



# Decoding the BJP's model of welfarism

It positions welfare as empowerment, but strips it from the language of rights, and enforces it through centralised delivery mechanisms

**T**he Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s electoral victory in Uttar Pradesh (UP) has put the spotlight on the centrality of welfare schemes in the party's electoral toolkit. This is not new. In the 2017 UP election, and the subsequent 2019 national election, welfare schemes were a loud and visible part of the campaign. The term "*labharthi*" (the BJP's term for scheme beneficiaries) has entered the lexicon of political analysis. Given this, it is important to ask if there is a distinct BJP welfare model. If so, what are its characteristics and how does it seek to shape citizen-State relations?

First, an important caveat. We do not, as yet, have significant rigorous, national evaluations of these schemes and their outcomes. It is difficult, therefore, to comment on their reach or impact. But polling data shows that welfare schemes are actively used by the BJP to derive political legitimacy

and access to scheme benefits plays a part in shaping voter choices. Thus, they merit a deeper understanding.

The most visible aspect of the BJP's welfare is its emphasis on direct benefits — cash transfers, providing toilets, housing, and since the pandemic, ration. Economist Arvind Subramanian describes this as "subsidised public provisioning of private goods", a "new welfarism" where public goods — health and basic education — are under-prioritised in favour of private benefits. Focusing on the political contract that underlies this new welfarism, political scientist Hilal Ahmed has recently characterised the BJP's welfare as an electoral bargain struck by a "charitable State". Welfare is not provided out of political duty, but rather as an act of benevolence linked to electoral return.

Building on "new welfarism" and "charitable State", there are three distinctive characteristics of the BJP's current welfare model.

First, a repositioning of welfare as "empowerment", distinct from "doles" and "entitlements" (as they describe) of the past. "The poor need to be empowered... to fight poverty on their own strength", the Prime Minister (PM) said in his early days in power as he sought to position the BJP's welfare through the slogan "empowerment versus entitlement".

Welfare, in this imagination, is about the State providing the tools to fight poverty through new welfarism, but the fight is an individual one. In its essence, this is a remarkably neoliberal take on welfare — a point that is lost in public discourse that tends to view any kind of welfare as Left-wing.

In an interview in the run-up to the UP election, Amit Shah reiterated this position. "We have provided gas connections, it is up to them to pay their bills," he said, "We have made toilets...they have to maintain them.... what we did is.. to upgrade their lives — this is empowerment".

Second, the idea of the *labharthi*. Logically, a discourse on empowerment ought to create political space for a deeper articulation of citizen rights and identity. But what is distinctive about the BJP's welfare is that it seeks to limit the idea of empowerment to the provision of benefits. The careful nurturing of the citizen as a *labharthi* is central to this framing.

In this formulation, the citizen is cast as a recipient, a beneficiary of welfare beholden to the benevolence of a charitable State rather than a citizen actively claiming rights from the State. By thus stripping welfare of the language of rights, the BJP has effectively created a new language of political mobilisation. The "*labharthi varg*" is distinct from caste and identity-



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based politics that draws on an imagination of empowerment as identity assertion through a language of group rights and dignity.

Third, the strategies through which the *labharthi* is mobilised — centralised delivery and direct attribution to the party leadership — are designed to build the moral legitimacy of the PM and establish trust, what political scientist Neelanjan Sircar has termed the "politics of *vishwas* (faith)".

This is not about establishing the patronage of the "*mai baap sarkar*". Rather, it is about establishing an emotive connection and deep loyalty to the party leadership. Individual benefits, rather than diffused public goods such as education, are compatible with this politics. Tangible benefits make it easier for party workers to mobilise voters and invoke the image of the PM as the provider. And when benefits fail to reach — despite the noise there remain households that are waiting for the promise of ration, toilets and housing — this loyalty is extracted from the promise of the future. After all, "*Modi hai to mumkin hai* (Modi can make it possible)".

Sociologist Patrick Heller coined the term "patrimonial welfarism". This comes closest to describing the BJP's welfare model: Welfarism that derives its power from the party leadership, while at the same time, leveraging specific welfare benefits as an instrument to establish the leadership's moral legitimacy with voters.

This is not a uniquely BJP strategy. Politicians going back to late Tamil Nadu chief minister (CM) Jayalalithaa and even Indira Gandhi deployed versions of patrimonial welfarism. But the political reach of the BJP's welfarism, one that several CMs across the country are now adapting, requires deeper engagement. What does it do to democracy when voters are cast as *labharthis* rather than rights-claiming citizens? How does this shape citizen expectations and democratic accountability? These are questions all students of democracy must ask and answer. This piece is a provocation to further this debate.

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The views expressed are personal*