Welfare Schemes and Electoral Politics: A Case of Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract
The evolving dynamics of welfare and electoral politics in Andhra Pradesh thus offers an incisive lens through which to view the political economy of public policy in a competitive-democratic context. The state's welfare provision has witnessed a significant increase over the past decade with state governments pushing for implementation of large-scale direct benefit transfer (DBT) schemes among other kindly policy instruments. Focusing on welfare programmes as instruments of social protection and as politically negotiated intervention affected by voting incentives, this paper contributes to the (small) literature on public policy. Based on empirical information from state budgets, policy papers, election manifestos, and by examining at the flagship welfare schemes of Amma Vodi, YSR Rythu Bharosa, and social pensions, among others, it analyses trends in policy targeting, implementation outcomes, and fiscal prioritization. The paper shows that welfare politics increasingly target electorally relevant groups such as women, farmers, and the poor and influence voter and party competition. The expansion of welfare has resulted in stronger state presence and short-term insure of livelihoods, but has also raised issues of democratic accountability, fiscal sustainability, and long-term development planning. The study makes a contribution to the public policy literature by showing how welfare regimes simultaneously operate as developmental and political strategies in a competitive electoral environment.
Keywords: *Welfare Schemes; Electoral Politics; Public Policy; Direct Benefit Transfers; Distributive Politics; Andhra Pradesh; Democratic Accountability*

I.   Introduction

In India's federal structure, subnational states enjoy considerable autonomy in designing welfare policies at the administration level, and as a result, the scalar sites of policy implementation at the state-level become politicised fields of competition and experimentation. Andhra Pradesh has emerged as a classic illustration of contradictory welfare politics in India, where successive state governments have increasingly relied on welfare schemes not merely as instruments of social protection but as strategic means of electoral mobilisation. In the context of persistent socio - economic inequalities, a large segment of the population in the verge of subsistence, and welfare politics occupying a central position on party agendas, in budgets and in election manifestos, there have been changes in the way in which electoral and political engagement are organised and voters decide (Dreze & Sen, 2013; Manor, 2018).

The gradual enhancement of welfare in Andhra Pradesh can be analytically conceived as a weaving together of distributive politics and policy feedback theory. The politics of distributive theorists is that the government allocates its resources strategically to maximize political support it can expect, by targeting benefits to groups that happen to be electorally concentrated rather than by offering universal public goods (Cox & Mc Cubbins, 1986; Dixit & Londregan, 1996). Policy feedback theory draws attention to the fact that public policies themselves "generate enduring political effects by influencing how citizens conceive of what governments owe them, who they are as members of the political community, and how to engage in politics" (Mettler & Soss, 2004). The welfare schemes in Andhra Pradesh, more so DBTs are not conduits for material welfare, but reconfigure the state citizen relation, reinforce political allegiance and influence voter behaviour. In this context, this paper investigates parallel developments in welfare and electoral politics in Andhra Pradesh through the lens of recent welfare schemes with a focus on the policy design, implementation outcomes and electoral implications.

II.   Theoretical Framework: Welfare and Electoral Competition

Party convergence in democratic contestation towards either more populist or welfare oriented politics is primarily driven by the need to win votes particularly against the backdrop of growing socio-economic inequalities (Downs,1957; Kitschelt, 2000). In these cases, welfare provision has both a redistributive and

electoral function, social policy makers are enticed into the electoral game (Bardhan, 2016; Jaffrelot, 2019). Welfare programmes in general, and direct transfers in particular, are politicised because they give governments the opportunity to send signals of concern to electorally significant groups, including women, farmers and financially compromised families.

Direct benefit transfers (DBTs) promote transparency and accountability in welfare delivery and provide politicians with a clean link between benefits and incumbency and leadership (Muralidharan, Niehaus & Sukhtankar, 2016). Distributive politics accounts for the tactical targeting, and policy feedback theory explains how/why politically effective delivery subsequently enhances political loyalty and participation. These are narratives about "welfare politics" and "welfare policy" in Andhra Pradesh - both as the means of developmental state intervention and as the source of electoral mobilisation.

III. Welfare Scheme Proliferation in Andhra Pradesh
3.1 YSRCP's Welfare Agenda

Under Chief Minister Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy, the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) amplified welfare schemes through its flagship *Navaratnalu* agenda, bringing about a new height in the quantity, direction and politicisation of social policy in Andhra Pradesh. The menu included a whole array of social protection measures designed to meet either the general needs of a socio-economic group or those of particular subsets thereof, such as women, small and marginal farmers, students from the weaker economic sections of the society, aged persons, and the physically challenged (Business Standard, 2023). Major schemes such as *YSR Pension Kanuka, YSR Rythu Bharosa, Jagananna Vidya Deevena, Jagananna Vasati Deevena, YSR Asara and Amma Vodi* were implemented mainly through direct benefit transfers (DBTs) which increased the transparency of disbursal, common leakages in welfare delivery mechanism were greatly reduced, and helped the State government to know and effectively hit the outreach of these schemes (The Federal, 2022).

Among them, *Amma Vodi* is the most potent for social and political ends. The scheme provides annual cash benefits to mothers who ensure that their children attend school, in order to increase enrolment and reduce dropouts, and to bring more girls into education. Simultaneously, the services seek to address women as a mobilisable electoral constituency and in so doing position mothers as political intermediaries engaging in political loyalty work for the ruling party ((The Federal, 2022; Deccan Chronicle, 2023).With its mix of financial rewards and maternal duty, *Amma Vodi* changes school attendance as a form of routine sociality into a politicized interaction between the state and household, a technique of refinement and discipline (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004).

These secular *Navratnas* into represent an assertion of welfare as a high-powered and strategic instrument of distributive politics in which state patronage is directed to those groups which are most electorally vulnerable with an aim to extracting the greatest political advantage (Dixit & Londregan, 1996). The poor and marginal farmers are entitled to YSR *Rythu Bharosa*, the income support linked to agriculture, and the students from backwards families are covered under *Jagananna Vidya Deevena* and *Vasati Deevena*, with financial assistance for tuition and boarding. YSR Asara expands self-help groups (SHGs), particularly women-led collectives, bridging local political networks in the process. These policies collectively demonstrate a multi-pronged strategy: social policies shape electoral concerns; welfare provision is brought into visibility and quantification; and subject categories are managed through split selective targeting to commit social protection objectives related to poverty alleviation, financial security and educational participation to political support.

The fact that a portion passed through DBTs also signals the bureaucratic competence of this agenda. These are different from the typical cash transfers that would get leaked to other things, DBTs tend to offer real time monitoring, are handled by much lesser hands and have the government linking the beneficiary directly to the fiscal outcomes. This not only enhances public trust in the welfare system but also increases the electoral visibility of the ruling party, as the beneficiaries too have no doubt about the source of their benefits i.e., the government (Business Standard, 2023; The Federal, 2022). Yet the targeting logic also means that the welfare system is now deployed as a tool of strategic electoral engineering, giving priority to groups with political significance voting blocs such as women, rural households, and small farmers, so that social policy and electoral politics become mutually reinforcing.

The YSRCP's *Navaratnalu* can be at best said to be a blend of social welfare politics and political pragmatism. Taking advantage of this state-level model, as well as merging development programs with electoral calculations, the party has raised welfare as an instrument of political mobilization at the national level. It is as if both about productionizing measurable social outcomes in terms of increased school enrolment and financial handouts to child-ridden poor households, but also it productions of the welfare state's politicization and demonstrates that contemporary good governance at the state level in Andhra Pradesh unwinds in "making" social policy, then "paying" for it fiscally, and then "legitimately" contesting elections in doing all of these-thus politicizing it, financing it, and social policy as triadic, mutually sustaining political strategy (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004; Jaffrelot, 2019).

3.2 Competing Welfare Promises: TDP and the "Super Six"

While the welfare populism of the YSR Congress Party was in the forefront in the polls, the Telugu Desam Party was reiterating its own welfare plank, the 'Super Six' in the poll for different states. The "package" included *Thalliki Vandanam* (education aid to students), pensions for the elderly and for the disable, help to farmers' income, among other cash doles to socially and financially vital sectors (Deccan Chronicle, 2023). Its formation reflects TDP's mirroring of an opposite distributive logic – that opposition parties articulate welfare packs in response not only to demand from within society, but to strategically bite into the ruling parties electoral base, & to the exact same group of voters (Dixit & Londregan, 1996; Bardhan, 2016).

The welfare incentives of the TDP are p a straight line between social policy and political expediency. Trying to "appeal to the same critical demographic constituencies as the YSRCP – students, women, farmers, senior citizens – the party is set to borrow the current regime's schemes for electoral recognition and even symbolic gains. Also, in an attempt to attract young and parent voters, *Thalliki Vandanam* that asked children to help their parents in education, mimicking YSRCP's *Amma Vodi*, albeit in both application as well as content, and pension schemes targeted at senior citizens for cross-generational political support (The Hindu, 2022). In the same way, transfers to farmers were introduced to compete with the YSRCP's *Rythu Bharosa*, showing how welfare schemes are increasingly becoming instrumental electoral tools rather than channels of development.

While both the YSRCP and the TDP relied on direct benefit transfers (DBTs) to enforce timely delivery and amplify political salience, differences in political culture and implementation and beneficiary perception that resulted in varied political outcomes. TDP's packages, on the other hand, were not as robustly implemented - at the structural level, rural Andhra lacked strong administrative networks in some parts and systemic targeting was, by and large, short lived (The Times of India, 2022). Meanwhile, the YSRCP's programmes had the benefit of unified oversight, consistent messaging, and longer-term roll-out, which improved social impact and political reticulation. DB can result in better political returns than comparable schemes, but not after adjusting for perception of security of entitlement Empirical research has shown that voters' perception about the reliability, transparency and access of welfare schemes is crucial in calculating political returns of welfare schemes and such perceptions are sometimes more determinant of political returns than the sheer size of transfer (Muralidharan, Niehaus & Sukhtankar, 2016).

The emergence of the "Super Six" and its competing welfare promises is just a manifestation of a larger phenomenon: the provision of welfare in Andhra has taken center stage in party competition with social policy being the foremost political lever. Welfare schemes have ceased to be neutral instruments of development; they are also tools of politics mobilisation, indicators of state responsiveness, and mechanisms for political loyalty among defined recipient constituencies. The above comparative readings of YSRCP and TDP projects demonstrate that the electoral utility of such schemes depends on more than just monetary outlay but also on how administratively synchronous, inclusive, and just in the recipient's eyes the distribution of benefits is, highlighting the intricate linkages between policy design, governance capacity and electoral politics (Pierson, 1993; Jaffrelot, 2019).

IV.   Empirical Evidence: Budget Allocations and Voting Patterns

4.1 Budget Priorities Reflect Electoral Calculus

The budgets of Andhra Pradesh reveal a predictable ballooning of welfare entitlements during election years or years immediately preceding elections, suggestive of a politicisation of the State's fiscal policy. In the case of the budget of 2023–24, for example, there was an unprecedented augmentation in the allotments for direct benefit transfer (DBT) schemes viz. *Amma Vodi, YSR Rythu Bharosa and Jagananna Vidya Deevena,* showcasing the tactical utilization of public funds for electoral-centric communities (The Print, 2023). These are not the stuff of some random give away, the doles are targeted at demographically politically sweet groups women, rural households' dependent on agriculture, students belonging to economically poor families and socio-economically backward groups (Deccan Chronicle, 2023).

Andhra Pradesh's welfare spending is such: when the distributions appear to have been obliged for social protection and human development result, they are, at the same time, street-side welfare tied up with electoral politics. Because DBTs are predictable and visible, the benefits conferred by these schemes can be traced back to the ruling party, thereby facilitating political credit claiming and generating policy feedback effects even among recipients (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004). In prioritizing local budget priorities around electoral incentives, the state leverages welfare provisioning to both maximize household welfare and secure political support, demonstrating the intersection of public policy design, fiscal strategy and distributive politics (Bardhan, 2016; Jaffrelot, 2019).

4.2 Scheme Implementation and Voter Response

Although the financial resourcing of such schemes is in accordance with strategic intent, evidence from ethnographic studies and journalistic investigations suggests outcomes vary at the local level and can inform the

politicisation of welfare instruments. According to reports, almost every beneficiary who is eligible for the scheme has received cash, which has helped increase household income, promoted school enrolment and improved financial stability (The Times of India, 2022). But mundane mistakes, delays in disbursal of funds, a mismatch between data, and minimum information about the beneficiary particularly concerning tenant farmers, sharecroppers and unregistered families, among others - have been hindering the pace as well as reach of such welfare schemes. These sorts of structural and process limitations indicate that the quality of implementation is an important predictor of societal and political legitimacy outcomes.

It matters for vote choice. The trustworthiness, transparency and ease of access to welfare programs influence how political credit attributions work towards maintaining electoral support of beneficiaries (Muralidharan, Niehaus & Sukhtankar, 2016). Like the person who didn't make the cutoff because their land records are out of order or they don't have ID, who might vote for the government no less after that experience, but one that's less confident or less sure in the legitimacy of the government, thus negating the political gains hoped for with DBT schemes. Conversely, if welfare transfers are delivered late and unpredictably, they are said to undermine trust in government responsiveness and, ultimately, voters' loyalty (The Federal, 2022). These findings underscore how the 'space' between policy design and administrative enforcement on the one hand, and electoral consequences on the other, welfare policies not only constitute social protection instruments, but also act as political feedback mechanisms that shape long-term citizen participation and party alignment.

V. Case Studies

5.1 *Amma Vodi*: Women Voters as a Strategic Constituency

The *Amma Vodi* Scheme is a gender focused welfare programme that provides mothers with annual cash incentives to send their children to school. Beyond its stated development purpose of raising educational attendance, the policy has a strategic electoral use, mediating directly with mothers as a political agent (The Federal, 2022). It increases maternal power at home, encourages school continuation, and consolidates women's perception of the state as a responsive welfare provider. In commodifying attendance at school, *Amma Vodi* brings about the emergence of policy feedback effects perpetrators which citizens link tangible welfare outputs with the ruling party reinforcing loyalty and repetitive political support in electoral cycles (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004). The design of the scheme also promotes monitoring and visibility, with digital DBTs direct, traceable transfers improving not only administrative efficiency, but also the ability of the recipient to claim political credit. *Amma Vodi* demonstrates how the political and social can be intentionally aligned: with a politically salient constituency women voters the programme advances social goals and builds political support at the level of the household.

5.2 YSR Rythu Bharosa and Farmers' Support

Whereas YSR *Rythu Bharosa* is an income-based support to the small and marginal farmers to promote agricultural sustainability and reduction of rural distress. The scheme is large-scale and extends support to millions of agriculturally dependent households, and it is expected to solidify the ruling party's rural electoral support base (The Times of India, 2022). Yet its impact is limited by bureaucratic and infrastructural bottlenecks. Landholding records are the basis of eligibility, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and other disenfranchised farmers are not included. These exceptions also reduce the aspiration enhancing potential of the scheme, as potential beneficiaries view the programme as unfair or out of reach. In addition, delays in treasuries and other procedural impediments in identification of beneficiaries contribute to the rater's less than satisfactory impression of state responsiveness, highlighting the importance of both policy design and administrative capacity (Muralidharan, Niehaus & Sukhtankar, 2016) for the political and social efficacy of welfare programmes.

5.3 Comparative Synthesis

A comparison of *Amma Vodi* with *YSR Rythu Bharosa* reveals diverging trends of welfare- led electoral mobilisation. *Amma Vodi* reflects inclusive targeting, greater visibility and stronger policy feedback and establishes a developmental-political link in terms of political loyalty among women voters. In contrast, although *YSR Rythu Bharosa* dispenses wide financial coverage, it deeply restricts the social and electoral impact of the welfare provision through a range of structural and administrative limitations. This comparison illustrates that the electoral payoff of welfare schemes is shaped not only by the magnitude of benefit but also by targeting logic, inclusiveness, and the security of delivery. Both schemes highlight the tactical wedging of welfare in electoral politics in Andhra Pradesh, and demonstrate how parties use DBTs as tools for cementing support across multiple constituencies. However, the prognosis is more varied as prospective inclusivity of beneficiaries and administrative efficacy appear to be critical variables in determining the conversion of welfare provision to political capital (The Federal, 2022; The Times of India, 2022; Pierson, 1993).

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Select Welfare Schemes in Andhra Pradesh

Scheme	Primary Beneficiaries	Policy Design & Targeting	Electoral & Political Effects	Key Limitations
Amma Vodi	Mothers of school-going children	Gender-targeted DBT; conditional cash transfer	Strengthens women's political loyalty; visible state welfare	Exclusion due to school/documentation gaps; limited systemic education impact
YSR Rythu Bharosa	Small/marginal farmers	Occupation-based DBT linked to land records	Consolidates rural support; reinforces welfare-centred politics	Excludes tenant/sharecropping farmers; administrative delays
YSR Pension Kanuka	Elderly, widows, disabled	Categorical DBT	Builds cross-cutting electoral support	Fiscal sustainability concerns; limited link to livelihoods
Jagananna Vidya/Vasati Deevena	Students from weaker sections	Education-focused DBT	Appeals to youth/parents; enhances pro-education image	Implementation bottlenecks; institutional dependence
YSR Asara	Women SHG members	Group-based DBT	Strengthens SHG networks; grassroots political penetration	Uneven coverage; limited to organized SHG participants

Table Sources: Government of Andhra Pradesh, *State Budget Documents* (various years); *Business Standard*; *The Federal*; *Deccan Chronicle*; *The Times of India*

VI.   The Politics of Welfare and Democratic Accountability

Welfare schemes are broadening social protection, but their use as political tools are also associated with clientelism, fiscal sustainability and governance quality (The Indian Express). The prioritization of populist handouts could also divert resources away from infrastructure and long-term development. Opposition parties regularly politicise welfare delivery, accusing ruling parties of just changing the name of the schemes or using them to target certain constituencies (The Times of India). These processes of change suggest that welfare in Andhra Pradesh is both a developmental intervention and a competitive electoral instrument, with ramifications for accountability, equity and policy coherence.

VII.   Conclusion

Welfare policies in Andhra Pradesh have turned into tools of electoral politics, focusing on the votes of women, farmers, students and weaker sections of society. Preliminary evidence on budgets, targeting and implementation suggests that the delivery of welfare influences voter behaviour and elections in a significant manner. Yet, politicisation of welfare may have negative normative consequences for accountability, fiscal sustainability and long-term developmental significance. Schemes targeting gender such as *Amma Vodi,* benefit from strong policy feedback and political consolidation, whereas schemes based on occupation such as *Rythu Bharosa*, expose administrative and structural constraints. In its totality, AP provides compelling illustration for how welfare regimes can be advanced in tandem with social protection and electoral strategies that highlight the significance of reconciling short-term redistributive imperatives with inclusive, sustainable and transparent governance.

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