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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

From Rights-Holders to Beneficiaries: India's Changing Welfare Model

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From Rights-Holders to Beneficiaries: India's Changing Welfare Model


Down to Earth 27 June 2026 **GS2**

Source: ujjyari.com — researched, fact-checked & UPSC-mapped



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Is calling citizens 'beneficiaries' rather than 'rights-holders' merely a change of vocabulary, or does it alter the balance of power between the state and the citizen?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)  [Down to Earth](#)


Every fact web-verified against primary sources (<https://ujjyari.com/how-we-verify/>)

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

For two decades India built a distinctive welfare model on the language of rights: the right to information, to work, to food, to education. The vocabulary of recent welfare expansion increasingly speaks instead of beneficiaries, lists and **saturation** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/saturation/>) of schemes. The change of word seems small, but it carries a constitutional weight. A rights-holder can demand and litigate; a beneficiary can mostly hope to be selected. How India frames its welfare recipients shapes who holds power in the relationship between citizen and state.

THE CRUX IN 60 WORDS

India is shifting from a rights-based welfare model, where entitlements are legally enforceable, toward a beneficiary model, where welfare is delivered as targeted schemes at administrative discretion. Modern delivery improves reach and cuts leakage, but reframing citizens as beneficiaries weakens justiciability and accountability, making exclusion harder to challenge. The task is to combine efficient delivery with enforceable rights.

THE ISSUE, DECODED

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CONCEPT	WHAT IT MEANS	WHY IT MATTERS
Rights-based welfare	Welfare claims backed by law and enforceable in court	Gives citizens standing to demand delivery and challenge exclusion
Beneficiary model	Welfare delivered as schemes to identified recipients	Efficient but can rest on administrative and political discretion
Justiciability	Whether a claim can be enforced through the courts	Determines if a citizen can legally compel the state to act
Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)	Transfer of subsidies and benefits straight to accounts	Improves targeting and reduces leakage, but depends on accurate databases
Accountability	The state's answerability for delivery and exclusion	Strong in rights regimes; weaker when welfare is framed as discretion

THE ANALYSIS

- 1 Rights gave citizens standing.** Landmark laws on information, employment, food and education converted welfare from policy preference into legal obligation. A denied entitlement (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/entitlement/>) became a violation, not merely an administrative gap.
- 2 The beneficiary model reframes the relationship.** Welfare becomes a scheme delivered to a list. The citizen's role changes from claimant of a right to recipient of a benefit, dependent on eligibility rules and database inclusion.
- 3 Discretion is the pivot.** In a beneficiary model, who is included, for how long, and on what criteria can rest on administrative judgement and political choice. Discretion is not inherently wrong, but unchecked discretion weakens equal treatment.
- 4 Exclusion becomes harder to contest.** A rights-holder wrongly denied can litigate. A beneficiary left off a list often has weaker legal footing, especially where the benefit is framed as discretionary rather than guaranteed.
- 5 Efficiency is real and should not be dismissed.** Digital targeting and DBT have expanded coverage, cut leakages and reached people faster than slow litigation ever could. The critique of framing is not a rejection of modern delivery.
- 6 The risk is welfare sliding into patronage** (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/patronage/>). When benefits are presented as gifts of those in power rather than dues of citizenship, the democratic accountability that rights provided can erode.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

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CARRY THESE INTO THE EXAM HALL.

Rights-based laws: Right to Information Act, 2005 (<https://ujjiyari.com/legislation/right-to-information-act-2005/>); Mahatma Gandhi NREGA, 2005; National Food Security Act, 2013; Right to Education Act, 2009.

Directive Principles (Part IV) and Fundamental Rights (Part III): the constitutional anchors for welfare and enforceability; Article 21's expanding scope.

Article 32 and Article 226: the writ jurisdictions that make rights justiciable (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocabulary/justiciable/>).

Social audit (<https://ujjiyari.com/terms/social-audit/>) and grievance redress: built into NREGA and food-security delivery as accountability tools.

Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT): the backbone of modern scheme delivery, linked to Aadhaar-based targeting.

Justiciability: distinguishes enforceable Fundamental Rights from largely non-justiciable Directive Principles.

THE DEBATE

For the rights framing: Rights create accountability, give citizens legal power, and protect the excluded. They embed dignity and equal treatment, ensuring welfare is a claim of citizenship rather than a favour that can be withdrawn.

For the beneficiary model: Outcomes matter. Targeted delivery and DBT have reached people faster, plugged leakages and achieved saturation that years of litigation did not. Efficiency and reach are themselves a form of justice for the poor.

Balanced verdict: This is not a binary. The most accountable **welfare state** (<https://ujjiyari.com/terms/welfare-state/>) would marry efficient, technology-enabled delivery with statutory entitlement and strong redress. Lose the rights anchor, and efficiency can become discretion; lose efficient delivery, and rights can stall in courts. India needs both.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (TRANSFERABLE SKILL)

When the state changes how it names citizens, ask what legal relationship the new word implies. "Rights-holder" implies a duty on the state; "beneficiary" implies discretion. Decoding framing reveals shifts in accountability that statistics alone miss. This lifts a governance answer from describing schemes to analysing the citizen-state balance.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

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Rights-based law -> enforceable entitlement -> citizen has standing -> exclusion is justiciable -> state is accountable versus scheme-based delivery -> discretionary benefit -> citizen is a listed recipient -> exclusion is hard to contest -> accountability weakens

THE WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Anchor core entitlements in statute.** Keep essential welfare (food, work, education, health) on a legal footing so they remain enforceable, not discretionary.
- 2 **Strengthen grievance redress** (<https://ujjayari.com/vocab/redress/>). Provide accessible, time-bound mechanisms to challenge wrongful exclusion from any scheme.
- 3 **Make beneficiary selection transparent.** Publish criteria, lists and appeal processes to limit arbitrary discretion and reduce patronage risk.
- 4 **Institutionalise social audits.** Extend independent audit and community verification across DBT-based schemes, not only legacy programmes.
- 5 **Fix database exclusion.** Ensure that errors in targeting databases do not deny genuine claimants, with provisions for self-declaration and correction.
- 6 **Frame welfare as citizenship.** Use language and design that treat welfare as a due of citizenship, preserving the dignity and accountability that the rights era introduced.

THE TAKEAWAY BOX

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Contrast rights-based and beneficiary models on accountability and justiciability, concede the efficiency gains of DBT, and argue for fusing enforceable rights with modern delivery.

“A rights-holder can demand; a beneficiary can only hope to be chosen, and that difference is the difference between citizenship and patronage.”

RTI Act 2005; MGNREGA 2005; NFSA 2013; RTE 2009; Articles 21, 32, 226; Fundamental Rights vs Directive Principles; DBT.

Dignity in welfare delivery; the moral difference between an entitlement and a gift; the risk of patronage undermining democratic equality.

Connects to questions on rights-based legislation, the role of Directive Principles, and welfare governance and accountability.

GS2 governance (accountability, service delivery), GS2 social justice (welfare schemes), GS2 polity (Fundamental Rights, justiciability), and GS4 ethics (dignity, public service).

Sources: *Down To Earth* (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in>), *PRS Legislative Research* (<https://prsindia.org>)

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KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

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The reframing of citizens from rights-holders, with legally enforceable entitlements, to beneficiaries, who receive discretionary state largesse, dilutes accountability and weakens the justiciability of welfare claims, shifting power from the citizen to the state.

 **SUPPORTING**

- Rights-based laws such as the right to food, work and education created enforceable obligations on the state and gave citizens standing to demand delivery.
- A beneficiary model frames welfare as a gift or scheme, where inclusion and continuity depend on administrative and political discretion rather than legal entitlement.
- Discretion concentrated in delivery weakens grievance redress, makes exclusion harder to challenge in court, and can blur the line between welfare and patronage.

 **COUNTER**

Direct benefit transfers and targeted schemes have improved reach, reduced leakage and delivered welfare faster than rights litigation, so outcomes may matter more than framing.

 **WAY FORWARD**

Combine the efficiency of modern delivery with the accountability of rights: statutory backing for core entitlements, robust grievance redress, transparency in beneficiary selection, and social audits, so that welfare remains a claim of citizenship rather than a discretionary favour.

**MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK**Ujyari Current Affairs - ujyari.com · Free Daily Current Affairs for UPSC & State PCS**QUESTION**

India's welfare architecture is shifting from rights-based entitlements toward discretionary beneficiary delivery. Critically examine how this affects accountability and the justiciability of welfare claims. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

India's welfare state was significantly reshaped in the 2000s by rights-based legislation that made certain welfare claims legally enforceable. A discernible shift is now under way toward a beneficiary-centred, scheme-based delivery model.

BODY

The rights-based phase, through the right to information, work, food and education, treated welfare as an entitlement of citizenship. It gave individuals standing to approach courts, imposed duties on the state, and built accountability into the design through grievance mechanisms and social audits.

The emerging beneficiary model, by contrast, frames welfare as delivery of schemes to identified recipients, often through direct benefit transfers and digital targeting. This has genuine merits: faster reach, reduced leakage and measurable saturation of coverage.

The concern is constitutional rather than logistical. When a citizen is a rights-holder, exclusion is a violation that can be challenged.

When a citizen is a beneficiary, inclusion can depend on eligibility criteria, database accuracy and administrative or political discretion, and exclusion becomes harder to contest. This subtly shifts power from the citizen to the state and risks blurring welfare into patronage.

The two approaches are not mutually exclusive.

CONCLUSION

India should fuse efficient delivery with enforceable rights by anchoring core entitlements in statute, strengthening grievance redress and transparency, so welfare remains a justiciable claim of citizenship, not a discretionary favour.

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