



# The political dimension of Social Welfare Schemes of Assam: An analysis

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## Abstract:

Since the formation of the BJP government in the state of Assam, numerous welfare schemes have been implemented to ensure the welfare of the poor people. These welfare schemes have been transmitted through cash, kind, and necessary services. During the last seven years, the government of Assam unleashed huge amounts of money to the beneficiaries from the exchequer. Primarily distributing benefits to the needy is a noble effort but if the objective has gone beyond the noble cause is questionable. It is observed in Assam that the welfare schemes executed by the state government are somewhat politically motivated and intended to secure political advantage. The BJP-led state government has targeted the underprivileged section of people, who have no political awareness, to gain support in the future election for the fixation of the rule of BJP in Assam. However, the researchers and intellectuals of Assam consider the matter from a different perspective and advocate that investing the public money for the overall betterment of the state if it is used to gain political mileage by the ruling political party for fulfilling their narrow interest is objectionable. Thus, this study is an academic exercise focusing on the identification of different determinants leading to political advancement and critical appraisal identifying the negative impacts of the politicization of welfare schemes.

**Keywords:** Welfare Scheme, State Government, Poor, Political Advantage, Political Party.

## Introduction:

The concept of the welfare state is contextualized for the establishment of social justice. The term welfare state has been defined in various ways though it has no common agreement on the usage of the term. It varies from time and situation to socio-economic as well as socio-political exigencies.

The welfare state is a system wherein the minimum needs of a certain minimum of standard of individuals as well as communal welfare can be fulfilled. The welfare state is a state that strives to secure the welfare of the people by establishing essential conditions of good living. The welfare states are committed to the high ideals of Justice, Liberty, and Fraternity, a democratic form of government, freedom, equality of law, and equal protection of law. It creates a climate for the people as a whole which is based not only on moral but also intellectual properties. A

welfare state has to protect the general social interest in all possible ways. It works on empirical and pragmatic criteria to judge each social issue in its merits by affording the most practical solution to the problem at hand by bringing welfare programs. The welfare states endeavour to establish decent conditions of work for all workers whether it is in agriculture, industry, or other sectors. All can enjoy leisure as well as socio-cultural opportunities to the fullest extent, if need be, to the right to interference in production by enlarging the activity of the state by encompassing all sections of the society including the poor and backward people along the vulnerable groups of the society like children, women, and minorities section.

It is a concept of government in which the state plays a key role in the protection and promotion of the economic and social well-being of its citizens. A welfare state is based on the principles of equality of opportunity and equitable distribution of wealth. It also focuses on the governmental responsibility for those who are unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions of a good life. It provides a social security net which may include education, housing, sustenance, healthcare, etc. Without ensuring equality of opportunity and equitable distribution of wealth, the welfare of the marginalized and deprived sections of society cannot be ensured.

India is described as a “Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic” in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution. Accordingly, the Constitution has extensive provisions to ensure the social and economic welfare of the people of India. In this regard two specific provisions have been made, one in the form of Fundamental Rights and the other as Directive Principles of State Policy. The welfare state is also guided by the philosophy of Gandhiji like “Sarvodaya through Antyodaya” (welfare of all, through the welfare of the weakest); Gandhiji’s Talisman; Trusteeship principle, etc. A welfare state and compassion towards the weaker section are necessary for the development of human and social capital for “Sab Ka Saath Aur Sab Ka Vikas” for one united and robust India. The aim of governance cannot be met without having the concept of a welfare state and developing compassion towards the weaker sections.

Apart from India as a whole, the Assam government has taken numerous schemes for the implementation of the concept of a welfare state, which is no doubt commendable. Since independence, the Assam government has implemented not only various schemes of central government but also adopted various state schemes independently towards the establishment of an equitable society.

The BJP-led state government of Assam since its formation in 2021 estimated to spend rupees 250 crores per year from the exchequer for the beneficiaries’ particularly economically underprivileged sections of people in the domain of different social welfare schemes or programs. The schemes are vivid with different objectives like food security, old age pension, widows, students, youth, farmers and peasant infrastructure development, etc. The scheme under which the assistance is distributed are Swahid Kushal Konwar Briddha Pension Scheme (SKKBPS), Antyodaya Anna Yojana, Arundhati Gold Scheme, Assam Arunodoi Scheme, Atal Amrit Abhiyan, Swami Vivekananda Assam Youth Empowerment Scheme (SVAYEM), Swanirbhar Nari – Atmanirbhar Assam Scheme, Aponar Apon Ghar Home Loan Subsidy Scheme, Assam Pragyan Bharati Scooty Scheme, Assam Tractor Scheme under CMSGUY, These are the flagship schemes for the poor people but in doing so the primary objective is intended to assist the needy one but from politics point of view it is somewhat different. By assisting the poor and needy the BJP-led government is intended to create a vote bank for future elections. Thus this paper is an attempt to understand the political dimensions of social welfare schemes and their positive and negative impacts in the entire economic and political scenario of Assam.

The objective of the study envisaged to underline the social welfare schemes leading to political mileage for the ruling party and government. For that, the determinants focusing on the political mileage or advantages of the ruling political party and government are turning the wheel of this study. The paper also makes a critical analysis of the negative impacts of politicization of welfare schemes initiated by the present government through various social welfare schemes/programs which rather ensure social security uses them as a tool to influence the voters during

elections. The universe of the study is delimited within the state of Assam and specifically state government schemes.

### **Determinants of political dimensions of welfare schemes:**

The government From the very inception of the first BJP-led state government of Assam in 2017, welfare schemes have been used as a tool to gain political advantage. Later in 2021 BJP's 2<sup>nd</sup> term government started extensively using different welfare schemes to draw the attention of the electors in favour of the party and the government. The determining factors leading to getting the political advantage in future elections are-

**Target orientation:** Designing target-specific groups that are more likely to support the ruling party helps to generate loyalty to the ruling party. All the welfare schemes of the state government of Assam targeted the rural and semi-urban communities' specifically marginalized section of people. By delivering different benefits the government tries to create a perception that the government is working for their welfare and by dint of which the support base would be created in future elections. Further, it is estimated by the ruling government that by dispatching the benefits to the vulnerable or marginalized group goodwill will generate for the ruling party.

**Enhance good image and popularity:** When the government announces the different welfare schemes for the underserved people then it will enhance the good image and popularity. For example, the programs on poverty alleviation, healthcare facilities, and free education for economically weaker children not only attract the positive attention of the children but also parents.

**Sign of proactive government:** The state government of Assam initiated different welfare schemes covering all sections of people indicating that the government is proactive and sensitive to the problems faced by the people. It also tries to visualize to show that the government is efficient and has a positive outlook on the issues of the people. Further, welfare programmes that show tangible and visible results are more likely to gain public support. When people see improvements in their unpleasant condition due to a particular scheme, it will impulse the politicians for their improvement. Politicians who effectively communicate the goals, benefits, and success stories of their welfare schemes can build a positive narrative around their efforts. Regular updates through various media channels can help shape public opinion in their favor.

**Media coverage:** The state government of Assam is very much vigilant in media coverage and publicity. It uses the means of print media, electronic media, and social media for publicity. The schemes and programs are extensively published in everyday newspapers either to inform the different schemes for the needy or to invite the beneficiaries to receive the benefit. This is particularly intended to shape public perception and increase support for the ruling party.

**Symbolic value:** While announcing a particular scheme, the state government chooses the renowned figures and names that are respected by the people of the state. For example, the name of Swahid Kushal Konwar who was the freedom fighter of Assam is used in SKKBPS, Arunodoi was the first printed newspaper of Assam is used in Assam Arunodoi Scheme, Atal Amrit Abhijan is used in the name of ex-Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Swami Vivekananda was the renowned social reformer of India is used in SVAYEM. When these names were added to a particular scheme it became more meaningful which created positive emotions with the government's efforts among the people.

**Responsiveness to public needs:** Another important factor leading to public sentiment is that when the government provides facilities for health care, education, poverty alleviation, etc. it demonstrates government responsiveness towards public needs. These are the pressing issues of the public that need care and attention from the government. The government of Assam by providing all these facilities tries to depict that this government is more responsive to the public issues. Consequently, the confidence and faith of the public will increase which will benefit the ruling party in any future elections.

**Local outreach:** The government of Assam and the ruling party try to reach the ground level by providing different welfare schemes. During the last seven years, the BJP-led government of Assam by announcing and implementing

the different schemes can reach the local level and be able to interact with the people. This strategy adopted by the state government of Assam will help the ruling government to earn the loyalty of the public.

**Transparency of data:** Sharing data and statistics about the impact of welfare schemes can also build credibility and trust among the public. It also helps the government to showcase the government's commitment to transparency and accountability. This strategy is adopted by the government of Assam to show the trustworthiness on public issues for gaining political advantage in the future.

**Inclusiveness:** Inclusive growth of a wide range of people rather than just a specific group helps to build a broad base of support. The government of Assam through its welfare policies cut across demographic, socio-economic, and geographic lines showcases the ruling party government's perspective of commitment to the overall well-being of the nation. This inclusiveness overview of the BJP-led Assam government is expected to get the political advantage in future elections and the long-run rule of the BJP party.

**Sense of empowerment:** The initiatives taken by the present Assam government to empower underprivileged people through distributing benefits under various welfare schemes helped them to foster a sense of ownership. This sense of belongingness and empowerment would be appreciated by the present Assam government by showing support at the proper time by the people who receive the benefits.

**Negative impacts of politicisation of welfare scheme:**

Undoubtedly during the last seven years, the state government of Assam has mounted numerous welfare schemes for the benefit of the poor and underprivileged sections of people. The people belonging to the poor and downtrodden are satisfied with the present government and have loyalty and support. They will show their loyalty and support to the ruling party in future elections. But still, the intellectuals and conscious people of Assam have identified some negative impacts of the politicisation of welfare schemes.

**Apathy to work:** After the introduction of the different welfare schemes by the central and state governments from time to time apathy to engage in work to earn a livelihood is perceived among the beneficiaries. The manual labor workforces are dramatically reduced from the field. This is due to the free rice and cash benefits under different schemes. It became so difficult to find a labourer to work in the paddy field during cultivation. As a result, a large number of paddy fields are left uncultivated. Further, it is very difficult to find an unskilled labourer for other domestic work. Thus, apathy to work has grown among the daily wage earners and is distinctly visible in Assam.

**Loss of work culture:** The work culture is a sign that indicates the growth and development of a country. The lack of work culture in the production and agriculture sectors affects the growth of the state economy as well as revenue generation. If the workforce becomes reluctant to perform their assigned duties and responsibilities then the economy of the state will go down. This is likely to happen in Assam due to the politically motivated unplanned execution of welfare schemes. The welfare scheme exterminates the work culture among the people of Assam because of the free or subsidized benefits of the government.

**Overdependence kills innovation and self-dependence attitude:** The welfare schemes implemented by the state government create an atmosphere of overdependence on government which extensively kills the innovation and innovative attitude of the people of Assam. It also kills the self-dependence attitude among the people. Due to the government schemes people become so dependent that lose their innovative skills and forget self-dependency.

**Attitude to get all things free:** Besides the free or subsidized benefits of welfare schemes, the attitude to get all things free has grown among the people of Assam due to the welfare schemes. The beneficiaries get rice and other food grains at a subsidized rate, free education to their wards in educational institutions up to an income level, gold ornament for daughter's wedding, old age pension, cash to a particular section of people, free house and housing loan with subsidy, scooty for meritorious girls, hostel fees is borne by the government, etc. Hence an attitude to get all things free or with subsidy creates a tendency of getting all things free or subsidised rate creates a heterogynous atmosphere in the society.

**The competitive environment is lost:** It is a human tendency that if anyone gets benefits without any effort then the competitive mindset is lost. Competition is very much essential to get something deserved in life. Without any



struggle and hard work if somebody receives all things then it destroys the competitive environment. As the case may be seen in Assam people get rice, a house, pension, gold ornament, education, cash, medical treatment, etc. either for free or with subsidy without competing with others.

**Over-politicization kills the development of the state:** Anything over is bad not only for the individual but for the society and state. It is observed that in the state of Assam to build a vote bank for future elections, the ruling government strategically issued different new welfare schemes intended to draw the attention of the electors. The overall impression is that to increase voter turnout in elections the soft and easy target is the poor and underprivileged section of people who do not cast their conscious votes in elections. But in the name of politics and political advantages over politicisation is harmful. This is happening in Assam today.

#### **More in-debts of the state (loan)**

**Fake beneficiaries:** When the government scrupulously sponsors the welfare benefits in their schemes, there is every possibility of the inclusion of fake beneficiaries. It is also seen in Assam where fake or pseudo-beneficiaries are in large numbers. This is due to the lack of either a proper survey or corruption at the selection level.

**Price rise:** The price rise of essential commodities is seen everywhere. If we relate with the welfare scheme it can be argued that the state economy is not up to the solvency position to give free or subsidised benefits to the common people. To provide benefits under different welfare schemes the government imposes GST on essential commodities in one hand and hikes the price of diesel. It is argued that if the diesel price is high then transportation costs will also increase and the price of the commodities will also increase.

**Conclusion:** Welfare schemes can be powerful tools for the government to gain political advantage, as they often directly impact the lives of citizens and can garner support. However, it is important to note that the ethical and moral consideration of using welfare solely for political gain can be problematic. Further, utilizing welfare solely as a political tool without genuine concern for people's welfare can lead to ethical and governance issues. By implementing and promoting effective welfare schemes, politicians can enhance their popularity and secure support from various segments of the population. But general observation is that the welfare schemes undoubtedly help politicians to gain support, but still the primary purpose should always be the well-being of citizens rather than simply securing votes. Thus, using these schemes solely for political gain without genuine concern for the welfare of the population can lead to mistrust and backlash from voters.

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