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Contemporary Socialism In India And Structural Paradigm Shift Of Welfare Policies

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I. Introduction

Since independence, India's social policy and economic planning have gone through many important changes. In the beginning, the Indian state followed democratic and Fabian socialist ideas and was seen as the main force for social and economic development. For the first four decades after independence, the government focused on state-led industrialization, central planning, and public control over key sectors of the economy. Over time, however, this heavily regulated system faced serious problems. These problems finally led to the 1991 balance of payments crisis, which forced India to move toward market-based economic reforms to stabilize and modernize the economy.

Market liberalization did not end India's welfare state. Instead, it increased the government's financial capacity and helped it support larger social welfare programs. In the following decades, Indian welfare changed in two major ways. First, during the 2000s, welfare became more rights-based, as citizens were given legal claims to services such as work, food, education, and information. Second, after 2014, welfare delivery became more centralized and technology-driven. This new model, often called 'New Welfarism' or the 'Techno-Patrimonial Welfare State,' uses digital systems to deliver benefits directly to people while also strengthening centralized political control (Yadav, 2026).

This ongoing transition reached a significant milestone with the legislative repeal of foundational rights-based frameworks. A key example is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of 2005, which was replaced by the Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-GRAM G) Act of 2025. Such evolution reflects a broader and deeper transformation within the country's political economy. It demonstrates that democratic socialism in India has proved to be a remarkably elastic and evolving construct. Its underlying mechanisms have been fundamentally restructured by the intersection of advanced technology, the complexities of fiscal federalism, and the constantly changing calculus of contemporary electoral politics (PIB, GOI, 2025).

II. Pre-Independence Roots And The Nehruvian Socialist Consensus

The intellectual origins of contemporary Indian socialism took shape before independence through a diverse coalition of social reformers, nationalist thinkers, and labor activists. Earlier, elite-led reform efforts, organized by figures such as Raja Rammohun Roy, had targeted regressive societal practices like caste discrimination, child marriage, and the ban on widow remarriage. Mahatma Gandhi later shifted these localized, urban initiatives into a massive national movement by establishing voluntary organizations focused on the upliftment of marginalized communities. Alongside this, early twentieth-century leaders including Narendra Dev, Jayaprakash Narayan, S.A. Dange, and Muzaffar Ahmed organized the agrarian and industrial working classes to campaign for radical wealth redistribution and social justice (Mahajan, 2022).

Simultaneously, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar profoundly shaped the debate over the state's institutional role in welfare. Believing that socio-economic rights should carry the same weight as civil and political liberties, Ambedkar successfully embedded this philosophy into the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) within the Indian Constitution to guide future legislation (Munjal, 2022). This vision was also reflected in his mid-1940s proposal to invite Sir William Beveridge to draft a social security blueprint for India. Although that effort was abandoned due to structural disagreements over the program's scope, Ambedkar ultimately prioritized formal, urban industrial workers, leading to the passage of the Employees' State Insurance (ESI) Act of 1948 (Saji Narayanan, 2022). This focused approach built upon previous colonial-era protections, such as the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1923, the Trade Unions Act of 1926, and the Maternity Benefit Act of 1929.

The post-independence era brought a political shift with the passing of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in 1950, which allowed Jawaharlal Nehru to advance his democratic socialist agenda. Nehru placed the state at the core of the economy, implementing the Mahalanobis model to channel capital toward key heavy industries like mining, energy, and metallurgy (D.N., 1988). To prevent private wealth concentration, his administration established the License-Permit-Quota Raj a highly regulated system marked by high import tariffs, state monopolies, and import substitution.

This centralized economic planning faced significant domestic opposition. Rejecting the compromised recommendations of the Economic Programme Committee in January 1948, the Congress Party's radical socialist faction split from the main party in March 1948 to form the independent Socialist Party. Despite these ideological disputes, Nehru maintained that production and economic growth had to occur before redistribution, declaring in 1958 that a welfare state was unfeasible without a dramatic rise in national income, noting that 'there is only poverty to divide' (The Nehru Archive, N.D.).

While this dirigiste system successfully constructed a diverse industrial foundation, expanded power and transport networks, and trained technical experts, its deep structural limitations eventually emerged. Excessive administrative protectionism and import substitution insulated domestic businesses from international markets, sparking productivity declines, technical stagnation, and bureaucratic inefficiency. Low agricultural investment resulted in chronic food deficits that made the nation dependent on foreign food aid, while rigid state regulations suppressed private enterprise, creating state-backed monopolies and a parallel economy fueled by corruption and rent-seeking.

III. The Neoliberal Transition

India's economic transition was a gradual, internally driven process rather than an abrupt policy pivot in 1991, as evidenced by the robust growth phase generated by the steady pro-business policy shifts during the 1980s (Mukherji, 2009). However, a critical turning point arrived in June 1991 when India was confronted with a severe balance of payments crisis. This crisis was precipitated by a ballooning fiscal deficit, the oil-price shock from the 1990–91 Gulf War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union India's primary trading and geopolitical partner—which together depleted foreign exchange reserves to less than fifteen days of imports.

In response to this emergency, the newly elected administration of PV Narasimha Rao, with Manmohan Singh serving as Finance Minister, implemented comprehensive structural adjustment reforms backed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. This New Economic Policy dismantled the restrictive License Raj, initiated the disinvestment of state-owned enterprises, slashed import tariffs, and opened previously monopolized sectors such as banking, telecommunications, and aviation to private and foreign capital (Malcolm, Little and Ahluwalia, 1999).

While these post-1991 reforms successfully revitalized the economy by accelerating real per capita income growth and elevating India's global profile particularly through a highly productive services and information technology sector they fell short in generating sufficient high-quality employment. The services sector, despite its major contribution to GDP, remained highly capital-intensive and specialized, offering minimal opportunities for low and semiskilled workers. Simultaneously, manufacturing became increasingly import-intensive, favoring foreign capital goods over labor-intensive domestic supply chains.

This imbalance resulted in jobless growth, with employment expanding by a mere 0.45 percent annually from 2004-05 to 2011-12, and the formal workforce stagnating just above 400 million after 2018 despite robust economic expansion (Directorate General of Employment, 2024). As the economy failed to generate secure non-farm jobs for millions of citizens transitioning out of agriculture, the state was unable to scale back its welfare interventions. Instead, it was forced to restructure its welfare commitments to mitigate rising socio-economic disparities and sustain democratic legitimacy.

IV. Social Movements And Institutional Entitlements

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, India's sociopolitical landscape witnessed a paradigmatic shift in its conceptualization of the welfare state. This transformation marked a departure from a traditional developmental model characterized by discretionary, top-down resource allocation based on perceived needs toward a robust, rights-based regime of legally enforceable entitlements. This transition was not merely administrative although propelled by a sophisticated synergy of grassroots mobilization, judicial activism through public interest litigation, and a political environment responsive to the demands of a rights-conscious electorate.

Central to this institutional evolution was the National Advisory Council (NAC), an innovative extra-constitutional body convened in 2004 under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi during the first United Progressive Alliance (UPA) administration. The NAC functioned as a critical deliberative interface, integrating the perspectives of grassroots activists, social scientists, and development economists directly into the legislative process. By institutionalizing civil society input, the NAC played a pivotal role in drafting and advocating for landmark social legislation, effectively translating social movement demands into codified national policy (Chidambaram, 2021).

This legalism found its intellectual foundation in capability approach by Amartya Sen, which redefined the objective of development from mere income growth to the expansion of human freedoms and functional capabilities (Kuhumba, 2017). Under this framework, welfare was reconceptualized; rather than viewing state assistance as a discretionary dole, essential services including primary education, nutritional security, healthcare, and guaranteed employment were recognized as fundamental rights in India. These rights are seen as the foundational prerequisites for active social citizenship, empowering individuals to lead lives they have reason to value and enabling the marginalized to challenge systemic inequalities.

The codification of these rights into statutory law fundamentally altered the relationship between the Indian state and its people. It established institutionalized mechanisms for accountability, granting citizens the legal standing to demand their entitlements and seek redress for state failures. By shifting the burden of proof from the recipient to the provider, this rights-based framework has deepened the democratic process, fostering a culture of claim-making that empowers the most vulnerable segments of society to extract accountability from public officials (Centre for the Study of the Indian Economy, 2026).

V. Significant National Rights-Based Legislation (2005–2013)

The legislative output of this era fundamentally reorganized the relationship between the citizen and the state through several landmark acts. The Right to Information Act (2005) empowered citizens to demand public records and expose corruption, while the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005) legally guaranteed manual wage employment to rural households. Furthering this shift, the Forest Rights Act (2006) recognized the traditional land tenure of forest-dwelling communities, and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) codified education as a right for children aged 6 to 14 years. Finally, the National Food Security Act (2013) turned food grains into a legal right for a vast majority of the population, covering over 81 crore citizens (Govt. Schemes, 2026).

The structural delivery of these rights-based interventions was explicitly decentralized and process-oriented. By vesting the identification of beneficiaries and project selection in local Gram Panchayats, decision-making power was placed directly within communities. This design relied on local accountability mechanisms, including community-led social audits and village vigilance committees, to enforce transparency. Ultimately, this emphasis on implementation processes sought to build democratic capacity, enabling citizens to participate in direct claim-making and effectively challenge entrenched local elites (Saxena, 2018).

VI. The Transition To New Welfarism

Since 2015, the rights-based welfare framework has increasingly given way to a distinctive social policy model described as ‘New Welfarism’ or the ‘Techno-Patrimonial Welfare State’. This model is marked by a clear preference for subsidized public delivery of visible, excludable private goods rather than sustained investment in intangible, non-excludable public goods. Unlike earlier redistribution strategies that sought to strengthen people’s long-term capacities through public education and primary healthcare, New Welfarism emphasizes the direct transfer of highly visible and easily quantifiable material benefits to households. This orientation is reflected in major national schemes centered on household-level delivery (Newman, 2024).

This material-focused approach is built around several prominent initiatives. The *Swachh Bharat Mission* sought to reduce open defecation through the construction of more than 10 crore household toilets since 2014, supported by Free Sauchalay Yojana hygiene grants. Similarly, the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana extended subsidized LPG cooking gas connections to low-income households, while the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) financed the construction of more than 2.5 crore rural and urban homes since 2016 through direct grants of up to ₹120,000 (Centre for the Study of the Indian Economy, 2026).

The PM-KISAN Scheme, launched in 2019, further strengthened this direct-delivery model by giving ₹6,000 every year to more than 12 crore farmers and reducing the role of traditional agrarian intermediaries (PM India, 2019). These transfers were made possible through the Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM) Stack, which helped open more than 50 crore bank accounts for Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT). The political economy of New Welfarism has been understood as a shift toward a ‘Techno-Patrimonial Welfare State’ (Venkat, 2024). In this system, the state uses digital public infrastructure, especially Aadhaar-based biometric identification and Direct Benefit Transfers, to reach people directly instead of depending on regional bureaucracies and local political intermediaries. This centralized digital route allows national leadership to take direct political credit for welfare delivery while avoiding many layers of the central administrative system.

In this model, welfare is no longer presented mainly as a legal right that citizens can demand. Instead, it is shown as a direct benefit given by the national leader. This has helped create the *labharthi varg*, or beneficiary class, a group of voters who are seen as connected directly to the leader rather than through caste, religion, or local political networks. In this way, the model reduces the importance of older social divisions and helps protect the government from charges of exclusion (Venkat, 2024).

VII. Structural Overhaul From MGNREGA To VB-GRAM G Act

The Indian welfare landscape is undergoing a profound structural evolution, marked by the legislative repeal of the historic Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of 2005 and the introduction of the Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-GRAM G) Act of 2025. Passed by Parliament in December 2025 and enacted on 01 July 2026, the VB-GRAM G Act re-envisions rural social safety nets by transitioning from a decentralized safety net to a digitally integrated, top-down infrastructure-driven employment model (Gupta, 2026).

This policy transition alters several core operational, financial, and planning components of rural labor guarantees. Statutorily, while the legacy MGNREGA guaranteed rural households a minimum of 100 days of manual wage employment per fiscal year, the VB-GRAM G Act increases this commitment to 125 days. Additionally, national floor wages have been standardized; under MGNREGA, wages differed across states, averaging ₹298.8 per day during the 2025–26 cycle. VB-GRAM G establishes a uniform national statutory wage floor of ₹300 per day, lifting the overall contemporary average to ₹327.4 per day (TOI, 2026).

The underlying fiscal framework has similarly shifted from a demand-driven, open-ended model to a centrally sponsored system with rigid, state-wise 'normative allocations'. Under MGNREGA, the Central Government covered 100% of unskilled wages and split material and administrative costs on a 60:40 basis with states. Under the new VB-GRAM G regime, the combined total of wage, material, and administrative overheads is subject to a strict 60:40 cost-sharing ratio, with a 90:10 ratio for Northeast and Himalayan states. Furthermore, while the legacy system placed the full financial burden of the unemployment allowance payable if work is not provided within 15 days of demand—on state governments, VB-GRAM G establishes a standardized escalation scale, paying one-fourth of the notified wage for the first 30 days of delay, and increasing to one-half for subsequent periods (TOI, 2026).

Seasonality and local planning authority have been fundamentally reorganized under the new framework. Unlike MGNREGA, which provided year-round counter-cyclical work opportunities, VB-GRAM G mandates a suspension of operations for up to 60 days during peak agricultural sowing and harvesting seasons to prevent wage competition in rural labor markets. Moreover, planning has transitioned from a highly decentralized, bottom-up model where local Gram Panchayats held absolute authority over project selection to a centralized, GIS-driven system integrated with the PM Gati Shakti and Yuktdhara platforms.

Administrative oversight has migrated from analog registers and manual muster rolls toward advanced digital systems. VB-GRAM G mandates e-KYC, biometric verification, and real-time geospatial tracking of all physical assets. While legacy works focused on small-scale, labor-intensive water conservation and land development projects, contemporary assets are integrated into the broader Viksit Bharat National Rural Infrastructure Stack. Finally, job card policies have changed: the validity period is reduced from five years under MGNREGA to three years under VB-GRAM G, and targeted, distinct colored job cards are now issued to highly vulnerable cohorts, including women, transgender individuals, and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) (PIB, 2026).

To support this transition, the Central Government allocated an initial ₹95,692.31 crore, disbursing a first installment of ₹25,863 crore on 05 July 2026 (Nair, 2026). However, the VB-GRAM G Act has drawn sharp criticism from opposition political leaders and social activists, who characterize it as a systematic erosion of the right to work in India. Prominent critics, such as Nikhil Dey of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan and Jairam Ramesh of the Congress party, have labeled the centralized framework as '*Rozgar Adhikar chori*' (the theft of the right to work) (TNIE Online Desk, 2026).

These critics argue that by replacing a demand-driven safety net with a centralized, computer-mapped infrastructure stack under PM Gati Shakti, the state has diluted the constitutional autonomy and authority of Gram Panchayats. There are also significant concerns regarding the fiscal burden of the 60:40 cost-sharing wage ratio on state governments. Aggregate state expenditures for rural employment are projected to rise six-fold, from ₹7,600 crore to more than ₹51,000 crore. Moreover, the implementation of New Welfarism is not uniform across India, though shaped by regional variations in subnational identity, fiscal capacity, and party competition (Centre for the Study of the Indian Economy, 2026).

At the state level, New Welfarism has evolved into a form of 'competitive populism,' where regional governments compete with central flagship initiatives by launching highly visible, targeted cash transfers and material subsidies. These state-level programs provide immediate economic relief to vulnerable groups although frequently strain sub-national public finances and bypass the structural administrative reforms necessary to build long-term public health and education systems.

VIII. State-Level New Welfarism Initiatives

Subnational competitive populism has produced different welfare spending patterns across Indian states. In West Bengal, the government launched the *Laxmir Bhandar* scheme in 2021 to provide monthly cash transfers to more than 2 crore marginalized and lower-caste women. Beneficiaries receive between ₹1,000 and ₹1,500 per month (The Telegraph, 2022). While the scheme has helped build long-term electoral support among women, it also places a heavy burden on the state budget. Its annual cost is estimated at ₹50,000 crore, contributing to West Bengal's rising debt, which reached 38% of Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) by 2025. The state also introduced the *Banglar Bari* program in 2024 after central PMAY funds were suspended. This program provides direct housing grants to 16 lakh rural families without durable homes, at a cost of ₹9,600 crore to the state (Nag, 2024). These initiatives build on earlier welfare programs such as *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, launched in 2013, which offers scholarships and one-time graduation grants to one crore female students in secondary education and has helped reduce child marriage.

Tamil Nadu follows a similar, yet historically rooted approach through the *Kalaignar Magalir Urimai Thogai* scheme. The program provides an unconditional monthly transfer of ₹1,000 to women heads of households working in the unorganized sector. Its broad coverage reflects Tamil Nadu's long-standing Dravidian social contract and its emphasis on welfare as a form of social citizenship (Meghna M., 2025). Bihar has adopted a more targeted strategy through the *Nitish Kumar Social Support Packages*. These packages focus on low-caste communities, rural youth, and women entrepreneurs by offering ₹10,000 grants for smartphones and entrepreneurial loans of up to ₹200,000 for women (Singh, 2025). Even though Bihar continues to encounter serious fiscal constraints, the scheme underwent an aggressive expansion of welfare benefits.

IX. Structural Deficits And Algorithmic Exclusion

While the political narrative surrounding New Welfarism emphasizes technological efficiency and saturation coverage, a granular analysis of social expenditures reveals a systemic underfunding of foundational social infrastructure. Public expenditure on education has remained stagnant between 3.5 percent and 4.5 percent of GDP since the early 1990s, failing to meet the 6 percent target originally recommended by the Kothari Commission in 1968. Concurrently, central expenditure on school education has steadily declined from 0.37 percent of GDP in 2014-15 to 0.23 percent in 2023-24 (The Hindustan Gazette, 2024).

This fiscal contraction has occurred alongside a parallel retreat in older, rights-based social assistance programs. The National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), which provides vital old-age, widow, and disability pensions to the elderly poor, has faced a severe real-terms budget squeeze (Sharma and Pathak, 2025). While its budget rose steadily from ₹2,392 crore in 2007–08 to a peak of ₹10,618 crore in 2014–15, it has flatlined at an average of ₹9,500 crore annually through 2025–26, representing a major funding cut after adjusting for inflation. A similar fiscal retrenchment is documented in child nutrition and public health. Central supplementary nutrition norms under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) have remained low since 2017 at ₹8 per child per day for standard cases and ₹12 per day for severely malnourished children, falling far short of NITI Aayog's recommended inflation-adjusted norms of ₹10 and ₹15 respectively (the New Indian Express, 2017).

This average funding has contributed to severe structural deficits in rural health infrastructure. Government data from March 2023 reveals a 22 percent shortage in rural health sub-centres, a 30 percent shortage in primary health centres (PHCs), and a 36 percent shortage in community health centres (CHCs) across rural India (PIB, 2024). The transition of welfare delivery into a digitally mediated system has also introduced new forms of exclusion. Access to basic survival infrastructure including subsidized grains, maternal benefits, and work is now entirely conditional on the biometric and database verification of an Aadhaar record. When automated biometric systems fail due to weak rural internet connectivity, mismatched database records, or degraded fingerprints, vulnerable citizens are locked out of the system.

Additionally, the heavy reliance on digital dashboards means that severe child malnutrition is often under-recorded; rather than eradicating stunting and wasting, the digital state risks invisibilizing the incidence of malnutrition on administrative dashboards, masking the real-world consequences of underfunded public systems. Despite public narratives highlighting technological efficiency and comprehensive welfare coverage, close examination reveals persistent underfunding of critical social infrastructure (Kuruva and Buddha, 2026).

X. Conclusion

Contemporary socialism in India has evolved through three major phases: Nehruvian state-led planning, rights-based welfare, and the recent rise of New Welfarism. In the early decades after independence, the state acted as the main driver of development through centralized planning, public sector dominance, and regulated industrial growth. The rights-based era of the 2000s changed this relationship by treating citizens as legal rights-holders entitled to employment, food, education, and information. Since 2015, however, welfare has increasingly shifted toward digitally delivered material benefits, using platforms such as Aadhaar, Direct Benefit Transfers, and the JAM system to provide targeted goods and cash transfers directly to households.

This shift has made welfare delivery more visible and technologically efficient, but it has also weakened the idea of welfare as a democratic right. By turning citizens from active claimants into passive beneficiaries, the new model risks making social policy dependent on centralized authority and political credit rather than legal entitlement and local accountability. Direct transfers may offer immediate relief, but they cannot replace sustained investment in education, healthcare, nutrition, and secure employment. Therefore, India's future welfare model must combine the efficiency of digital delivery with stronger universal rights, deeper public investment, and greater empowerment of local democratic institutions.

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