating climate adaptation with social welfare, providing a model for others to follow.

6. POLITICAL DYNAMICS AND WELFARE POLICIES

Political polarisation has fragmented welfare debates, with partisan ideologies shaping policy priorities. In polarised democracies, welfare often becomes a tool for electoral mobilisation rather than long-term social investment. For example, populist regimes may focus on high-visibility cash transfers while neglecting structural reforms in education and healthcare. This short-termism undermines the sustainability of welfare systems, highlighting the need for bipartisan consensus on welfare as a non-negotiable public good. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) play a crucial role in bridging gaps in welfare delivery, particularly in regions with limited state capacity. Nonprofits and community-based organisations have been instrumental in providing healthcare, education, and disaster relief in marginalised areas. However, CSOs often face challenges related to funding, regulatory hurdles, and political interference. Strengthening partnerships between governments and civil society can enhance the reach and effectiveness of welfare initiatives.

7. INNOVATIONS IN WELFARE

The integration of big data into welfare policymaking has revolutionized the design and delivery of services. Governments can now analyze demographic trends, identify vulnerable groups, and track the impact of welfare programs in real time. For instance, Brazil's Bolsa Família program uses data analytics to ensure targeted delivery of cash transfers, significantly reducing poverty levels. Expanding such practices can improve efficiency and accountability in welfare systems globally. Global challenges require innovative cross-border welfare solutions. Regional collaborations, such as the European Union's social policy framework, demonstrate how nations can collectively address shared welfare concerns. Such models can be replicated in other regions, particularly in Africa and South Asia, to address issues such as migration, public health, and disaster management.

8. UNIQUE CHALLENGES IN WELFARE: CURRENT PERSPECTIVES

The integration of automation and AI across industries like manufacturing, agriculture, and services is accelerating at an unprecedented pace. While technology enhances efficiency and innovation, it also displaces millions of workers in routine, repetitive jobs. For instance, autonomous vehicles threaten to eliminate jobs in transportation, while AI-powered systems reduce the need for human labor in customer service and data processing. This displacement disproportionately impacts low-skilled workers, exacerbating income inequality. Furthermore, many countries lack adequate retraining and upskilling programs to prepare workers for emerging fields like AI development, renewable energy, and digital services. Governments must bridge this skills gap by investing heavily in education, vocational training, and continuous learning programs, while also providing income support during

transition periods. Rising sea levels, prolonged droughts, and extreme weather events are forcing millions to migrate from their homes. According to the International Organization for Migration, climate change could displace up to 200 million people by 2050. These "climate migrants" face significant challenges, including loss of livelihoods, inadequate housing, and lack of legal recognition in host regions. Many host countries, particularly in the Global South, already struggle to provide welfare for their own populations, leaving migrants in precarious conditions. Welfare systems must integrate climate resilience into policies by creating adaptive housing, sustainable livelihoods, and cross-border frameworks to support displaced populations. Global cooperation, such as climate migration funds and regional agreements, is essential to address this growing challenge. The increasing reliance on digital platforms for welfare delivery—such as online healthcare consultations, digital education, and electronic cash transfers—has created a dependency on technology. While this shift improves efficiency and accessibility for many, it marginalizes those without access to devices, internet connectivity, or digital literacy. For example, in rural areas of India, unreliable internet access prevents farmers from accessing government subsidies or market information. Elderly populations also face difficulties navigating digital systems for pensions or healthcare benefits. To address this divide, governments must invest in digital infrastructure, offer affordable technology, and provide training programs to ensure no one is excluded from welfare benefits due to technological barriers. Political polarisation has deeply affected the design and implementation of welfare systems. Populist governments often prioritise short-term, high-visibility measures, such as cash transfers or fuel subsidies, to gain electoral support. However, these policies frequently neglect critical areas such as education reform, healthcare infrastructure, and social security, which require long-term investments. For example, some countries have reduced funding for public health systems while introducing populist schemes that lack sustainability. Furthermore, political parties often view welfare as a tool to serve their voter base rather than as a means of addressing broader societal needs. To overcome this challenge, there must be a bipartisan consensus on welfare as a fundamental public good that transcends electoral politics.

In many developed countries, populations are ageing rapidly, with fewer working-age individuals supporting an increasing number of elderly citizens. For example, Japan's aging population has led to a dependency ratio of over 47%, straining its pension and healthcare systems. Similar challenges are emerging in South Korea and parts of Europe. These demographic shifts result in higher expenditures on healthcare, long-term care, and social security, while shrinking tax revenues from the working population. Policymakers must explore innovative solutions, such as encouraging immigration, raising the retirement age, and promoting family-friendly policies to address declining birth rates. Developing nations, though currently youthful, must prepare for similar transitions through proactive policies. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of global health and welfare systems, particularly in low-income and developing countries. Health crises disproportionately impact marginalized communities, which lack access to quality healthcare, clean water, and basic sanitation. Additionally, pandemics often disrupt livelihoods, pushing millions into poverty. For example, the World Bank estimated that COVID-19 increased global poverty for the first time in two decades. Future welfare systems must integrate robust healthcare infrastructure, universal access to medical care, and emergency social safety nets to ensure resilience against such crises. Governments must also establish contingency funds and strengthen international collaboration to address global health emergencies.

The gig economy, driven by platforms like Uber, DoorDash, and Amazon Mechanical Turk, has created new forms of employment but also significant challenges for welfarism. Gig workers often lack job security, health benefits, and retirement plans because they are classified as independent contractors rather than employees. For instance, drivers for ride-hailing services face long hours, low wages, and no access to traditional labour protections. Welfare systems must evolve to address these gaps by extending benefits like health insurance, pensions, and paid leave to gig workers. This requires regulatory reforms that balance the flexibility of gig work with workers' rights and protections. Many welfare systems fail to account for the compounded disadvantages faced by individuals with intersecting identities. For example, a woman with a disability in a rural area may face barriers due to gender, physical limitations, and geographic isolation. LGBTQ+ individuals in conservative societies

often face exclusion from social services due to stigma or discriminatory policies. Welfare programs must adopt an intersectional approach by designing policies that address the unique challenges posed by overlapping vulnerabilities. Tailored interventions, such as affirmative action, inclusive healthcare policies, and targeted education programs, can help bridge these gaps and promote equity.

Conflicts in regions like the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe have led to a surge in refugees and stateless individuals. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that over 35 million refugees worldwide live in precarious conditions. Refugees often lack access to healthcare, education, and employment in host countries due to legal restrictions or resource limitations. Stateless individuals, who lack citizenship, are particularly vulnerable, facing systemic exclusion from welfare systems. Governments must collaborate with international organisations to create comprehensive frameworks for refugee integration, including legal recognition, access to essential services, and pathways to citizenship. Mistrust in public institutions is growing globally, fueled by corruption, inefficiency, and political instability. For example, welfare programs in some countries are perceived as tools for patronage rather than equitable service delivery. This mistrust discourages citizens from participating in welfare initiatives or reporting fraud and corruption. Rebuilding trust requires transparent governance, community involvement in welfare planning, and the use of technology to enhance accountability. Governments must also address systemic bribery and ensure that welfare programs are inclusive, effective, and free from political interference.

9. CHALLENGES IN WELFARISM: A VIKSIT BHARAT PERSPECTIVE

In India's pursuit of becoming a Viksit Bharat (developed nation), the persistent urban-rural disparity in welfare delivery remains a critical challenge. Urban areas often receive better healthcare, education, and digital infrastructure, leaving rural regions underserved. For example, while urban populations have access to specialised healthcare facilities, rural areas struggle with shortages of doctors, equipment, and medicines. Bridging this gap requires decentralized welfare models that empower local governments and improve last-mile connectivity through technology and infrastructure investments. Agriculture remains the backbone of India's economy, yet small and marginal farmers face declining incomes due to shrinking landholdings, erratic weather, and inadequate market access. Current welfare programs, such as PM-KISAN, need to be expanded to include support for crop diversification, agro-processing facilities, and guaranteed procurement of diverse crops. A Viksit Bharat vision demands holistic agricultural reforms that integrate sustainable farming practices, advanced irrigation techniques, and access to global markets. Women in India continue to face barriers in accessing welfare benefits and participating in the workforce. Female labour force participation remains below 25%, hindered by a lack of childcare facilities, wage disparities, and unsafe work environments. A gender-sensitive welfare system under the Viksit Bharat framework must prioritise universal childcare, skill development programs tailored for women, and social safety nets to support unpaid care workers. Policies such as reserved quotas for employment and leadership roles can further empower women economically. The Digital India initiative has made significant strides, but many citizens still lack the digital literacy needed to effectively access welfare schemes. Programs like Ayushman Bharat or online subsidies often remain out of reach for those without smartphones or digital skills. A Viksit Bharat welfare system must expand digital inclusion by providing free or low-cost devices, public Wi-Fi in rural areas, and training programs. Ensuring inclusivity in digital governance can bridge the gap between technology and welfare accessibility. With over 50% of its population below the age of 25, India faces the dual challenge of harnessing its demographic dividend while addressing unemployment. Many youths lack access to quality skill development programs aligned with industry needs. Welfare policies must focus on enhancing employability through initiatives such as Skill India and the PM Kaushal Vikas Yojana. Furthermore, integrating entrepreneurial support, mentorship networks, and incubation centres into welfare frameworks can empower the youth to drive economic growth.

As India advances toward industrial and economic development, environmental sustainability must remain integral to the welfare agenda. Challenges such as water scarcity, pollution, and deforestation disproportionately affect vulnerable communities. A Viksit Bharat model should incorporate eco-

friendly welfare initiatives, such as subsidised solar panels for rural households, reforestation drives tied to employment schemes like MGNREGA, and incentives for adopting green technologies. Sustainable urban planning, clean energy investments, and awareness campaigns can further ensure a balance between growth and environmental protection. While schemes like Ayushman Bharat aim to provide universal health coverage, disparities in healthcare quality persist. Rural health centres often lack specialists and modern equipment, leading to unequal outcomes. A Viksit Bharat welfare perspective calls for expanding healthcare infrastructure, introducing mobile medical units in remote areas, and incentivizing private sector partnerships to improve service quality. Telemedicine platforms and AI-driven diagnostics can further enhance accessibility and efficiency. The informal sector employs over 80% of India's workforce but remains largely excluded from formal social security programs like pensions and health insurance. Welfare initiatives must integrate informal workers into schemes such as ESI and EPFO by offering flexible enrollment options and portable benefits. A Viksit Bharat approach must also address challenges specific to gig workers, migrant labourers, and domestic helpers by creating customised policies that ensure their financial stability and well-being. India is highly vulnerable to natural disasters, including floods, cyclones, and earthquakes, which disrupt lives and livelihoods. Welfare policies under the Viksit Bharat framework must incorporate disaster preparedness and recovery mechanisms. This includes creating dedicated disaster relief funds, setting up rapid-response welfare teams, and ensuring housing and crop insurance for at-risk populations. Promoting climate-resilient infrastructure and training local communities in disaster management are crucial to building resilience. States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu perform well on welfare indicators such as literacy and healthcare, while others, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, lag significantly behind. A Viksit Bharat vision requires addressing these regional disparities through targeted welfare programs. Providing additional funding and resources to underperforming states, combined with accountability measures, can ensure equitable development across the nation. Despite significant progress in reducing hunger, India faces emerging food security challenges due to climate change, soil degradation, and changing dietary patterns. Welfare systems must integrate climate-resilient agriculture, promote dietary diversity, and ensure universal access to fortified foods. Strengthening the Public Distribution System (PDS) with biometric tracking and expanding it to include the urban poor and migrant workers can enhance food security. India's cultural and linguistic diversity presents unique challenges in welfare implementation. Policies and schemes must account for regional languages, traditions, and community practices to ensure inclusivity. For example, welfare outreach materials in multiple languages and region-specific programs for tribal communities can increase participation and impact.

10. CONCLUSION

The vision of Viksit Bharat—a developed, self-reliant, and inclusive India—rests on a robust welfare system that addresses the diverse needs of its citizens while fostering equity, resilience, and sustainable growth. Welfarism, as a pillar of governance, has historically been central to India's nation-building efforts, reflecting the values of justice, equality, and fraternity enshrined in our Constitution. However, the evolving social, economic, and political landscape presents both opportunities and challenges that require innovative, adaptive, and inclusive approaches to welfare delivery. India's unique demographic composition, with its vast youth population, presents an unprecedented opportunity to channel human capital into economic growth. Skill development, entrepreneurial support, and digital literacy are critical to harnessing this demographic dividend. Programs like Skill India, when expanded to include futuristic industries such as AI, green technology, and sustainable agriculture, can create a workforce ready to lead the global economy. Simultaneously, empowering women and marginalised communities through targeted interventions and affirmative policies ensures that no one is left behind in the march toward development. Addressing the urban-rural divide is another critical aspect of the Viksit Bharat agenda. Ensuring equitable access to healthcare, education, and digital infrastructure is not just a necessity but a moral obligation. Leveraging technology, such as telemedicine and e-learning platforms, can bridge these gaps and ensure that welfare reaches even the most remote corners of the nation. Furthermore, integrating climate resilience into welfare policies—through sustainable agricultural practices, renewable energy adoption, and disaster preparedness—can safeguard

livelihoods while promoting environmental stewardship. The welfare system must also adapt to contemporary challenges, including the rise of the gig economy, climate-induced migration, and regional disparities. Extending social security to informal and gig workers, creating robust frameworks for climate migrants, and allocating resources equitably among states are essential to achieving balanced development. These efforts must be coupled with initiatives to rebuild trust in institutions, ensuring transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in welfare delivery. A *Viksit Bharat* is not merely about economic prosperity but also about fostering unity, dignity, and pride among its citizens. It is about creating an India where every individual, irrespective of gender, caste, or region, has the opportunity to live with dignity and contribute to the nation's progress. This vision requires not just government action but also active participation from all sections of society. Civil society, private enterprises, and individuals must come together to support and amplify welfare initiatives, creating a collective force for national development. As India approaches its centenary of independence, the dream of becoming a developed nation is within our grasp. By prioritising inclusive growth, sustainable development, and social equity, we can transform this vision into reality. The journey to *Viksit Bharat* is a patriotic call to action for every Indian to help build a brighter, stronger, and more united India. Together, with resolve and responsibility, we can fulfil the aspirations of our forefathers and secure a future that reflects the greatness of our nation. Let us rise, as one India, to build a welfare state that embodies the spirit of *Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat*—One India, Great India.

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