

Targeted Welfare and Structural Inequality: A Conceptual Evaluation of Social Justice Schemes for Marginalised Communities in India

Navin Chettri

Assistant Professor, Management Area, NIIT University, Neemrana

Abstract

This paper presents a conceptual analysis of the social justice-driven schemes carried out by India's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE), such as scholarships, livelihood/skill development schemes and welfare measures for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNTs), disabled and transgender individuals. Understanding these schemes as measures of redistribution and recognition, this paper seeks to understand the extent to which they address the structural injustices associated with caste, gender, disability and spatiality that they seek to redress. This paper employs an analytical framework based on Nancy Fraser's typology of affirmative versus transformative solutions to injustice, the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and the literature on political economy of caste-based discrimination and applies it to a scheme-by-scheme analysis of the schemes carried out by the MSJE, based on official sources, commissions' reports and secondary literature. It asserts that even though MSJE programs have increased the scope of their reach to include more people who were ignored before like DNTs and transgenders, they are still basically affirmational rather than transformative because of their low-level benefits, eligibility criteria and documentations that produce exclusivity, fragmentation and lack of connection with universal social protection systems and rights-based frameworks. Therefore, targeted welfare programs become an essential yet partial solution for structural inequalities, and their transformative power will only be realized through universal social protection floors, anti-discrimination laws and community involvement.

Keywords: targeted welfare; structural inequality; caste; redistribution and recognition; capability approach; denotified tribes; social justice

Date of Submission: 09-07-2026

Date of acceptance: 20-07-2026

I. Introduction

The social protection framework in India includes a basic provisioning scheme for all, which provides subsidised food via the Public Distribution System (PDS), rural employment guarantee and publicly provided health insurance along with an extensive scheme of targeted programmes addressing historically disadvantaged groups (Drèze & Sen, 2013). Among these schemes, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) stands out. While other social sector ministries deal with deprivation based on either income or social sector, MSJE is concerned with tackling disadvantages associated with social identities of caste, community, disability and gender through schemes for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Denotified Nomadic Tribes (DNTs), persons with disabilities, senior citizens and transgender persons (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment [MSJE], 2015). In the past two decades, the ministry's schemes have been broadened from scholarships and hostels to skill development, rehabilitation, housing and economic empowerment in the name of social justice (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2022).

This development is marked by the continuing existence of entrenched and identity-based inequalities. There have been numerous studies that show how caste remains not just a legacy of the past, but a discriminatory institution that shapes labour, finance, property, and education markets in the present day (Thorat & Newman, 2010; Deshpande, 2011; Mosse, 2018; Munshi, 2019). Disability and deviation from gender norms exacerbate the problem, and DNTs, criminalized and stigmatized under the colonial legal framework, remain some of the most marginalized communities in the eyes of policy (Radhakrishna, 2001). It is within this context that the following question emerges in relation to the paper: to what extent are MSJE's affirmative programs able to act as redistributive tools for their beneficiaries, and where does their influence fall short of structural change?

This study attempts to answer the above question in a conceptual manner, rather than an empirical one. It is not concerned with measuring the effects of schemes but rather constructs an analytical framework and applies it to the rationale behind the scheme portfolio of MSJE based on official documents of the schemes, commission reports, and secondary sources. The second section introduces the institutional background. The

third section lays down the conceptual framework which is based on Fraser's analysis of redistribution vs recognition, Sen's capability theory and caste economics. Sections 4 to 7 deal with four clusters of schemes: education, livelihoods, DNT welfare and those for persons with disabilities and gender minorities.

II. Institutional and Policy Context

The MSJE works mainly through the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment along with other statutes and commissions, such as the National Trust for the well-being of individuals suffering from autism, cerebral palsy, intellectual disability and multiple disabilities, as well as the national commissions for backward classes and for DNTs (each representing a particular constituency), respectively (MSJE, 2015; National Trust, n.d.). The programs of the agency represent an important component of social protection policy, including employment in rural areas in accordance with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, food security according to the National Food Security Act, and health insurance under Ayushman Bharat (Drèze & Sen, 2013). What makes MSJE programs special is their explicit targeting of marginalized communities who suffer from exclusion, not only due to poverty but because of their caste identity, discrimination, and lack of political power.

The policy documents and year-end reports articulate the above work within the ambit of constitutional obligations in respect of Articles 15 (non-discrimination), 17 (abolition of untouchability), and 46 (promotion of educational and economic interests of weaker sections) and the need for inclusive growth through interventions (PIB, 2022). However, the translation of the above into scheme design is not consistent. According to Mosse (2018), the approach towards the development of social policy in India has been one where caste is seen as either a static or residual problem that can be rectified through compensatory policies instead of being understood as an ongoing relational process which needs to be dismantled by the state.

III. Conceptual Framework: Redistribution, Recognition, Capability, and Structural Inequality

The theoretical structure in the paper depends on three pillars of analysis – redistribution and recognition, capability and empowerment, and structural inequality – which can help to consider targeted welfare as something else but resource transfer.

The first one makes use of Nancy Fraser's (1995) distinction of two families of justice claims: redistribution claims that solve socio-economic injustice by resource redistribution and recognition claims that solve cultural injustice by disrespected identities' revaluation. Furthermore, Fraser distinguishes affirmative remedies, which deal with inequities without changing the structural relations behind, from transformative remedies, which change relations of production and recognition themselves (Fraser, 1995; Fraser & Honneth, 2003). This distinction suits Indian social justice very well, because such castes as SCs and DNTs are subject to both maldistribution and misrecognition at once (Ambedkar, 2014).

The second pillar is that of capability approach where the well-being of individuals is measured not by the amount of resource transfer but by the actual freedom – capabilities – that the people have access to (Sen, 1999). In other words, it means that a scholarship or a stipend will matter less as income but as an increase in the capabilities of an individual to get education and employment, as well as participate as equals. Empowerment in such cases becomes synonymous with increasing agency of marginalized individuals and their capacity to take up strategic decisions (Kabeer, 1999).

Structural inequality is the third pillar. According to Young (1990), structural injustice does not emanate from any form of discrimination but is the effect of the operation of institutions, norms, and practices that systemically set up some people for disadvantage. Caste is the most defining structure of discrimination and advantage in the case of India, according to Mosse (2018). Unlike the expectation of many people, caste systems have not diminished with modernization but continue to thrive in India by creating penalties on hiring, wages, lending, and renting of homes (Thorat & Newman, 2010; Deshpande, 2011), with caste networks still influencing economic mobility and access to markets (Munshi, 2019).

The fusion of the pillars leads to three questions that can be posed regarding any scheme that is aimed at targeting specific problems. The first question is regarding redistribution and asks whether the scale, time period, and extent of benefits provided by the scheme are sufficient considering the level of poverty that exists. The second question is about capabilities and recognition and asks whether the scheme builds on agency, voice, and equality or merely provides short-term relief without changing anything else. The third question regards structure and asks whether the solution provided by the scheme is affirmative or transformative.

IV. Scholarships and Educational Support for SC, ST, OBC, and Other Groups

Scholarships form one of the oldest and most prominent MSJE programs that are used for the purpose of ensuring educational equality among SC, ST, OBC and other socially underprivileged students. The list includes scholarships for pre-matric and post-matric students, national scholarship program for studies abroad, fellowships and hostels & coaching program, which all help in reducing the cost burden on families and making education and higher education more accessible through the coverage of tuition fees, maintenance and examination expenses (PIB, 2021; MSJE, 2015).

Through the process of redistribution, scholarships ensure allocation of resources from the government to the families who would be unable to afford continuation of education on their own, and through the process of capability enhancement scholarships contribute towards increasing real opportunities for learning and competing (Sen, 1999). However, the success of scholarships depends heavily on the parameters of the design itself such as income thresholds, amount of reimbursement, ceilings, but above all timely disbursement of funds, which differ greatly across various states and programs (MSJE, 2015).

Scholarships essentially function as affirmative and not transformative remedies according to Fraser. Scholarships distribute resources that allow entry into educational institutions, but fail to transform what happens in them. SC and OBC students remain stigmatized, segregated into lesser streams and educational institutions, and subject to discrimination in the job market after graduation (Deshpande, 2011; Mosse, 2018). This implies that while education is a prerequisite for breaking down structural inequality, it only allows access to an already discriminatory terrain.

V. Livelihood and Skill-Development Programmes

In addition to education, the government agency implements livelihood and skill development schemes that aim at empowering the economically deprived communities. The schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Dakshta Aur Kushalta Sampann Hitgrahi (PM-DAKSH) Yojana offer skilling, entrepreneurship assistance and credit linkage to SC, OBC, economically disadvantaged and DNT sections, along with other initiatives for self-help groups, microenterprises and vocational training (PIB, 2022).

While these programmes represent redistributive schemes, they try to shift the beneficiaries from their current low productivity and unstable work to a better one. However, their impact is restrained by poor quality of training, insufficient placement and post-training support, and finally, by the fact that the segmentation of the labour market on the grounds of the community affiliation still takes place (Thorat & Newman, 2010; Munshi, 2019). Thus, the skilling increases the supply of skills but does not influence the discriminatory demand side of employment and income generation process.

Empowerment will yield maximum results when empowerment programs go beyond individual skill building to organizational empowerment, which involves support for producer cooperatives or self-help federations or bargaining for terms of trade because such programs change the power equation and do not just build the assets of individuals (Kabeer, 1999). Empowerment programs are mostly individualistic, and they only take into consideration the shortcomings of the individual worker without dealing with the organization and the entire value chain process.

VI. Welfare Schemes for Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes

Denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes hold a unique position in India's social-justice spectrum. Tagged as "criminal tribes" under British laws since 1871, these tribes were "denotified" only after independence, although the notoriety, police surveillance, and bureaucratic neglect associated with them have endured (Radhakrishna, 2001). Both the successive official investigations by the Renke Commission (National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes [NCDNT], 2008) and Idate Commission (NCDNT, 2017) revealed extreme levels of destitution, with the former stating that the vast majority of DNT families had no form of documentation or land holding.

To address their needs, the Government of India initiated the Scheme for Economic Empowerment of Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (SEED), which involves an overarching scheme involving scholarships, cluster housing, livelihood opportunities, and help to access mainstream schemes (MSJE, 2022). The relevance of SEED lies in its recognition of redistribution coupled with recognition, where the latter is incomplete acknowledgment of communities denied citizenship rights and considered criminal in nature (Fraser, 1995).

And yet, the structural problem for DNTs hinges on issues of movement, policing, and documentation. Programs that rely on the existence of a permanent address, caste or income certificates, and digital registration may be difficult to access for groups whose identities depend on movement and a lack of papers, so that the

documentation necessary to access the welfare reinforces the invisibility that the welfare seeks to alleviate (NCDNT, 2008, 2017). Without complementary changes to policing procedures and the law against Habitual Offenders, which maintains colonial attitudes of suspicion, documentation procedures, and participatory methods to allow DNTs input into governance structures, such programs may fail to effect structural change.

VII. Schemes for Other Marginalised Groups: Disability, Transgender Persons, and Others

Moreover, MSJE and its sister organisations cater to the needs of people with disabilities mainly through the National Trust and run schemes for transgender people and those who beg, such as the comprehensive scheme called SMILE (Support for Marginalised Individuals for Livelihood and Enterprise), which includes shelter, rehabilitation, economic assistance, and skills development (National Trust, n.d.; PIB, 2022). Such policies provide recognition to the axes of exclusion that have long been ignored in welfare policies, namely disability and gender diversity, and at the same time address some very important legal changes like that concerning transgender individuals' rights in *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* (2014) and from the welfare to the rights paradigm in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2019).

Indeed, in actuality, most such plans continue to be based on the custodial/charitable approach rather than on a rights-based approach, focusing more on care, protection, and rehabilitation as opposed to empowerment, enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation, and transformation (Young, 1990). Rehabilitation of those who beg, for example, serves as immediate assistance, but does not challenge the way urban governance processes have criminalized poverty or provided the means to eliminate the root cause of poverty, that is, affordable housing and social security.

VIII. Adequacy of Targeted Welfare vis-à-vis Structural Inequality

Assessing adequacy means moving beyond coverage counts to ask how schemes interact with entrenched power relations. On the positive side, MSJE's portfolio has expanded in beneficiaries and allocation, and initiatives such as SEED and SMILE register previously unacknowledged forms of marginalisation and tailor provision to community-specific need (PIB, 2022; MSJE, 2022). This is real progress in the recognition dimension.

Structurally, however, three weaknesses remain consistent. The first lies in the smallness of the redistribution compared with the size of deprivation; scholarships and stipends do not always compensate for the true costs of education and training (MSJE, 2015). Second, the intricacy of rules and documentation required, and the online interface, exclude the same groups from access that the scheme is intended for—namely, DNTs without any documents, disabled people, residents of slums—so that the design of administration excludes these people directly (NCDNT, 2008, 2017). It reproduces an insight from social policy: targeted schemes have a tendency to create exclusion errors affecting most marginalized people who would be unaffected in a universal scheme (Mkandawire, 2005). Finally, few schemes include mechanisms for the enforcement of antidiscrimination, complaints procedure, and participation in control by beneficiaries (Mosse, 2018).

In Fraser's terms, the portfolio is weighted toward affirmative remedies that improve the position of disadvantaged groups within existing structures, and away from transformative remedies that would reconfigure those structures. This is why targeted welfare, though valuable, is insufficient on its own to dismantle structural inequality unless it is embedded in broader rights-based and universal frameworks.

IX. Policy Reflections and Ways Forward

These directions include the following. First, the strengthening of a universal social protection floor consisting of basic provisions in the areas of income, health, education, and housing; the use of MSJE's targeted schemes as additions to such universal provisions for historically discriminated against communities; instead of replacing universal provisions. This approach reduces the necessity of targeting and its problems, but at the same time allows for focusing on the individuals who are not provided for by universal provision alone (Mkandawire, 2005; Drèze & Sen, 2013).

Secondly, empowering the schemes through creating organization, representation, and participation of SC, OBC, DNT, disabled, and transgender organizations in the monitoring committees, social audits, and policy reviews; thus moving away from the purely welfare state model toward citizen rights model (Kabeer, 1999).

The third is to link MSJE interventions explicitly to the institutional reforms that confront structural discrimination: enforcement of anti-discrimination and atrocity law, reform of policing and of the Habitual Offenders Acts that still shadow DNTs, fuller implementation of the rights paradigm in disability and

transgender law, and targeted public investment in lagging regions and districts (Radhakrishna, 2001; Young, 1990).

Finally, there is a case for better data and intersectional research on scheme outcomes—capturing how caste, gender, disability, location, and mobility intersect to shape access—so that the next generation of schemes can move from compensatory redistribution toward genuinely transformative provision (Deshpande, 2011).

X. Conclusion

In this way, the welfare schemes of MSJE have been analysed in this paper as tools of redistribution and recognition and their effectiveness judged on the basis of the structural inequalities that they seek to address. Scholarships, livelihood schemes and schemes for the SCs, OBCs, DNTs, people with disabilities, and transgender people have expanded opportunities for marginalized populations as well as recognized them. However, they fall short due to the limited extent of benefits, exclusionary eligibility and documentation process, fragmentation of implementation mechanism and articulation with rights based/universal mechanisms.

It can be said, therefore, theoretically, that the targeted welfare scheme is both an inevitable as well as an inadequate solution to structural inequality. To use Fraser's terminology, targeted welfare is largely affirmative in nature because although it redistributes resources and recognizes, it does not have the capacity to uproot the deeply ingrained system of castes, abilities and gender roles that create inequalities. It is only when the welfare schemes are combined with universal floors, anti-discrimination law and the participation of the marginalized community in the administration of these very schemes that the transformation can be made.

References

- [1]. Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of caste: The annotated critical edition* (S. Anand, Ed.). Verso. (Original work published 1936)
- [2]. Deshpande, A. (2011). *The grammar of caste: Economic discrimination in contemporary India*. Oxford University Press.
- [3]. Drèze, J., & Sen, A. (2013). *An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions*. Princeton University Press.
- [4]. Fraser, N. (1995). From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a “post-socialist” age. *New Left Review*, (212), 68–93.
- [5]. Fraser, N., & Honneth, A. (2003). *Redistribution or recognition? A political-philosophical exchange*. Verso.
- [6]. Galanter, M. (1984). *Competing equalities: Law and the backward classes in India*. University of California Press.
- [7]. Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>
- [8]. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. (2015). *Compendium of schemes*. Department of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. <https://socialjustice.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/compenofschemas-2015e.pdf>
- [9]. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. (2022). *Scheme for Economic Empowerment of Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (SEED)*. Department of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2022/feb/doc202222519501.pdf>
- [10]. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. (n.d.). *Schemes*. Department of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. Retrieved June 22, 2026, from <https://socialjustice.gov.in/schemes>
- [11]. Mkandawire, T. (2005). *Targeting and universalism in poverty reduction* (Social Policy and Development Programme Paper No. 23). United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.
- [12]. Mosse, D. (2018). Caste and development: Contemporary perspectives on a structure of discrimination and advantage. *World Development*, 110, 422–436. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.06.003>
- [13]. Munshi, K. (2019). Caste and the Indian economy. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 57(4), 781–834. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20171307>
- [14]. National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes. (2008). *Report of the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes* (Renke Commission). Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India.
- [15]. National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes. (2017). *Report* (Idate Commission). Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India.
- [16]. National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, (2014) 5 S.C.C. 438 (India).
- [17]. Press Information Bureau. (2021, December 21). *Scholarships to SC/ST/OBC students*. Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetailm.aspx?PRID=1784233>
- [18]. Press Information Bureau. (2022, February 11). *Twenty-four flagship schemes for welfare of the public being implemented by the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment*. Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1896994>
- [19]. Radhakrishna, M. (2001). *Dishonoured by history: “Criminal tribes” and British colonial policy*. Orient Longman.
- [20]. Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, No. 49 of 2016, India Code (2016).
- [21]. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- [22]. Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (Eds.). (2010). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.
- [23]. Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, No. 40 of 2019, India Code (2019).
- [24]. Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton University Press.