

India's Tryst with Socialism/ Welfarism

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Abstract

The issue of nature and character of the Indian state has always been a subject of debate among the scholars. The application of different approaches naturally provide different perspective; sometimes diametrically opposite. In the context of India those who subscribe to constitutional- legal perspective within the broader framework of liberalism the majority opinion advocates that it is a welfarist state. Notwithstanding the drawbacks in the operational dynamics their arguments are based on constitutional commitments and institutional initiatives. The aim of this paper is to locate the same with the help of theoretical postulates and objective facts.

Key Words: State, Welfare, Democracy, Justice, Disadvantaged, Discrimination, Development, etc.

The concept of socialism and welfare have been shrouded in mystery as these have been defined by academia in different perspective due to application of different approaches. In other words usage of different yardsticks, generally coloured by ideological myopia portray different distinct features of these terms. The fact remains, therefore, that owing to ideological/ subjective moorings there is no unanimous agreement among the scholars about the connotations of these concepts. In fact the term welfare state is generally equated with the welfare society. Both these terms, however, are not synonymous. Though concept of welfare economy in modern perspective is associated with Keynes but in rudimentary form it's generic ideas can be found in the theoretical postulates of Benthamite 'utility', Bismarck Beveridge's commitment of socio-economic security and French revolutionary ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. Another ideational impact on the concept of welfarist economy is to be traced in the conceptualisation of people's participation in the ownership of industrial organization. In other words, no doubt, the credit of welfarist economy is given to Keynes but it must not be forgotten that such an idea not only preceded him but got refined and polished and enriched by many scholars. The prominent among them are Webbes, Leonard Hobhouse, Ruskin, J.S Mill etc. as they deliberated about the welfare of human beings. Notwithstanding a long tradition of evolution of the concept of welfarist state there is neither comprehensive consensus nor ideological framework that delineate the programmes and policies that are supposed to act as a guiding principle of the welfare state.

Notwithstanding the diverse propositions and prescriptions by above mentioned proponents of welfarist state the credit goes to Ebenstein who successfully stitched the critically relevant ideas into a holistic definition of the welfarist state. According to him a welfare state strives

to ensure a minimum standard of living for all. It attempts to promote progress and stable economy which is insulated from the threats of both - boom and doom. Furthermore, he tried to dispel the myth that free enterprise needs to be replaced by compulsory nationalisation to ensure employment for all. In fact he asserted that without nationalisation the state can regulate the economy in such a way through legitimate instruments like taxation and contextual monitoring of rates of interest and other economic measures an egalitarian society can be achieved. Thus a welfarist state may take care of protecting its people from the dangers of want, sickness and old age.

Human beings unlike the animals, are not satisfied by bare living, rather they deserve a good life and the basic dharma of welfare state is to ensure good life. Therefore, the welfare state can be seen as the positive critique of the police/ negative state. It enjoins the ultimate responsibility of bringing about material welfare of the people by ensuring removal of basic socio-economic deprivation which is reflected in poor rate of literacy, abject poverty and unemployment. It guarantees the rights of all without discrimination of caste, colour, creed and sex. Moreover it respects the dignity of human being and assures justice (social, economic and political) to all. It strives to take care of the disadvantaged/ poor/weak in such a way that they are not left to their own fate rather it strives to remove all the hurdles of their welfare/ well being through adequate and equal opportunities. As a logical corollary it develops mechanisms for regulating economic and other activities of the other people in the larger interest of the society and does not allow Monopoly of a particular class to exploit the other classes.

Genealogical roots of the welfare oriented policies can be traced back to the reign of British Queen Elizabeth I as she consented to pass the first Poor Law Act. In France too, Napoleon III, initiated a large number of policies within a broad framework of socio-economic reforms which could be rightly called the necessary features of the welfare state. Germany, during the tenure of Bismarck launched many programmes and policies which were closer to the modern conceptualisation of the welfare state. Important among them are social insurance against sickness, accident, old age and disability. These programmes and policies were further broadened/ expanded by social democrats. The post second world war era saw adoption of welfare oriented policies in USA under the Presidency of Roosevelt, though there was lot of opposition to the very idea of welfare which was described by Hoover, a former president, as nothing but the backdoor entry of collectivism. However, gradual formulation of a number of social and economic reforms have practically turned America into a welfare state. Denmark, Norway and Sweden are the other welfare states of Europe. Even totalitarian states have come out with many programmes and policies which may qualify them to be called welfare states in an indirect way. The only difference is that the totalitarian states pay more attention to material welfare rather than holistic welfare which includes moral and spiritual welfare as well. Thus, it can be argued that the concept of welfare state which emerged primarily to save the crisis ridden capitalist society has become a universal concept which has been initiated in most of the states irrespective of ideological differences.

According to Ebenstein, the changing world order led to perceptible change in the socio-economic philosophy of governance in liberal democratic system as it gave way to Welfarism in place of laissez-faire or free market economy. Such a drastic change was forced by the negative /disastrous trends of concentration of the economic resources in few hands and marginalisation of the maximum number of people in the newly industrialised societies which were pursuing free market economy. Hence in order to minimise the socio-economic gap among the masses which could have led to social and political unrest it was thought prudent to allow intervention/ regulation by the state with the welfarist programmes and policies. On the other hand broadening the political participation through the Universal Adult suffrage had enabled the voters to discover that the right to vote entailed not only the political power to elect members of the legislature or the executive but also vast social and economic powers. These ideational initiatives have convinced people both in developed and developing countries that socio-economic conditions are not the result/ gift of the nature rather these are man made which are the byproducts of certain policies. And this realisation led to the rise and growth of welfarist state.

Contextualising Indian State

The post colonial evolution of the Indian state began its journey by rejecting the notion of state as nothing but law and order maintaining institution. In fact the historical consensus of wiping out tears from the millions of people became the cardinal guiding ethos of the political elites who came to occupy the driving seat of political power. Hence, they took upon themselves the herculean task of designing the road map of development in such a manner that was to ensure growth/ development with justice - social, economic and political. Keeping the above objective in mind the architect/ founding fathers of our constitution decided to prescribe such an ideational goal and institutional mechanisms that reflects the idea of a welfare state.

A closer scrutiny of the constitution of India in general and Preamble along with Directives would clearly indicate that the path of social revolution envisioned by the founding fathers was nothing short of the parameters of the welfare state. It would not be inappropriate to put forward the critical components of a welfare state which are explicitly mentioned in part IV of the constitution under provisions of Articles 39 to 47 . In a nutshell these provisions intended to: ensure adequate means of livelihood with dignity; ensure equality of opportunity and wages without gender bias or discrimination on the basis of sex/ gender; ensuring right to work and freedom from exploitation of child and adult workforce/ labour; ensuring right to free education especially up to the age of 14; ensuring necessary support of the state in case of unemployment, age related/ geriatric sickness/ disabilities; ensuring living wage, just and humane conditions of work leading to a decent living with opportunities for leisure and socio-cultural opportunities; ensuring educational and economic interests of the underprivileged sections of the society in general and scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in particular, and ensuring the betterment of public health by improving their level of nutrition and standard of living.

Though the Directives were non-justiciable but the provisions under part III/ Fundamental Rights was intended to be read with the Directives to make it a potent weapon for removing inequalities and creating an egalitarian/ socialistic society. The basic aim of the rights enshrined in this section is to protect the natural rights and freedoms from any onslaught of the state. Hence it provides for equality before the law and equal protection of the law. Furthermore, it also ensures in no uncertain terms, the rights of the citizens from any discriminatory policies by the state on the grounds like faith, gender, caste and place of birth etc. However, one should not forget to mention that there are exceptions to these provisions so that special laws can be enacted and specific programmes and policies are initiated to protect the interests of women, children as well as socially and educationally backward communities, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The provision for approaching the Supreme court and the High court for enforcement of the rights under this section was to act as the strongest possible remedy against any threat to these rights by the state as well as the individual.

The trio of preambular goal of creating a welfare state was to be achieved by blending of social and individual rights explicitly enshrined in part IV and iii of the constitution namely Directive principles of the state policy and Fundamental Rights. This sentiment of the founding fathers found endorsement in the due course of legal pronouncements of many judges. P.B. Gajendragadkar, former Chief Justice of India did not mince words while exploring the intention of these provisions and said "The Indian Constitution makers were fully alive to the problems posed by the idea of Welfare State and so the Constitution has guaranteed to its citizens - justice social economic and political." Hidayatullah, another former Chief Justice of India did voice similar concern and clearly affirmed that our Constitution is an instrument admirably suited for the establishment of a liberal and socialist democracy "in which the rival claims of individual and society can be completely reconciled and through which the erection of a Welfare State is rendered practical."

The normative goals of establishing an egalitarian/socialistic/welfarist state began taking concrete shape through positive policy initiatives by the state immediately after the adoption of our constitution. To begin with the central government decided in March 1950 to create an institution called 'planning commission' to take care of the material and human resources in such a way that a blue print is prepared for the most effective and balanced utilisation of both the resources are ensured. And the ideational objective of the first plan document made it crystal clear by declaring that it aimed at acting as a positive catalyst in building a welfare state on the basis of achieving socio-economic development by translating the provisions of the Directives into reality. The Second Five Year plan document came out with much more elaborate commitment towards the constitutional goals. It clearly envisioned that the primary concern of our idea of establishing a socialistic pattern of society is to ensure a decent standard of living and fair opportunities to all. Furthermore, promotion and protection of the interests of the disadvantaged sections of the society would be ensured. The Third Five Year Plan reasserted the same as it set the target of providing the masses of Indian people the opportunity to lead a good life. Removing poverty and unemployment became the core concern of the Fourth and Fifth five year plans. While the sixth plan document laid emphasis

on improving the quality of life of the people in general it made special reference for the socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the society. Though one may find different thrust areas as the focal point of development in different plans but the basic objective of moving towards an egalitarian society still holds good. In other words the journey of planned development even after creation of NITI AYOOG remains dedicated to the goal of prosperity without allowing concentration of economic power in few hands. In fact the overall attempt has been to ensure fair distribution of fruits of development without which the state can not escape from the dangers of societal unrest which may endanger the social fabric of our democratic society.

The deep rooted impact of welfarist ideas during the struggle for freedom was incorporated not only in the constitution but remained the critical concern of the political parties irrespective of their ideological configuration. It remains an objective fact whether political parties use the terms like socialistic/welfarist or not but the manifestos of the political parties clearly indicate that their basic goal of governance would not be any different. It is visible when we analyse the legislative measures of the successive governments at the union or state level. Among the notable steps by the government include abolition of zamindari and privy purses, measures of land reforms, and numerous policies for the socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the society. In plans and annual budgets the government has been allocating more resources which aimed at ameliorating the discrimination in general and socio-economic in particular.

Critical concern/ evaluation

It is argued that no state can claim to be a welfare state unless it strives genuinely hard to inch closer to removal of poverty on the one hand and ensuring economic growth with social justice. It is an open secret that in contemporary India economic development could not keep pace with socio-economic justice which is reflected in the concentration of economic power in the hands of few people. Such an abnormal redistribution of economic growth has certainly created a situation of plenty amidst poverty which has consistently been a threat to social harmony. Thus, the herculean tasks still remains to achieve justice which can be realised if the economic development becomes synonym of justice. And this can become reality by ensuring increasing opportunities for a better or dignified life to the people at large which necessitates more equitable distribution of income and wealth, substantial increase in the level of employment, greater degree of security of income, expansion of education, health, nutrition, housing and social welfare. This is not a positive sign for achieving the normative twin goals of growth with justice. Qualitative and structural changes in the society must therefore, go hand in hand with rapid economic growth and existing disparities - regional, sectoral and social- should be substantially reduced. The need of the hour, therefore, is to channelise the human and material resources in such a way that the goal of socio-economic justice would become a reality. It is possible with improvement in the standard of living of the poorest or disadvantaged sections on the society which cannot be realised without reducing inequalities of income and equitable distribution of assets. In other words the benefits of ongoing economic development should lead to progressive upliftment of the

relatively less privileged strata of the society which ultimately would lead to progressive reduction in the concentration of economic power.

A cursory look at the seven decades of development in the post colonial India would suggest that no doubt the government at both the levels of federal structures have used various methods in the direction of welfare of the people, like direct attack on poverty and asset inequalities but poor results have led the analysts to suggest that there has not been desired positive change in the socio-economic structures. However, another set of social scientists are not in agreement with the negative only connotations of the Indian state. According to them India's planned economy has succeeded to a great extent and has moved towards a social revolution whereby socio-economic disparities have been minimised. It is clearly visible in the improving social services in general and health as well as education in particular. However, an objective assessment of the claims and counter claims would suggest that no doubt much progress has been achieved but at the same time there are many critical concerns which remains to be addressed. The most critical question, therefore, which crops up is to find out the reasons which are responsible for failure to realise the constitutional goal of justice: social, economic and political.

There are differences of opinion on the quantum of achievement which are necessary ingredients to qualify as the welfare state. The causal scrutiny of the whole issue, however clearly indicate that the institutional inaction/inertia appears to be the most important reason for failure in translating the constitutional goals into reality. The corrective path/ measures to be undertaken would require spelling out in crystal clear terms the basic aims and objectives of the socio-economic development and policy initiatives under the framework of National Welfare Programmes. It is pertinent requirement, therefore, that adequate coordination is achieved among all the governmental bodies concerned with social welfare and related social programs, such as education, health, housing, justice and labour both at the Centre and the State. Moreover, the planner and coordinating machinery should also ensure effective communication and continuous exchange of general and specific information as well as effective collaboration at the operational level. Furthermore, effective social planning need to be based on scientifically collected relevant objective data. In the absence of such data it becomes difficult for the planners to assess the situation which more often results in the poor allocations to social welfare.

Another important mechanism for removing the bottleneck at both the levels (programming and implementation) is to encourage active participation of the people at large. This would give an important opportunity for getting the feedback from the targeted beneficiaries. Yet another meaningful intervention would be to encourage the concerned voluntary organisations in active assistance to the governmental agencies which are tasked with providing social welfare. However, the required care should be taken to ensure that these organisations are not mutated into bureaucratic organisation. And, last but not the least, the administrative procedures for deciding the needs of the targeted beneficiaries and the redressal of their grievances must be simple and clearly defined in the transparent manner.

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