

Background Note

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The Politics of Welfare in Tamil Nadu



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Published By:
The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy
Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai,
Chennai – 600002. Tamil Nadu, India.

Web: www.thehinducentre.com
Phone: +91-44-25876300
Email: thc@thehinducentre.com

The Politics of Welfare in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu, which goes to the polls on May 16, 2016, to elect a new State government, makes for an interesting study in the politics of welfare. Its deep-rooted welfare mechanism links party politics, public finance, public policy, the livelihoods of the electorate, and electoral outcomes. To the popular eye, the welfare cycle starts with an election promise and is completed with the delivery of such an assurance. Behind the scenes, however, there are conceptual and practical questions that need to be addressed by the political leaders and the government machinery to make any proposed scheme deliverable. Some of these are:

- What is the line between ‘welfare’ and ‘populism’?
- Is the welfare/populist plank effective for a party to outbid others in the electoral arena?
- Does the implementation of certain welfare/populist schemes in Tamil Nadu enhance the likelihood of a party winning elections?

A conceptual introduction

In the practice of public policies, a precursor to the modern welfare state can be traced to fourteenth century England when state intervention was made after the Black Death of 1348-49 to control wages and labour mobility. Legislative intervention to ensure that a minimal level of protection for the vulnerable also came in the form of the Poor Relief Act, 1576, and the Poor Law Act in 1601, which was “the basis of poor relief until well into the twentieth century” in Britain and the U.S.¹

The post-World War II welfare state can be said to lie at an intersection of democracy and capitalism as a sort of compromise between classes that were beginning to repudiate capitalism and those in power. In this manner, a social contract was reached and the welfare state, in one viewpoint, came to be seen as a by-product of capitalism, with social policy gaining importance against the backdrop of increasing concentration of wealth through capitalism (Katzenstein, 1987, Polanyi, 1944, Rodrik, 2008). Through another, more pessimistic lens, the welfare state can be seen as a mechanism to discipline and control labour unrest. Esping-Anderson and Korpi, however, see the development of the welfare state as a reflection of the power of the working classes (Esping-Andersen and Korpi, 1986).

The Indian experience differs from the European or U.S. variants. One feature of the Indian welfare state is that it has “limited universality” and the welfare state has not truly evolved in a complete sense. At best, India can be considered to be a partial welfare state, where some form of social security exists only for workers in the organised sector, which is itself a minuscule percentage of the workforce.

In India, as in Europe, provision of food security was, and continues to be, a major component of welfare intervention by the state. The apathy of the colonial rulers during the Bengal famine, which “underscored the intimate connection between food and political justice”, influenced the vision that pre-independence Indian thinkers had for a free nation.² This thought was translated into action at

the all-India level with the mainstreaming of the Public Distribution System (PDS), which owed its origin to the post-World War II rationing of food.

The PDS consolidated its position with the creation of the Food Corporation of India and the Agricultural Prices Commission in 1965, and has the following objectives:

- “i) Providing foodgrains and other essential items to vulnerable sections of society at reasonable (subsidised) prices
- ii) to have a moderating influence on the open market prices of cereals, the distribution of which constitutes a fairly big share of the total marketable surplus; and
- iii) to attempt socialisation in the matter of distribution of essential commodities.”³

The PDS, which operates on the principle of aggregation and distribution, is a crucial building block in the politics of welfare in Tamil Nadu. It also serves as an important government institution that shapes welfare politics in Tamil Nadu, after politics transformed from limited suffrage, based on income and education, to universal adult franchise in independent India. This factor, universal adult franchise, is a crucial component in the evolution of political parties as well as welfare politics.

Tamil Nadu has a long history of welfare, dating back to colonial India, predating universal adult franchise. P. Chidambaram, former Union Finance Minister, points out that P. Subbarayan, who was Chief Minister of the Madras Presidency government between 1926 and 1930,

“was instrumental in introducing many revolutionary welfare measures for the poor and the downtrodden. He introduced concession in school fees, educational grant for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, a debt relief scheme and compulsory teaching of English.”⁴

This places the Tamil Nadu State machinery in a distinct position of having conceived and implemented welfare programmes for a decade short of a century now.

Welfare politics in Tamil Nadu can be divided into three broad categorisations since independence. Wyatt⁵ provides a comprehensive analysis of the differing approaches adopted by the Indian National Congress (INC), the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in charting out policies that are crafted to win popular support. In sum, the more a party is able to extend clientelism by providing goods and services for political support and patronage, the better it seems to have performed in elections.

Votes for rice, consumer durables and goats

The evolution of Tamil Nadu's welfare mechanism also shows signs of increasing clientelism and expansion of goods and services that are used to win over political support. If it was rice and food that played a major role in the 1950s and 1960s, when the INC was in power, it was rice and housing, when the DMK took over the administrative reins. In the late 1960s, the ascent of the DMK was also on a promise to provide rice at the price of Rs. 1 per measure for the poor.⁶ Subsequently, the DMK government introduced a housing scheme for the poor. In addition, as Wyatt points out, the DMK expanded its reach by making "patronage appointments" in the government sector.

The emergence of the AIADMK, led by M.G. Ramachandran, who had considerable political experience in the DMK, and was its Treasurer before forming his party, saw a new pattern in welfare politics. Two important changes made to the welfare framework were in the product and the process. With regard to product, the AIADMK reshaped the noon meal scheme, which was initiated in 1925 in Madras, and later enhanced by the INC government in the 1960s, and made it a material benefit that reached a large section of poor children. When it came to changes in the process, unlike the DMK, "the AIADMK tended to be more open-handed when distributing patronage, distributing lower value goods to larger numbers of voters", (Wyatt, 2013).

The change in the process was reflected in the inclusion of the personal element to a public good. Thus, the mid-day meal scheme came to be identified with M.G. Ramachandran. This was to take another step when the DMK government in 2006-11 named the health insurance scheme as "*Kalaigñar Kapitu Thittam*" (interestingly, it was called 'Chief Minister's Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme' in English).

Indeed, the branding of political leaders took another dimension between 2011 and 2015 when the names of almost all government welfare schemes by the AIADMK government were prefixed with "Amma", as Jayalalithaa is referred to by her followers.

After the Seventies, the next significant shift in Tamil Nadu's politics of welfare came in 2006, when the DMK, headed by M. Karunanidhi — who succeeded the party's founder, C.N. Annadurai, as Chief Minister in 1969, lost power to M.G. Ramachandran in 1977, and then led the DMK governments in 1989 and 1996 — won the elections based on promises of more welfare schemes, which included providing free colour television sets. This changed the narrative of the politics of welfare. In 2011, the AIADMK, led by Jayalalithaa — who was already a three-time Chief Minister and had criticised Karunanidhi's free television scheme in 2006 — went a step further and promised free goats and milch cows to the rural poor and free mixies and fans for the urban poor.

Tamil Nadu's success in implementing welfare schemes comes with some related questions, three of which are: what distinguishes a welfare good from a populist good, who designs these schemes and how are they implemented, and what is their impact on the electorate.

A particular electoral pattern is worth noting. Since the passing of M.G. Ramachandran, incumbents have been defeated, only to be re-elected, with power alternating between the DMK and the AIADMK. It is debatable if this electoral pendulum is a result of voters expecting better governance

or more “welfare schemes”. However, it is evident that Tamil Nadu’s political narrative is now centred more on what people stand to gain from governments through direct and immediate benefits, rather than long-term and sustainable programmes and plans.

Two final questions linger: what has been the effect of this competitive nature of welfare politics on the fiscal health of the State, and, is there a need to reconceptualise Tamil Nadu’s welfare schemes, which now tend to veer towards populism.

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(Background note prepared by V.S. Sambandan and Vasundhara Sirnate)



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