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AN ANALYTICAL STUDY ON POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES TO REDUCE INCOME AND WEALTH INEQUALITIES IN INDIA

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Income and wealth inequality remain among the most critical developmental challenges in India despite sustained economic growth over the past several decades. While economic liberalisation accelerated growth and expanded opportunities in sectors such as services, finance, and technology, the benefits of development have remained unevenly distributed across regions, occupations, and social groups. This study analytically examines the evolution of India's policies and programmes aimed at reducing income and wealth inequalities from the post-Independence planning era to the contemporary period of digital welfare governance. The study is based on secondary data from government reports, Economic Surveys, NITI Aayog publications, RBI reports, World Bank estimates, Oxfam reports, and the World Inequality Database. The findings reveal that early policy interventions focused on land reforms, public sector expansion, rural development, and progressive taxation to promote distributive justice. After 1991, market-oriented reforms accelerated economic growth but also widened socio-economic disparities. In recent years, particularly after 2014, technology-driven welfare delivery through DBT and the JAM Trinity has significantly improved efficiency and access to welfare. Programmes such as PM-KISAN, PMGKAY, Ayushman Bharat, PMAY, and GST reforms contributed to reductions in poverty, food insecurity, and healthcare access, as well as to financial inclusion. The World Bank estimates that nearly 171 million people moved out of extreme poverty between 2011–12 and 2022–23.

However, the study also finds that wealth concentration, labour market inequality, informal employment, and regional disparities continue to remain major structural challenges. The paper concludes that sustainable inequality reduction requires not only welfare expansion but also deeper reforms in employment generation, education, healthcare, taxation, and asset distribution.

KEYWORDS: ***Income Inequality, Wealth Inequality, Welfare Policies, Poverty Reduction, DBT, JAM Trinity, GST Reforms, Inclusive Development, Social Protection, India***

INTRODUCTION

Income and wealth inequality remain among the most pressing socio-economic challenges in India. Despite significant economic growth since the 1991 reforms, the distribution of these gains has been uneven across regions, social classes, castes, and occupational groups. The rapid expansion of sectors such as information technology, finance, telecommunications, and urban services has generated substantial wealth for certain segments of society, while large populations continue to face poverty, unemployment, insecure livelihoods, and limited access to education, healthcare, and housing. Consequently, the central issue is not whether India has achieved economic growth, but rather which groups have benefited and to what extent development has been inclusive.

The issue of inequality in India is multidimensional. It extends beyond income disparities and includes unequal ownership of assets, unequal access to productive resources, regional imbalances, educational inequalities, gender disparities, and social exclusion rooted in caste and class structures. Reports by organisations such as the World Inequality Lab and Oxfam have repeatedly highlighted the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small percentage of the population, while a substantial portion of the population remains economically vulnerable. The persistence of informal employment, agrarian distress, and uneven urbanisation has further widened socio-economic gaps.

Recognising these disparities, the Indian state has historically adopted a wide range of policies and programmes to promote distributive justice and reduce inequality. India's constitutional vision is rooted in the principles of social, economic, and political justice. Directive Principles of State Policy, affirmative action provisions, land reforms, labour protections, progressive taxation, poverty alleviation programmes, and welfare schemes have all emerged from this broader commitment to social equity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The issue of income and wealth inequality has attracted extensive scholarly attention across economics, sociology, and public policy. Classical economists such as Karl Marx emphasised that inequalities arise from unequal ownership of productive assets and exploitation within capitalist systems, while Simon Kuznets argued that inequality initially rises during economic development before declining in later stages.

In the Indian context, inequality has historically been shaped by caste hierarchies, land ownership patterns, regional imbalances, and labour market segmentation. Dreze and Sen (2013) argued that economic growth without adequate social investment produces unequal development outcomes. They emphasised that public investment in education, healthcare, and social security is essential for inclusive growth. Similarly, Himanshu (2018) observed that while poverty declined after economic liberalisation, income inequality increased significantly due to unequal access to opportunities and rising wealth concentration.

The existing literature on income and wealth inequality in India clearly indicates that economic growth has not translated into equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. While India achieved rapid economic expansion after the 1991 reforms, scholars increasingly argue that the gains of growth have remained concentrated among upper-income groups, urban regions, and asset-owning classes. Inequality in India is reflected not only in income and wealth, but also in access to education, healthcare, employment, land, digital resources, and social mobility.

Keshava S.R. (2014) observed that India's urban inequality increased substantially between 1993 and 2010, with the top 40 per cent of the population controlling nearly 79 per cent of the country's wealth, while the bottom 60 per cent owned barely one-fifth. The study further highlighted that unequal access to skills, organised employment, and productive assets widened economic divisions in both rural and urban India. In another important study, Keshava S.R. (2022) argued that although liberalisation accelerated economic growth, it also intensified wealth concentration. Drawing on the *World Inequality Report* and Oxfam findings, the study found that billionaire wealth expanded rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic, even as poverty, unemployment, and livelihood insecurity increased among poorer households.

Similarly, Sridhara Babu K.R., Keshava S.R. (2023), quoting the World Inequality Database, find that the top 10 percent of India's population accounted for more than 57 percent of total income and nearly 65 percent of wealth, demonstrating the growing concentration of economic power. Keshava S.R. (2009), while discussing Mahatma Gandhi's theory of Trusteeship, also emphasised that extreme inequality is socially and morally unsustainable and argued for ethical redistribution and social responsibility as instruments of inclusive development as envisaged by Mahatma Gandhi.

Several other researchers support these observations. Muttur R. Narayana (2022) linked the demographic dividend to economic inequality, arguing that an unequal distribution reduces the long-term benefits of growth. Dhruv Solanki (2022) noted that the benefits of globalisation and liberalisation largely bypassed weaker social groups. Arbatli-Saxegaard (2023) demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic sharply increased poverty and income inequality in India, especially among casual and low-skilled workers.

Further, studies by Blundell et al. (2022), Wildman (2021), Narayan et al. (2022), and Flor et al. (2022) revealed that inequality widened globally during the pandemic due to job losses, educational disruption, unequal access to healthcare, and uneven social protection mechanisms. Their findings collectively underline that redistributive taxation, employment generation, food security programmes, public healthcare, and inclusive social policies remain essential for reducing inequality and achieving balanced development in India.

RESEARCH GAP

Existing literature on inequality in India has extensively examined poverty trends, welfare schemes, taxation policies, and economic reforms. However, several important gaps remain.

First, many studies analyse individual programmes in isolation rather than examining the broader evolution of inequality-reduction strategies across different policy regimes. There is limited comparative analysis of the Five-Year Plan era and the NITI Aayog framework regarding policy orientation, institutional mechanisms, and redistributive outcomes.

Second, a significant portion of existing research focuses primarily on poverty alleviation rather than wealth inequality. While poverty reduction has improved in several dimensions, the concentration of wealth and asset ownership has received comparatively less attention in policy analysis.

Third, there is inadequate integration of fiscal policies, welfare programmes, and governance reforms within a single analytical framework. Tax reforms, direct transfers, employment programmes, food security schemes, and regional development initiatives are often studied separately, despite their interconnected roles in reducing inequality.

Fourth, many contemporary studies focus on short-term welfare outcomes without adequately examining whether policies address structural inequalities in land ownership, informal employment, educational access, and regional disparities.

The present study attempts to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive and critical analysis of India's major policies and programmes aimed at reducing income and wealth inequalities across different phases of development.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse the evolution of India's policies and programmes aimed at reducing income and wealth inequalities from the Five-Year Plan period to the post-2014 policy framework.
2. To examine the role of welfare schemes, financial inclusion initiatives, taxation reforms, and digital governance mechanisms in reducing poverty and improving socio-economic equity.
3. To critically assess the persistence of structural inequalities related to wealth concentration, employment, regional imbalance, education, and healthcare despite extensive policy interventions.
4. To suggest policy measures for achieving more inclusive, balanced, and sustainable socio-economic development in India.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an analytical and descriptive approach, relying primarily on secondary data sources. Data have been

collected from government reports, NITI Aayog publications, Economic Surveys, the World Inequality Database, RBI reports, and Oxfam reports.

The study adopts a historical and comparative approach, examining inequality-reduction policies across two major phases: the Five-Year Plan period and the post-2015 NITI Aayog period. Policies and programmes are analysed in terms of their objectives, implementation mechanisms, socio-economic impact, and limitations.

The analysis also incorporates data related to taxation reforms, welfare expenditure, food security, employment generation, housing, healthcare, and digital welfare systems. Particular attention is given to how these interventions influence income distribution, social protection, and regional disparities.

The study employs a qualitative orientation, supplemented by relevant statistical data where appropriate. It aims to critically evaluate both the achievements and limitations of India's redistributive policy framework.

Policy Analysis and Findings

India's policy response to income and wealth inequality has evolved significantly since its independence in 1947. In the early decades after Independence, the Indian state adopted a welfare-oriented, state-led development model with the objective of reducing poverty, unemployment, and the concentration of wealth. The government believed that economic planning, land reforms, public-sector expansion, and progressive taxation were essential to achieving distributive justice in a highly unequal society. During this period, inequality was viewed not merely as an economic issue but also as a social problem rooted in caste hierarchies, feudal land ownership, illiteracy, and regional backwardness. Consequently, the state attempted to create a more equitable social order through constitutional provisions, Five-Year Plans, and welfare programmes.

Land Reforms: One of the earliest and most important initiatives undertaken after Independence was land reform. The abolition of the Zamindari system during the 1950s attempted to dismantle feudal agrarian structures and transfer ownership rights to cultivators. Tenancy reforms and land ceiling legislations were introduced in different states to redistribute surplus land and protect tenants from exploitation.

Bhoodan Movement: The Bhoodan Movement, led by Vinoba Bhave, also encouraged voluntary land donations for redistribution among the landless poor. Although implementation varied across states, these reforms weakened traditional landlord dominance in several regions and improved the socio-economic position of tenants and marginal farmers. Nearly 73 lakh acres of land were declared surplus under ceiling laws, though only a portion was effectively redistributed. States such as Kerala and West Bengal achieved relatively better outcomes in land redistribution compared to others.

Five-Year Plans: The Five-Year Plans further strengthened the state's redistributive approach. The First Five-Year Plan (1951–1956) primarily focused on agriculture, irrigation, rural development, and poverty reduction. Around 31 percent of total plan expenditure was allocated to agriculture and community development. Programmes such as the Community Development Programme (1952) and National Extension Service (1953) aimed to improve rural livelihoods through irrigation, skill development, and agricultural productivity. The economy grew at an annual rate of approximately 3.6 percent during the First Plan period, which was higher than initially expected.

The Second Five-Year Plan (1956–1961), influenced by the Mahalanobis strategy, shifted attention toward heavy industrialisation and expansion of the public sector. The Industrial Policy Resolution of 1956 assigned a dominant role to the state in strategic industries, including steel, heavy machinery, mining, and infrastructure. Public sector enterprises were viewed as instruments for employment generation and the reduction of private monopolies. Small-scale and village industries were also promoted to create employment opportunities for the weaker sections. Manufacturing output grew rapidly during this period, averaging around 7–8 percent annually. However, industrial growth became concentrated in certain urban and regional clusters, contributing to regional disparities.

The Third and Fourth Five-Year Plans attempted to combine agricultural growth with distributive justice. Programmes such as the Intensive Agricultural District Programme (IADP) and cooperative farming initiatives sought to improve agricultural productivity and rural incomes. The Fourth Plan (1969–1974) marked a major turning point with the nationalisation of 14 major commercial banks in 1969. Bank nationalisation significantly expanded access to rural credit and financial inclusion. The number of bank branches increased from around 8,000 in 1969 to more than 60,000 by 1990, with a substantial expansion in rural areas. This reduced dependence on moneylenders and enabled farmers, artisans, and small entrepreneurs to access institutional finance. During the same period, the Public Distribution System (PDS) was expanded to provide subsidised food grains to poor households and reduce consumption inequality.

The Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Five-Year Plans placed increasing emphasis on poverty alleviation and employment generation. Programmes such as the Twenty-Point Programme, Minimum Needs Programme, Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), and Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) aimed to improve rural infrastructure, create wage employment, and support self-employment among poor households. IRDP alone covered nearly 16 million rural families during the 1980s. Employment programmes generated millions of person-days annually and acted as safety nets for rural labourers. Simultaneously, investments in literacy, rural housing, healthcare, and women's development programmes gradually improved human development outcomes among disadvantaged communities.

Despite these efforts, poverty and inequality remained significant challenges by the late 1980s. Although the state successfully expanded welfare infrastructure and reduced extreme exploitation in certain sectors, economic growth remained relatively slow. This period is often referred to as the "Hindu Rate of Growth," with average GDP growth hovering

around 3.5 percent annually. Large sections of the population continued to depend on low-productivity agriculture and informal employment.

New Economic Reforms, 1991: The economic reforms introduced in 1991 marked a major shift in India's development strategy. Liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation policies reduced state control over the economy and encouraged private investment, foreign capital, and market-oriented reforms. Economic growth accelerated significantly after 1991, with GDP growth averaging between 6 and 8 percent in many years. However, while reforms increased national income and created new opportunities in sectors such as information technology, finance, telecommunications, and services, they also widened income disparities. Urban regions and highly skilled groups benefited disproportionately, while informal workers, small farmers, and rural populations often remained excluded from the gains of globalisation. Studies and reports by organisations such as Oxfam have shown that the top 1 percent of Indians today control a disproportionately large share of national wealth, reflecting rising wealth concentration.

Determinantal Changes, reduction in poverty, and growth of the Economy: After 2014, India's approach to reducing inequality entered another phase characterised by digital governance, direct benefit transfers, financial inclusion, and asset-based welfare programmes. One of the most significant initiatives was the launch of the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) in 2014, which aimed at universal financial inclusion. By 2025, more than 53 crore bank accounts had been opened under the scheme, with women accounting for over 55 percent of account holders. Financial inclusion was further strengthened through the JAM Trinity—Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, and Mobile, which enabled the direct transfer of subsidies and welfare benefits to beneficiaries' bank accounts. Government estimates suggest that Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) reforms generated savings exceeding ₹2.7 lakh crore by reducing leakages and duplication in welfare delivery.

Several welfare schemes launched after 2014 focused on reducing multidimensional deprivation. The Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) introduced direct income support of ₹6,000 annually to more than 11 crore farmers. Ayushman Bharat–PMJAY expanded healthcare protection by providing health insurance coverage of up to ₹5 lakh per family to nearly 50 crore beneficiaries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) provided free food grains to approximately 81 crore people, preventing widespread food insecurity. Similarly, MGNREGA employment generation increased sharply during the pandemic, with employment crossing nearly 389 crore person-days in 2020–21. These programmes acted as important social protection mechanisms during periods of economic distress.

According to the World Bank, India has achieved a significant reduction in poverty over the last decade, with nearly 171 million people moving out of extreme poverty between 2011–12 and 2022–23. During this period, the country's extreme poverty rate declined sharply from 16.2 percent to 2.3 percent. The World Bank attributes this improvement largely to the expansion of government welfare programmes, particularly initiatives related to food security, sanitation, rural housing, and social protection. In addition, the JAM Trinity played a crucial role in improving the efficiency, transparency, and direct delivery of welfare benefits to vulnerable households.

India's Taxation policy and Income and wealth inequality: India's taxation policies have also played an important role in reducing inequality and promoting redistribution. In the decades following Independence, India adopted a highly progressive income tax system. During the 1970s, the top marginal income tax rate exceeded 90 percent, reflecting the state's attempt to curb wealth concentration and finance welfare expenditure. However, such extremely high tax rates often resulted in tax evasion and low compliance. The 1997 budget presented by P. Chidambaram significantly reduced the top tax rate to 30 per cent and simplified the tax structure, which is regarded as the "Dream Budget". This marked a transition toward moderate taxation aimed at improving compliance and encouraging investment.

Under the new tax regime for FY 2025–26, the Modi government further rationalised income tax slabs. Income up to ₹4 lakh is exempt from taxation, while the highest slab of 30 percent applies to incomes above ₹24 lakh. Additionally, the enhanced Section 87A rebate effectively makes income up to ₹12 lakh tax-free for many taxpayers, and up to ₹12.75 lakh for salaried individuals after standard deduction. These measures increase disposable income among lower and middle-income groups while maintaining progressive taxation for higher earners. The government also imposes surcharges on high-income individuals, ensuring that wealthier sections contribute proportionately more to public revenue.

GST Reforms: Indirect tax reforms have similarly evolved over time. Before the introduction of GST, India's indirect tax structure consisted of multiple taxes such as excise duty, sales tax, VAT, service tax, and central sales tax. This fragmented system created cascading "tax on tax" effects and increased compliance burdens. The introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017 represented one of the most important fiscal reforms in independent India. GST replaced nearly 17 central and state taxes and introduced the principle of "One Nation, One Tax." The reform aimed to simplify taxation, improve transparency, and create a unified national market.

Recent GST reforms under the GST 2.0 framework introduced a simplified structure with Nil, 5 percent, 18 percent, and 40 percent tax slabs. Essential goods such as food grains, educational materials, and life-saving medicines are either exempt or taxed at lower rates, while luxury goods and sin products such as tobacco, luxury vehicles, and aerated beverages attract higher taxation. The logic behind this structure is redistributive: poorer households spend proportionately more on essential goods, while wealthier households consume more luxury goods. GST revenues also finance welfare programmes related to food security, healthcare, housing, and employment generation.

India's policy trajectory since Independence demonstrates a sustained effort to balance economic growth with social justice. The initial decades prioritised state-led redistribution through land reforms, public sector expansion, and planning, whereas

the post-1991 era emphasised market-led growth alongside welfare interventions. Since 2014, policy focus has shifted toward digital governance, direct transfers, financial inclusion, and targeted welfare delivery. While these measures have substantially reduced extreme poverty and improved access to banking, food security, healthcare, and housing, persistent structural inequalities in wealth ownership, education, employment, and regional development remain. Thus, the enduring challenge is not only to sustain economic growth but also to ensure a more equitable distribution of development benefits across all segments of society.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. India's early policies focused on redistribution through land reforms, public sector expansion, and progressive taxation.
2. Five-Year Plans gradually shifted from agricultural reconstruction to employment generation and welfare-oriented development.
3. Post-2014 reforms introduced technology-driven welfare governance, direct transfers, and financial inclusion.
4. Welfare programmes significantly reduced extreme poverty and improved access to food, banking, housing, and healthcare.
5. Despite policy expansion, wealth concentration remains high, especially among upper-income groups.
6. Progressive taxation exists, but India's redistributive fiscal capacity remains limited compared to advanced welfare economies.
7. GST improved tax efficiency and national integration, but concerns about the indirect tax burden on poorer households persist.
8. Long-term inequality reduction requires structural reforms in education, employment, healthcare, land ownership, and wealth redistribution.

Critical Issues

- Despite considerable expansion of India's welfare architecture, many programmes remain primarily compensatory rather than transformative. Most interventions provide support for consumption, subsidies, or short-term income stabilisation, without addressing underlying structural inequalities.
- Land reforms, which had the potential to transform rural power structures, were implemented unevenly and often diluted by political resistance. Wealth redistribution through taxation remains limited, and India lacks robust mechanisms for inheritance or wealth taxes to address the extreme concentration of assets.
- Similarly, labour market inequality persists due to the dominance of informal employment. A large proportion of workers still lack social security, stable wages, and labour protections. Welfare schemes often reduce immediate vulnerability but do not necessarily create sustainable upward mobility.
- Digital governance reforms such as DBT have improved efficiency, yet exclusion errors remain significant among populations lacking digital literacy, documentation, or reliable connectivity. In several welfare schemes, tenant farmers, migrant workers, landless labourers, and informal urban workers remain partially excluded.
- Another important concern is the growing concentration of wealth at the top. Economic liberalisation generated substantial growth opportunities, but gains have been disproportionately captured by high-income groups and urban elites. Welfare policies at the lower end of the distribution have not been matched by strong redistributive measures at the upper end.
- Regional inequality also remains a serious concern. Southern and western states continue to outperform several northern and eastern states in human development, industrialisation, and infrastructure. While the Aspirational Districts Programme represents an innovative approach, long-term regional convergence requires deeper investments in education, healthcare, employment generation, and infrastructure.

Way Forward

Reducing inequality in India requires moving beyond welfare expansion toward structural transformation. Poverty alleviation alone cannot ensure equitable development unless accompanied by reforms in asset ownership, employment opportunities, taxation, and human capital formation.

1. India needs stronger investments in universal quality education and public healthcare.
2. Labour-intensive industrialisation and employment generation must become central policy priorities.
3. Social protection systems should move toward universal coverage.
4. Progressive fiscal reforms are necessary to address wealth concentration.
5. Regional planning must focus on balanced development through targeted investments in backward districts,

CONCLUSION

India's policy response to income and wealth inequality has evolved considerably since Independence, moving from a state-led redistributive framework to a more technology-driven and targeted welfare approach. Early policies such as land reforms, rural development programmes, and public investment aimed to reduce structural inequalities, though their impact was often constrained by uneven implementation and regional disparities. In recent years, especially after 2014, welfare governance has increasingly relied on digital platforms, direct transfers, and financial inclusion mechanisms. The JAM Trinity improved transparency and reduced leakages in subsidy delivery, while schemes such as PMAY, PMUY, Ayushman Bharat, PM-KISAN, and PMGKAY expanded social protection and strengthened access to housing, healthcare, food security, and income support.

Fiscal measures, including progressive taxation and tax rebates for lower and middle-income groups, have also contributed to improving disposable income and consumption capacity. These interventions have played an important role in reducing extreme poverty, improving access to welfare, and improving basic living conditions.

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