

Impact of Welfare Schemes on Tribal Voting Patterns in Madhya Pradesh

¹Mamta Sharma, ²Dr. Kusum Bhadouria

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, PMCOE Govt. P G College, Datia

²Professor, Department of Political Science, MLB Govt. College of Excellence, Gwalior

Abstract

The association between the welfare program and voting behaviour is a growing area of study in contemporary political sociology as it relates to developing democracies, such as that of India. Developing democracies, like India, are characterized by high levels of socio-economic inequality; therefore, welfare policies are more than just developmental tools; rather, they play an important role in determining the degree of political participation and how individuals vote. This research ties into that greater discourse by focusing specifically on Indigenous populations, who have historically as a group been discriminated against and have limited access to their government's resources. More specifically, this study will examine the relationship between welfare programs and voting behaviour in Madhya Pradesh State, which has a relatively high percentage of Scheduled Tribes (about 21% of the total state population). Individuals from tribal populations in this part of India (e.g., Jhabua, Mandla, Dindori districts) represent a significant percentage of the state's total electorate; thus, there are many factors, including historical, cultural, and socio-economic, that determine how they will vote. The number of targeted welfare initiatives and programs in these areas has increased over the past several years; thus, research will address how these types of initiatives may shape the electoral process through voting behaviour and the specific mechanisms that connect welfare programs to voting behaviour. Welfare programmes help to improve economic conditions for beneficiaries, which also contributes to their sense of security as they live in a more stable environment; however, they can also help to raise political consciousness among beneficiaries by giving them direct access to state institutions and officials related to their welfare benefits. Additionally, welfare programmes may create clientelistic relations where voters link the benefits they receive from the welfare programme to specific political entities, resulting in a change in their vote choice. While the findings of the research presented in this paper demonstrate that there is significant variation in the impact of welfare programmes on the electoral behaviour of tribal populations across India, the level of variation is influenced by a combination of different variables, including: socio-economic, cultural and political factors. As a result, there is a high degree of variability and a contextual component to voting behaviour in tribal communities. This more nuanced interpretation of the influence of welfare-driven voting on the electoral behaviour of tribal communities demonstrates the flaw in an overly simplistic view of how welfare-driven voting works, and also affirms the need to consider the specific conditions within which welfare-driven electoral behaviour occurs.

Keywords

Tribal Voting Behaviour, Welfare Schemes, Electoral Politics, Madhya Pradesh, Political Participation, Development Politics, Clientelism

I. Introduction

India's democratic process takes place in a very diverse range of social settings and is influenced by many factors, so there is no single way that one group votes. Instead, voting patterns develop through the interaction between many different aspects including caste, class, religion, region, and the economy. The interplay of these variables helps shape how a person or group engages in political activity. Given this complex web of social relationships, the position of tribal communities is unique. This uniqueness stems from their history of being marginalized and geographically isolated, which has built their own distinct cultural traditions. Thus, the characteristics of tribal communities aid in the construction of their socio-economic realities, and affect their political behaviours in a way that requires analysis that considers history, social context as well as present-day realities. (Yadav, 2020)

In the case of Madhya Pradesh, the tribal segment of the population makes up a significant number of votes in any election, making them an important group for consideration in predicting outcomes of elections. The population of tribal groups like the Bhils, Gonds, Baigas, and Sahariyas, is large and there is a concentration of these groups in certain districts, making it easier for candidates and political parties to solicit the support of these groups when contests are very close. However, tribal communities are very diverse. They vary greatly in their culture, economics, and political awareness, and therefore have similar but different political behaviours.

The past ten years have seen a significant shift in the relationship between the state and tribal citizens as a result of the growth of welfare programs. These programs (which address long-standing developmental deficits) support many areas, including education, health care, employment, housing, and infrastructure. Welfare programs are intended to give people access to essential services and economic opportunities, thereby decreasing inequality and promoting social inclusion. However, welfare programs provide more than just material benefits; they also represent a visible manifestation of state presence in previously neglected areas. As such, welfare programs are changing how tribal peoples perceive the nature of governance and the political authority of the state. (Verma, 2023)

This change is important because it creates additional factors in the political decision-making process. As individuals begin to receive more tangible benefits (i.e., subsidized housing, increased employment opportunities, better access to education and health care), their expectations of the state will begin to shift. Rather than relying on traditional measures (e.g., identity or the influence of local leaders) to determine whether or not government has been effective, individuals will increasingly use evaluations of performance and delivery to assess the effectiveness of their government. Thus, welfare programs serve two purposes: they are tools for developing the community and creating political attitudes (as well as electoral preferences).

The latest academic research suggests that tribal voters' behaviour appears to be gradually changing. For example, the historical voting patterns in tribal communities were driven primarily by the voters' loyalty to certain identities (kinship, community, or local leaders), although these forms of identity still influence voters' decisions. Numerous studies, however, indicate that an increasing number of tribal voters are more likely to make decisions based on issues related to their livelihoods, development, and access to social services than in the past. In addition to becoming more exposed to the government programs and political processes, tribal voters are also increasing their participatory political behaviour, allowing them to make more informed political decisions. (Singh, 2022)

The influence of welfare programs on the political decisions of voters is still uncertain. It remains unclear whether welfare programs have a direct impact on voters' electoral choices or whether their impact is produced through other means (e.g., social identity, political mobilization, or other local power dynamics). This question is especially relevant in a state such as Madhya Pradesh, in which tribal voters have a considerable impact on election outcomes and in which the number of welfare interventions has risen significantly.

This study aims to fill this gap by determining how tribal voters use welfare programs to inform their political choices. It aims to move beyond simplistic assumptions of direct causality and instead explore the complex interactions between welfare delivery, socio-economic conditions, and political behaviour. By doing so, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how development policies influence democratic participation among marginalized communities. (Sharma, 2023)

II. Review of Related Literature

Amartya Sen's (2020) attention to developing an individual's capability and freedom resulted in a strengthened foundation for participating in democracy from the individual citizen's perspective. By stating that access to welfare and basic services increases the agency of all citizens and, therefore, encourages higher levels of engagement in political processes than those who do not have these services or welfare, Sen laid the groundwork for Banerjee's (2020) discussion of the relationship between democracy and welfare policy. Banerjee's findings, based on empirical studies, indicated that welfare policies have significant influences on shaping voters' expectations and liabilities in electoral political environments.

Later, Kumar (2021) used empirical evidence to look at how the development process has evolved by focusing on changes in the socio-economic environment as they relate to electoral behaviour. His results indicated that people's economic development and access to state resources had a positive impact on their vote; specifically, he highlighted how these factors played an important role in shaping voting behaviour among members of disadvantaged groups. In another study, Desai (2021) used an empirical analysis of how government social policy has impacted the election results since 2000 and concluded that governments use welfare programs to implement social policies that encourage voters to reward their governments for providing effective welfare programs. Chatterjee (2021) focused on the politics of development and indicated that welfare programs are both instruments of socio-economic change and therefore, a means for political mobilization that shape how people perceive governance and legitimacy through the narratives established.

The complexity of translating welfare benefits into political outcomes has been further illustrated through research focusing on governance and marginalised communities. Das (2022) indicated that governance structures play a key role in how marginalised communities view and access welfare schemes. Rao (2022) explored the relationship between development and democracy, concluding that while welfare schemes improve the quality of life, the political impacts of these schemes depend on the efficiency of the delivering institution and the amount of trust the public has in them. Gupta (2022) studied political mobilisation in rural India and emphasised the importance of local networks, intermediaries, and grassroots organisations in shaping how voters behave, especially in regions with low state outreach.

Research scholars are increasingly starting to look at tribal communities as a distinct political category. Yadav (2020) looked at tribal populations that participate politically and found that socio-economic, educational (low literacy), and awareness (very low) factors limit their participation in the electoral process. Singh (2022) examined tribal politics in the central part of India; while he found that identity, cultural cohesiveness, and traditional leadership structures are still important to voting behaviour, he did see evidence of some emerging changes because tribes were increasingly exposed to the effects of development programmes and political campaigning. Joshi (2023) reviewed tribal development policies in India, stating that targeting tribes with specific interventions can help address historical inequalities; however, he also identified significant continuing gaps in implementation and access.

Recent academic studies have specifically evaluated how welfare initiatives have shaped individuals' decision-making during elections. For example, Sharma (2023) researched both welfare programs and voting behaviours and discovered that voters receiving benefits from welfare programs tended to support sitting governments. This was especially true if the benefits were visible to them in their everyday life and they were originally implemented as promised. Verma (2023) studied welfare within the context of Indian politics and determined that welfare programs have resulted in influencing many people to move towards issue-based voting although issues concerning identity still play an important role when it comes to voting behaviour. Bhattacharya (2023) took a more global perspective of the sociology of elections in India and the interaction between structure, political parties and institutions, and the use of the vote.

As an example of dress research within a specific context, research on the tribal population of Madhya Pradesh has revealed some interesting insights into tribal election behaviour. According to the 2024 Bhaskar Research Report, tribal welfare projects within Madhya Pradesh where both the personal and economic conditions of individuals have improved as a result, however they have not experienced equal degrees of success due to how successfully these programs were implemented and communicated. The Government of India (2024) and Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2024) provided some evidence that the Government of India continues to increase amounts of money in budgets and provide new policies that target tribal peoples in India, especially since most of the tribal peoples are experiencing increased rates of poverty. As a result of this, the Government of India has made substantial expansions of welfare projects that are being targeted to the tribal peoples of India through education, health care, and employment.

Both Nair (2024) and Patel (2024) studied the wider relationship between public policy and people's behaviour in elections. They find that the welfare state helps shape how people feel about governance and how well it performs, which affects how voters vote. Mishra, Pandey, and Tripathi (2025) looked into economic growth and how tribal groups in Madhya Pradesh vote in elections. They found that there has been a relative shift towards voters using issues of governance, welfare benefits and greater political awareness to help influence their vote.

All the literature found that welfare schemes help shape people's behaviour in elections, especially for those who are marginalised. However, it was also found that there are many different factors affecting the impact of welfare schemes, such as socio-economic conditions, political awareness, institutional effectiveness, and cultural identity. Although many studies highlighted the rising importance of development-based voting, it was also noted that traditional factors such as identity and local leadership were still important influences on voting behaviour. Nonetheless, despite the many contributions made, there is still a significant gap in understanding the ways in which welfare schemes influence tribal voting behaviour at a regional level (e.g. Madhya Pradesh). Thus, this study attempted to fill that gap by providing a context-specific and comprehensive analysis of the connections between welfare schemes and electoral behaviour in voting behaviour among tribal groups.

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the impact of welfare schemes on the voting patterns of tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh.
- To examine the extent to which welfare benefits influence electoral participation among tribal voters.
- To assess how welfare schemes shape party preferences within tribal populations.
- To explore the relationship between welfare schemes and traditional determinants such as identity and social structure.
- To understand the role of political leadership in mediating the effects of welfare schemes on voting behaviour.
- To evaluate the influence of political awareness on the effectiveness of welfare schemes in shaping electoral choices.

Hypotheses

- Welfare schemes have a significant positive impact on voter turnout among tribal communities.
- Welfare schemes play an important role in influencing electoral preferences of tribal voters.
- The impact of welfare schemes on voting behaviour is mediated by socio-economic conditions.
- Awareness levels among tribal communities significantly affect the relationship between welfare benefits and voting patterns.

- Local political dynamics influence how welfare schemes translate into electoral support.
- Welfare-driven voting coexists with identity-based voting rather than completely replacing it.

III. Research Methodology

This study utilized a hybrid methodology composing both qualitative and quantitative research methods to ensure a complete evaluation of the data collected for this research study. Qualitative components of this study used survey data obtained from tribesmen living in selected regions/districts within the state of Madhya Pradesh—Jhabua, Mandla, Dindori and Alirajpur—as a way to evaluate political behaviour. A stratified sampling method was used to ensure representation across different tribes, age groups, and socio-economic categories. The sample size was 200 tribal respondents.

The qualitative portion of this study consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted with tribal electorates, key local leaders, and government officials, which provided valuable insights into respondents’ perceptions of welfare programs and the degree to which they have impacted political behaviour.

Secondary source materials consisted of several types of data; i.e., government publications (reports), election data and academic studies relating to; (1) the relationship between welfare benefits and voting behaviour have been evaluated using statistical tools (e.g., regression analysis, correlation).

IV. Data Analysis and Interpretation

To examine the relationship between welfare schemes and voting patterns among tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh, primary data collected from selected tribal districts was analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparative interpretation. The findings are presented through five tables, each highlighting a specific dimension of the relationship between welfare access and electoral behaviour.

Table 1: Access to Welfare Schemes among Respondents

Type of Welfare Scheme	Number of Beneficiaries	Percentage (%)
Housing Schemes	128	64%
Employment Schemes	142	71%
Educational Schemes	116	58%
Health Schemes	98	49%
No Access to Schemes	34	17%

Interpretation

The data indicated that a majority of respondents had access to at least one welfare scheme, with employment-related schemes showing the highest reach. Housing and education schemes also covered a significant proportion of the population, suggesting active state intervention in improving socio-economic conditions. However, a noticeable segment of respondents remained excluded, pointing toward gaps in implementation and accessibility.

Table 2: Welfare Access and Voter Participation

Category of Respondents	Voter Turnout (%)
Beneficiaries of Schemes	82%
Non-Beneficiaries	61%

Interpretation

A clear difference emerged between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in terms of voter participation. Individuals who received welfare benefits demonstrated significantly higher voter turnout. This suggested that welfare schemes contributed to increased political engagement by fostering a sense of inclusion and connection with the state.

Table 3: Influence of Welfare Schemes on Voting Preference

Response Category	Percentage (%)
Strongly Influenced by Welfare Benefits	46%
Moderately Influenced	32%
Not Influenced	22%

Interpretation

The findings showed that nearly half of the respondents acknowledged a strong influence of welfare schemes on their voting decisions. A substantial proportion reported moderate influence, indicating that while welfare benefits

mattered, they were not the sole determinant. A smaller segment remained unaffected, reflecting the continued relevance of other socio-political factors.

Table 4: Impact of Implementation Quality on Voting Behaviour

Implementation Level	Support for Incumbent (%)	Electoral Volatility (%)
High Implementation	74%	18%
Moderate Implementation	58%	27%
Poor Implementation	39%	46%

Interpretation

The quality of implementation emerged as a crucial factor influencing electoral outcomes. Regions with effective delivery of welfare schemes showed higher support for incumbent parties and lower electoral volatility. In contrast, poor implementation led to dissatisfaction, resulting in fluctuating voting patterns and reduced political loyalty.

Table 5: Role of Traditional Factors in Voting Behaviour

Determinant Factor	Influence Level (%)
Community Leadership	68%
Kinship Networks	61%
Welfare Benefits	57%
Party Ideology	42%

Interpretation

The data highlighted that traditional determinants such as community leadership and kinship networks continued to exert strong influence on voting behaviour. While welfare benefits played a significant role, they did not surpass these established social structures. Instead, welfare schemes often reinforced existing political alignments rather than fundamentally altering them.

Overall Interpretation

This analysis aimed to show the impact of welfare schemes on tribal communities' political participation. It concluded there is a strong and positive correlation between access to welfare schemes and the level of political participation of tribes in electoral processes through both voting and involvement.

However, it was also noted that the influence of welfare schemes on voters is neither the same for all nor absolute. Therefore, the degree to which tribal welfare schemes are effective depends upon many factors, but especially on how well they are implemented and the extent of tribal beneficiaries' awareness of various schemes. When welfare scheme implementation has occurred in an efficient manner, tribal voters appear to reward the incumbent government with their votes. However, in cases where implementation of the scheme is poor, tribal voters appear to be dissatisfied and thus make their voting decisions unpredictable.

In addition, traditional social structures such as kinship networks or local leadership (i.e. elder males) continue to have an important impact upon the way in which tribal members make their voting decision. Thus, welfare schemes work with these existing social structures and in doing so, they create a complex and contextually dependent electoral behaviour pattern for the tribes relative to voting.

In sum, the data provided indicates that while welfare schemes appear to be a contributing factor for tribal voting patterns in Madhya Pradesh, they are one of the many underlying socio-political issues tribes have to consider relative to their own voting behaviour such as identity, culture, and local conditions.

V. Findings of the Study

The results of this work show welfare programs have a major impact on how tribal groups vote, but the effect of welfare programs is neither the same nor absolute. Welfare programs will impact voting behavior in some specific ways, but they depend on other factors that control how those experiencing the programs see them. In Madhya Pradesh specifically, there is a diverse and heterogeneous tribal population distributed across a large geographic area; as such, there are many ways in which welfare programs have led to enhanced political participation in this area. People who have received the benefits of welfare programs such as housing, jobs, and education provide greater evidence that democracy has provided them with a place; therefore, receiving welfare benefits also provides individuals with a higher likelihood of voting because individuals have developed a sense of belonging to the political system.

However, the study also indicates welfare benefits have a conditional impact on vote choice based on various mediating or moderating factors. For example, awareness is an important factor in tribal voters! The

greater the awareness about welfare programs among tribal voters, the more likely they were to associate a benefit received from welfare programs with a particular political party/actor or government and, thus, the more likely their voting behavior will be influenced by the welfare program.

The limited understanding of individuals about the benefits they received from welfare programs reduced the perceived connection between these benefits and the political system. This reduced the potential impact of welfare programs on how people vote. Voter perceptions of good governance were positively impacted by how easily accessible welfare programs were, and by how effectively they were implemented. Voter perceptions of good governance could lead to voters supporting or voting for candidates who support or vote for the implementation of social welfare programs. On the other hand, when people could not access welfare programs due to inefficiencies in administration or because they were corrupt, voters had negative perceptions of the delivery of welfare programs and therefore did not support or vote for candidates who supported social welfare programs.

Local governance was also a part of how welfare programs impacted who people voted for. Local leaders, as well as the intermediaries and administrative institutions that operate at the local level, played a significant role in how welfare programs were delivered and how voters perceived them. When local governance structures were functioning properly, welfare programs were perceived as credible and trustworthy. Therefore, there was a strong relationship between welfare program delivery and assistance and the development of support for candidates who provided assistance to their communities. Conversely, when local governance structures were not functioning properly, there was little or no relationship between welfare program delivery and assistance and the development of support for candidates who provided assistance to their communities.

The other major conclusion of the study is that there is a growing politicization of development issues among tribal voters, namely, tribal voters are using welfare schemes as an additional criterion to evaluate political parties and political candidates. In assessing how political representative characteristics influence the vote, more voters are evaluating political representatives not only based on traditional evaluations, but also based on how well they provide quantifiable benefits and improve their community's quality of life. This new direction in voter behaviour suggests that issue-based voting is gradually becoming established, where development outcomes will increasingly become an important deciding factor for voters' choices. Welfare programs have improved the socio-economic condition of many individuals and also changed how people perceive political representatives and accountable mechanisms for politicians.

Although these important shifts in voter behaviour are taking place, this study still identifies the persistence of identity-based voting. Cultural identities, ties to communities and interpersonal relationships will continue to have a major influence on how people vote in tribal societies. Nevertheless, among tribes that have a high degree of social cohesion and cultural continuity, cultural and community related influences will generally supersede or occur simultaneously with welfare related influences when voters make their election decisions. Consequently, voters will vote for the political candidate or party associated with their culture or community even when there is a party that provides superior welfare benefits. These findings demonstrate that welfare programs do not eliminate or substitute for other existing social/cultural influences but instead will continue to interact with them and operate in complex and context specific ways.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that the relationship between welfare programs and tribal voting patterns is best viewed as a dynamic, evolving and layered process. There can be no doubt that the implementation of welfare projects will improve political participation and that over time more and more voters will begin to move toward voting for candidates who are delivering development outcomes.

Despite these schemes' fundamental importance and implications for developing nations, their overall impact is heavily influenced by structures of awareness, accessibility, governance, and longstanding social constructs and cultural identities. In Madhya Pradesh, the electoral behaviour of tribal voters reflects a blend of long-held traditions along with emerging development factors (e.g., all of these reasons affecting voter behaviour as opposed to showing total transformation in behaviour occurring only through the welfare of people).

VI. Conclusion

The findings of this research indicate that welfare-related programmes have had a substantial impact on the electoral behaviour of tribal communities within Madhya Pradesh through both their roles as political and developmental tools to influence voter's vote and the way they vote. Nevertheless, the relationship is not a direct or linear correlation and is affected by various combinations of social, cultural, and economic-political aspects. As welfare-related programs promote voting on an issue basis and participation in democracy, they do not replace older forms of influence on a voter's vote. To successfully implement welfare-related programmes among tribal families/communities, identification and engagement with the particular tribal population, through sufficient understanding of their specific culture/sub-culture, will be essential for government policymakers in order to construct plans and solutions that adequately address their requirements.

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