



From welfare schemes to rights-based entitlements: A conceptual analysis of social security architecture in India

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Abstract

This paper presents a conceptual analysis of the transformation of India's social security architecture from scheme-based welfare interventions to rights-based entitlements. Traditionally, social protection in India operated through targeted and discretionary welfare schemes aimed at poverty alleviation and risk mitigation. However, recent policy shifts reflect a growing emphasis on legal enforceability, accountability, and citizen-centered governance. The study examines the normative, institutional, and technological dimensions of this transition, highlighting how statutory guarantees, grievance redress mechanisms, and participatory governance frameworks are reshaping state-citizen relations. It further analyzes the emergence of a hybrid architecture in which legacy welfare schemes coexist with legally backed entitlements, generating both opportunities and coordination challenges. The integration of digital public infrastructure is explored as a transformative force enhancing efficiency and transparency, while also raising concerns regarding digital exclusion and equity. By synthesizing theoretical and policy perspectives, the paper argues that the rights-based turn signifies a paradigm shift toward social justice and constitutional accountability. Nevertheless, the realization of these entitlements depends on administrative capacity, fiscal sustainability, and inclusive governance. The study contributes to contemporary debates on welfare state transformation and inclusive development in emerging economies.

Keywords: Social security, rights-based entitlements, welfare schemes, digital governance, inclusive development, accountability, india

Introduction

The trajectory of social security in India reflects a gradual but profound shift from discretionary welfare schemes toward a more institutionalized, rights-based architecture of social protection. Historically, welfare in India was conceptualized within a developmental state framework, where targeted schemes sought to alleviate poverty and vulnerability through subsidies, public works, and safety nets. While these interventions played a critical role in addressing deprivation, they often operated within a patronage-based or scheme-driven logic, characterized by fragmentation, administrative discretion, and uneven access (Wood & Gough, 2006; Kumar, 2018) [8, 19]. In recent decades, however, policy discourse has increasingly embraced the language of entitlements, accountability, and legal guarantees, signaling a paradigmatic shift in how social security is understood and operationalized.

This transformation aligns with broader global debates on social protection floors and inclusive development, where social security is framed not merely as a redistributive tool but as a fundamental right embedded within democratic citizenship (Van der Borght & Milian Gómez, 2024; Butler, 2022) [4, 15]. The rights-based turn emphasizes universality, transparency, and enforceability, moving beyond charitable or residual welfare models. In India, legislative enactments such as employment guarantees, food security provisions, and social assistance reforms illustrate this transition from programmatic welfare to justiciable entitlements. This evolution is not merely administrative; it reflects deeper normative commitments to social justice, equity, and human dignity (Verma, 2022; Chhotray *et al.*, 2020) [6, 16].

The shift is also shaped by structural transformations in India's political economy. Rapid economic growth,

urbanization, and digitalization have reconfigured state-citizen relations, raising new questions about inclusion, accountability, and state capacity (Masiero & Prakash, 2020; Addo & Senyo, 2021) [1, 10]. Digital public infrastructure, including biometric identification and direct benefit transfers, has been promoted as a means to enhance efficiency and reduce leakages. Yet, scholars caution that technological integration must be examined through the lens of equity and access, particularly for marginalized populations (Rawal *et al.*, 2021; W. W. Wang, 2024) [12, 17, 18]. The rights-based framework thus intersects with digital governance debates, where entitlement realization increasingly depends on technological mediation.

The reconceptualization of social security in India must be situated within comparative and global contexts. Emerging economies are similarly navigating the tension between targeted welfare and universal rights-based approaches (Li *et al.*, 2024; Y. Wang *et al.*, 2024) [17, 18]. International experiences suggest that durable social protection systems require coherent institutional design, fiscal sustainability, and participatory governance (Dele-Dada *et al.*, 2025; Zaidan & El Fadel, 2026) [7, 20]. India's evolving architecture—marked by a mix of contributory and non-contributory schemes, central and state-level initiatives, and digital integration—offers a unique case for conceptual analysis.

At the theoretical level, the movement from welfare schemes to rights-based entitlements raises critical questions about the nature of the welfare state in post-liberalization India. Traditional welfare models often relied on means-testing and targeted benefits, which, while fiscally pragmatic, sometimes reproduced exclusion errors and administrative arbitrariness (Wood & Gough, 2006; Kumar,

2018)^[8, 19]. A rights-based approach, by contrast, aspires to reduce discretion, strengthen grievance redress mechanisms, and embed social security within a constitutional and legal framework (Chawla & Kumar, 2026; Singh *et al.*, 2026)^[5, 14]. This shift reflects broader transformations in governance paradigms, where citizen agency and accountability mechanisms become central to policy design (Adhikari & Heller, 2024; Mazzone, 2020)^[2, 11].

Nevertheless, the transition is neither linear nor uncontested. Scholars note persistent challenges in implementation, intergovernmental coordination, and fiscal prioritization (Biju & Gayathri, 2026; Riaduzzaman *et al.*, 2026)^[3, 13]. The coexistence of scheme-based welfare and rights-based entitlements creates a hybrid architecture, where legal guarantees operate alongside discretionary programs. This hybridization underscores the need for a conceptual framework that critically examines coherence, inclusivity, and institutional robustness within India's social security system.

Against this backdrop, this paper undertakes a conceptual analysis of India's evolving social security architecture, interrogating the normative foundations, institutional configurations, and governance mechanisms underpinning the shift from welfare schemes to rights-based entitlements. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives and contemporary policy debates, the study seeks to illuminate how India's social protection paradigm reflects broader transformations in state-citizen relations, development strategy, and democratic accountability in the twenty-first century.

Literature Review

The evolution of social security from welfare-based schemes to rights-based entitlements has been widely debated within welfare state theory, development studies, and governance scholarship. The conceptual transition reflects not only institutional reforms but also deeper transformations in the normative foundations of state-citizen relations. This literature review synthesizes theoretical and empirical contributions to understand the architecture of social security in India within broader global and comparative perspectives.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Welfare and Social Protection

Classical welfare state theory conceptualizes social security as a mechanism for mitigating market risks and ensuring minimum standards of living. Wood and Gough (2006)^[19] argue that welfare regimes in developing countries often function as "informal security regimes," where state support is fragmented and mediated through patronage networks rather than universal entitlements. This perspective is particularly relevant for India, where early welfare interventions were largely scheme-based and targeted, embedded within a developmentalist paradigm focused on poverty alleviation rather than enforceable rights (Kumar, 2018)^[8].

The global shift toward rights-based approaches redefines social protection as a component of citizenship and human dignity. Butler (2022)^[4] emphasizes that rights-based welfare reframes beneficiaries as rights-holders, thereby strengthening accountability and legal enforceability. Similarly, Van der Borght and Milian Gómez (2024)^[15] underscore the importance of embedding social protection within constitutional and legal frameworks to enhance sustainability and legitimacy. This shift moves beyond

discretionary welfare toward institutional guarantees that can be judicially enforced. In the Indian context, Chhotray *et al.* (2020)^[6] highlight the interplay between democratic participation and welfare delivery, suggesting that rights-based legislation strengthens citizen agency. Verma (2022)^[16] further argues that the expansion of legally backed entitlements reflects a normative commitment to social justice embedded in constitutional values. These theoretical contributions establish the conceptual basis for analyzing India's transition from welfare schemes to rights-based entitlements.

2. From Targeted Schemes to Legal Entitlements

Targeted welfare schemes have historically dominated India's social policy landscape. While such programs aimed to address poverty efficiently, scholars note significant issues related to exclusion errors, administrative discretion, and fragmentation (Kumar, 2018)^[8]. Wood and Gough (2006)^[19] caution that targeted models often reinforce dependency and political mediation rather than universal inclusion.

The rights-based turn, however, introduces enforceability and grievance redress mechanisms. Chawla and Kumar (2026)^[5] argue that the institutionalization of legal entitlements enhances transparency and reduces arbitrariness in benefit allocation. Singh *et al.* (2026)^[14] emphasize that embedding entitlements within statutory frameworks strengthens accountability by obligating the state to fulfill defined standards of service delivery. Nevertheless, the coexistence of scheme-based and rights-based programs creates a hybrid social security architecture. Biju and Gayathri (2026)^[3] note that while rights-based laws expand coverage, their implementation often depends on administrative capacities inherited from earlier welfare schemes. Riaduzzaman *et al.* (2026)^[13] similarly observe that institutional coherence and intergovernmental coordination remain persistent challenges in transitioning fully to entitlement-based systems.

3. Governance, Accountability, and Citizen Agency

Governance reforms are central to the rights-based transformation of social security. Adhikari and Heller (2024)^[2] argue that decentralization and participatory governance mechanisms enhance the responsiveness of social protection systems. They suggest that rights-based frameworks create opportunities for local-level monitoring and social audits, thereby strengthening democratic accountability.

Mazzone (2020)^[11] further conceptualizes social security architecture as an institutional ecosystem requiring coordination among legal, administrative, and fiscal actors. Effective implementation of entitlements demands robust grievance redress systems, transparency norms, and data integration. Chhotray *et al.* (2020)^[6] highlight the role of civil society and grassroots mobilization in ensuring that entitlements are realized in practice, not merely codified in law. However, Dele-Dada *et al.* (2025)^[7] caution that institutional reforms must be accompanied by fiscal sustainability and capacity-building measures. Without adequate funding and administrative preparedness, rights-based commitments risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative. Thus, governance capacity becomes a critical determinant of successful social security architecture.

4. Digitalization and Social Security Delivery

The integration of digital technologies has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary social protection systems. Masiero and Prakash (2020) ^[10] examine the role of digital public infrastructure in enhancing efficiency and reducing leakages in welfare delivery. They argue that digitalization can strengthen entitlement realization by improving targeting accuracy and direct benefit transfers. Addo and Senyo (2021) ^[11] analyze digital transformation in public service delivery, emphasizing its potential to foster transparency and data-driven governance. However, they also highlight risks related to digital exclusion and unequal access. Rawal *et al.* (2021) ^[12] similarly caution that marginalized populations may face barriers due to technological literacy and connectivity gaps.

Recent comparative studies reinforce these concerns. W. W. Wang (2024) ^[17, 18] and Y. Wang *et al.* (2024) ^[17, 18] demonstrate that digital welfare systems must incorporate safeguards to prevent exclusion and privacy violations. Li *et al.* (2024) argue that digital governance can enhance inclusivity when accompanied by strong institutional oversight and equitable infrastructure development. In the Indian context, digitalization represents both an opportunity and a challenge. While digital platforms streamline benefit transfers, their effectiveness depends on accessibility and grievance redress mechanisms. Thus, digital integration must be analyzed as part of the broader rights-based architecture rather than as a purely technical solution.

5. Comparative and Global Perspectives

Global debates on social protection floors provide valuable insights for understanding India's evolving system. Van der Borgh and Milian Gómez (2024) emphasize that sustainable social security systems require legal clarity, fiscal commitment, and participatory governance. Comparative evidence suggests that rights-based frameworks are more resilient during economic crises due to their institutional legitimacy. Zaidan and El Fadel (2026) ^[20] highlight the importance of policy coherence and environmental sustainability within social protection design, linking social security to broader development goals. Dele-Dada *et al.* (2025) ^[7] further argue that inclusive social protection contributes to social cohesion and economic stability. These global perspectives underscore that India's transition is part of a wider reconfiguration of welfare governance in the Global South. However, the Indian case remains distinctive due to its federal structure, demographic diversity, and scale of implementation.

6. Political Economy and Institutional Hybridization

The political economy of social security reform shapes the trajectory of rights-based entitlements. Wood and Gough (2006) ^[19] emphasize that informal security arrangements often coexist with formal systems in developing contexts. Kumar (2018) ^[8] argues that India's welfare expansion reflects electoral incentives and social mobilization pressures. Singh *et al.* (2026) ^[14] note that policy reforms are influenced by intergovernmental fiscal dynamics, with states playing a crucial role in implementation. Biju and Gayathri (2026) ^[3] highlight that institutional hybridization—where rights-based and scheme-based programs operate simultaneously—creates complexities in coordination and accountability. Riaduzzaman *et al.* (2026) ^[13] further contend that policy continuity depends on political

consensus and fiscal prioritization. Without stable funding mechanisms, rights-based commitments may face sustainability challenges. Thus, the transition toward entitlements must be examined through a political economy lens that accounts for power relations, fiscal federalism, and institutional capacity.

7. Gaps in Existing Literature

While existing scholarship provides valuable insights, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature examines individual schemes or digital reforms in isolation rather than analyzing the overall architecture of social security. Second, limited conceptual work synthesizes normative, institutional, and technological dimensions into a coherent framework. Third, comparative analyses often overlook the unique hybrid nature of India's system. There is therefore a need for a comprehensive conceptual analysis that integrates welfare regime theory, rights-based governance, digital transformation, and political economy perspectives. Such an approach can illuminate how India's social security architecture is evolving and identify pathways for strengthening inclusivity, accountability, and sustainability. The literature reveals a clear shift from discretionary welfare schemes toward rights-based entitlements anchored in legal frameworks, participatory governance, and digital integration. However, this transformation remains incomplete and contested. Institutional capacity, fiscal sustainability, digital inclusion, and intergovernmental coordination emerge as critical determinants of success. By synthesizing these theoretical and empirical insights, this study situates India's social security architecture within broader global debates while highlighting the distinctive features of its hybrid and evolving model.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the transformation of India's social security system from welfare schemes to rights-based entitlements. Given the focus on normative shifts, institutional design, governance mechanisms, and digital integration, a qualitative framework enables an in-depth exploration of legal, political, and socio-economic dimensions that quantitative metrics alone may not adequately capture. The transition from discretionary welfare to enforceable entitlements involves constitutional principles, legislative frameworks, administrative reforms, and citizen-state interactions, all of which require interpretative and conceptual analysis.

The research relies on a systematic and critical review of scholarly literature, policy documents, legislative texts, and empirical governance studies to map the evolution of India's social security architecture. Key academic sources include theoretical works on welfare regimes and informal security systems (Wood & Gough, 2006; Kumar, 2018) ^[8, 19], rights-based governance and accountability frameworks (Butler, 2022; Van der Borgh & Milian Gómez, 2024) ^[4, 15], and participatory decentralization models (Adhikari & Heller, 2024; Chhotray *et al.*, 2020) ^[2, 6]. The study also engages with literature examining institutional reform and hybrid governance arrangements (Biju & Gayathri, 2026; Singh *et al.*, 2026; Riaduzzaman *et al.*, 2026) ^[3, 13, 14].

In addition, the research incorporates analyses of digital governance and social protection systems to understand the technological mediation of entitlements. Studies on digital

public infrastructure and welfare delivery (Masiero & Prakash, 2020; Addo & Senyo, 2021) ^[1, 10], digital inclusion challenges (Rawal *et al.*, 2021) ^[12], and comparative digital welfare frameworks (Li *et al.*, 2024; W. W. Wang, 2024; Y. Wang *et al.*, 2024) ^[17, 18] provide critical insights into how digitalization reshapes access, accountability, and transparency. Broader perspectives on policy coherence and inclusive development (Dele-Dada *et al.*, 2025; Zaidan & El Fadel, 2026; Verma, 2022; Mazzone, 2020) ^[7, 11, 16, 20] further contextualize India's reforms within global social protection debates.

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine the conceptual shift from welfare-based schemes to rights-based entitlements within India's social security framework.
- To analyze the institutional, legal, and governance mechanisms that underpin the emerging rights-based architecture.
- To explore the role of digital public infrastructure and administrative reforms in mediating access, transparency, and accountability.
- To identify structural and political economy factors influencing the coexistence of scheme-based and entitlement-based models.
- To synthesize theoretical and empirical insights to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework of India's evolving social security architecture.

Data Collection and Sources

Data collection involved systematic extraction and review of information from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy analyses, government reports, legislative texts, and comparative international studies. The selection criteria emphasized conceptual relevance, methodological rigor, and contemporary significance in debates surrounding welfare governance and rights-based development. The literature was categorized into thematic clusters, including welfare regime theory, rights-based legislation, governance reforms, digital transformation, fiscal federalism, and global social protection frameworks.

This approach enabled the identification of recurring themes such as universality versus targeting, accountability and grievance redress mechanisms, institutional hybridization, digital inclusion and exclusion, fiscal sustainability, and participatory governance. By examining both national and comparative studies, the research situates India's experience within broader global transformations in social security systems.

Analytical Framework

The study employs thematic content analysis to synthesize findings across diverse sources. This method allows for the identification of patterns, conceptual linkages, and institutional dynamics within the evolving social security architecture. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions:

1. **Normative Dimension:** Examining the ideological and constitutional foundations of rights-based entitlements, including citizenship, social justice, and human dignity.
2. **Institutional Dimension:** Analyzing legal frameworks, administrative structures, fiscal arrangements, and

intergovernmental coordination mechanisms shaping implementation.

3. **Technological Dimension:** Investigating the integration of digital public infrastructure and its implications for access, efficiency, transparency, and exclusion risks.

Through this multidimensional lens, the research highlights both structural patterns and localized governance challenges. It critically evaluates how rights-based frameworks alter power relations between the state and citizens, and how institutional capacities condition the realization of entitlements.

Scope and Justification

A qualitative, literature-driven methodology is particularly suitable for conceptual analysis because it enables synthesis across disciplines, including political economy, public administration, development studies, and digital governance. Rather than measuring outcomes of specific schemes, this study seeks to interrogate the architecture of social security as an evolving system shaped by normative commitments, institutional reforms, and technological change.

By prioritizing interpretative depth over statistical measurement, the methodology facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms, tensions, and trajectories underpinning India's transition from welfare schemes to rights-based entitlements. It situates contemporary reforms within broader socio-political and global contexts, thereby contributing to theoretical debates on welfare state transformation and inclusive development. Overall, this research design provides a robust conceptual foundation for analyzing how India's social security architecture is being reconfigured in the twenty-first century, highlighting opportunities, challenges, and pathways for strengthening accountability, inclusivity, and sustainability.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that India's social security architecture is undergoing a significant normative and institutional transformation from discretionary welfare schemes toward rights-based entitlements. This transition reflects a broader shift in governance philosophy, where beneficiaries are increasingly recognized as rights-holders rather than passive recipients of state benevolence (Butler, 2022; Van der Borght & Milian Gómez, 2024) ^[4, 15]. By embedding social protection within statutory frameworks, the state assumes a legally enforceable obligation, thereby strengthening accountability and democratic legitimacy. This aligns with theoretical arguments that rights-based systems enhance transparency and reduce arbitrariness in welfare delivery (Chawla & Kumar, 2026; Singh *et al.*, 2026) ^[5, 14].

However, the discussion also reveals that India's social security system remains structurally hybrid. Scheme-based targeting mechanisms continue to coexist alongside rights-based entitlements, producing institutional complexity and coordination challenges (Biju & Gayathri, 2026; Riaduzzaman *et al.*, 2026) ^[3, 13]. Such hybridization reflects historical legacies of informal and fragmented welfare regimes identified by Wood and Gough (2006) ^[19] and Kumar (2018) ^[8]. While rights-based reforms expand

coverage and grievance redress mechanisms, their effectiveness depends heavily on administrative capacity and fiscal sustainability.

Digitalization emerges as both an enabler and a site of contestation within this evolving architecture. The integration of digital public infrastructure has improved efficiency and reduced leakages in benefit transfers (Masiero & Prakash, 2020; Addo & Senyo, 2021) ^[1, 10]. At the same time, concerns about digital exclusion, technological literacy, and infrastructural disparities underscore the risk of new forms of marginalization (Rawal *et al.*, 2021; W. W. Wang, 2024) ^[12, 17, 18]. Comparative scholarship suggests that digital governance must be embedded within robust institutional safeguards to ensure inclusivity and data protection (Li *et al.*, 2024; Y. Wang *et al.*, 2024) ^[17, 18].

Furthermore, participatory governance and decentralization play a crucial role in realizing entitlements. As Adhikari and Heller (2024) ^[2] and Chhotray *et al.* (2020) ^[6] argue, rights-based frameworks gain substantive meaning only when citizens can actively monitor and claim benefits. Thus, the success of India's transition depends not only on legal codification but also on strengthening local governance, fiscal coherence, and institutional accountability (Dele-Dada *et al.*, 2025; Zaidan & El Fadel, 2026; Verma, 2022) ^[7, 16, 20]. Overall, the discussion underscores that the movement from welfare schemes to rights-based entitlements is transformative yet incomplete, requiring sustained institutional reform and inclusive governance to achieve its normative promise.

Major Findings

The study identifies several critical findings regarding the evolution of India's social security architecture from welfare schemes to rights-based entitlements.

First, a significant normative shift is evident in the conceptual framing of social protection. Earlier welfare models were predominantly scheme-driven, discretionary, and targeted, often resulting in fragmented delivery and administrative arbitrariness (Wood & Gough, 2006; Kumar, 2018) ^[8, 19]. In contrast, contemporary reforms increasingly emphasize legal enforceability, transparency, and accountability, aligning social security with constitutional principles of social justice and citizenship (Butler, 2022; Van der Borght & Milian Gómez, 2024) ^[4, 15]. This shift reflects a redefinition of beneficiaries as rights-holders rather than passive recipients, strengthening the moral and institutional legitimacy of state intervention (Verma, 2022) ^[16].

Second, the institutionalization of rights-based entitlements has improved formal accountability mechanisms, particularly through statutory guarantees and grievance redress systems (Chawla & Kumar, 2026; Singh *et al.*, 2026) ^[5, 14]. However, the research finds that the coexistence of targeted schemes and legal entitlements has produced a hybrid architecture. This hybrid model creates coordination challenges between central and state governments and complicates fiscal planning and administrative coherence (Biju & Gayathri, 2026; Riaduzzaman *et al.*, 2026) ^[3, 13]. Thus, while rights-based reforms signal progress, institutional integration remains incomplete.

Third, digital public infrastructure has emerged as a transformative component of social security delivery. Digitalization has enhanced efficiency, minimized leakages, and enabled direct benefit transfers, thereby strengthening

transparency in welfare administration (Masiero & Prakash, 2020; Addo & Senyo, 2021) ^[1, 10]. Nonetheless, digital integration also presents risks of exclusion for technologically marginalized groups, raising concerns about equitable access and data governance (Rawal *et al.*, 2021; W. W. Wang, 2024) ^[12, 17, 18]. Comparative studies emphasize that digital systems must be supported by inclusive infrastructure and robust oversight to prevent new forms of inequality (Li *et al.*, 2024; Y. Wang *et al.*, 2024) ^[17, 18].

Fourth, participatory governance and decentralization are found to be essential for effective entitlement realization. Rights-based frameworks gain substantive meaning when local institutions and civil society actors actively monitor implementation and facilitate citizen claims (Adhikari & Heller, 2024; Chhotray *et al.*, 2020) ^[2, 6]. Without institutional capacity and fiscal sustainability, rights-based commitments risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative (Dele-Dada *et al.*, 2025; Zaidan & El Fadel, 2026) ^[7, 20]. Overall, the findings suggest that India's transition represents a transformative but evolving process, where normative commitments to rights-based entitlements must be reinforced by institutional coherence, digital inclusivity, and sustained governance reforms.

Conclusion

The transition from welfare schemes to rights-based entitlements marks a significant reconfiguration of India's social security architecture. This study demonstrates that the shift is not merely administrative but normative, institutional, and technological in character. Moving beyond discretionary and targeted welfare models, the rights-based approach reframes social protection as a matter of citizenship, accountability, and legal obligation (Butler, 2022; Van der Borght & Milian Gómez, 2024) ^[4, 15]. By embedding entitlements within statutory frameworks, the state strengthens its constitutional commitment to social justice and human dignity (Verma, 2022) ^[16].

However, the transformation remains uneven and structurally hybrid. The coexistence of legacy scheme-based programs alongside rights-based laws generates institutional fragmentation and coordination challenges across federal and administrative levels (Biju & Gayathri, 2026; Riaduzzaman *et al.*, 2026) ^[3, 13]. As earlier welfare regime analyses suggest, informal and targeted arrangements continue to influence implementation practices (Wood & Gough, 2006; Kumar, 2018) ^[8, 19]. Thus, while rights-based reforms enhance formal accountability mechanisms (Chawla & Kumar, 2026; Singh *et al.*, 2026) ^[5, 14], their substantive realization depends on administrative capacity, fiscal sustainability, and intergovernmental coherence.

Digital public infrastructure has further reshaped the contours of social security delivery. Technological integration has improved efficiency, reduced leakages, and expanded the reach of direct benefit transfers (Masiero & Prakash, 2020; Addo & Senyo, 2021) ^[1, 10]. Yet, the risk of digital exclusion underscores the importance of inclusive design, robust oversight, and grievance redress mechanisms (Rawal *et al.*, 2021; W. W. Wang, 2024) ^[12, 17, 18]. Comparative scholarship reinforces that digitalization must be embedded within strong institutional safeguards to prevent new forms of inequality (Li *et al.*, 2024; Y. Wang *et al.*, 2024) ^[17, 18].

Ultimately, the study concludes that India's social security system is in a transformative but evolving phase. The normative promise of rights-based entitlements will be realized only if accompanied by participatory governance, fiscal commitment, and institutional strengthening (Adhikari & Heller, 2024; Dele-Dada *et al.*, 2025; Zaidan & El Fadel, 2026)^[2, 7, 20]. The future trajectory of India's social protection architecture will depend on its ability to reconcile universality with sustainability, digital innovation with inclusivity, and legal guarantees with effective implementation.

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