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Addressing Welfare in Third World Contexts

Indian Case

Dolly Arora

Welfare discourse in third world countries has revolved around western experiences and theories, missing the nature and context of their own problems. This paper examines welfare issues in the context of India and suggests that third world countries need to evolve alternative approaches to welfare that are appropriate for them.

WELFARE discourse in third world countries has revolved primarily around western theories and experiences. In their eagerness to imitate the western welfare states, most third world states adopted policies and programmes which completely missed the peculiar nature and context of their problems. Not only has their handling of welfare questions noticeably evaded large sections of their populations, their narrow and somewhat superficial conceptualisation of welfare needs led them to constantly ignore the extremely negative fall-outs of numerous other policy interventions which were not even perceived as relevant for purposes of addressing welfare issues. The poor state of welfare is often interpreted by policy-makers in these countries in terms of limited resources available with them. What goes unnoticed and unexplored is the possibility of arresting the decline of welfare, and even contributing to its growth, by (a) introducing correctives in the numerous, apparently innocent, but effectively anti-welfare policies of these states, and (b) exploring the alternate ways of addressing the question of welfare in their own specific contexts. This paper examines these issues in the context of India and suggests that countries like India must ensure a context-sensitive approach to welfare; and further, that these must draw on their own experiences rather than mere exogenous sources of policy and support, and evolve alternate approaches to welfare which are also more meaningful and appropriate for them.

Section I of this paper outlines the broad politico-economic context in which the issue of welfare was addressed by the post-independence Indian state. It briefly recounts the nature of general economic and developmental policies and their weak welfare dimension on the one hand, and efforts made to secure welfare for the people from outside these – through legislative enactments, welfare policies and programmes – on the other. Section II provides an overview of the state of people's welfare and analyses reasons for the failure of the state to arrest the decline of welfare as experienced by large sections of society. This is not simply an analysis of the implementation of welfare policies and programmes, or even of their

adequacy in terms of the needs of people. While these policies and programmes are not overlooked, this section also underlines the significance of examining the welfare implications of several other policies and programmes, which generally escape the attention and analysis of welfare scholars as well as policy-makers, yet which account for a large part of the decline of welfare in most third world countries. Section III explores the possible ways of improving the state of people's welfare in the context of India. While ruling out the possibility of dispensing with the state's involvement in welfare issues, or opting for market provision of welfare, or leaving the welfare needs at the service of the voluntary sector, this paper emphasises the need for a reconceptualisation of welfare in terms of sustainability, participative content and autonomy of the very model of development which is adopted. Welfare concerns necessitate a reevaluation and redefinition of the very framework of development in the context of countries like India – this is the central argument of this paper.

I

Welfare Addressed: Policies in Context

The post-independence Indian state adopted a democratic framework of polity with a mixed economy model of development, presumably to ensure the welfare of the Indian people. Towards that end, it assumed enormous powers to not only regulate, protect, promote or contain specific economic as well as non-economic activities, but also to directly participate in production, trade and circulation in various sectors of the economy. Capitalism, however, remained the basic context for its operation. More often than not, its activities were meant to support the activities of the private sector which was expected to serve the needs of people. Seen from the perspective of people, capitalism still remained a remote idea for many – large parts of people's subsistence and welfare needs were managed outside the market system. The joint family system as well as traditional community and caste relations catered to the welfare needs of a large part of society. Alongside there also

existed several social welfare organisations providing support to specific sections of society. The notion of welfare as a commodity to be bought from the market was alien to most people of India. Despite this context, the state could not but emphasise its own concern for people's welfare. To an extent, this became crucial because of the very nature of political discourse during the struggle for independence. Promises of a better future for the people of independent India had to be translated into action by the state. The legitimacy of the state rested on its capacity to take people's needs into account; welfare gestures were the first step in that direction.

With a vision of development as experienced by the west combining rapid growth based on capital and technology-intensive forms of production and provision of welfare for those marginalised by these processes, policy-makers in India made efforts to move in similar directions.¹ Initially, some concern was shown to introduce structural and institutional changes, especially in the rural sector, as through land reforms and co-operatives, but little progress was made at the level of implementation. In the industrial sector also, despite resorting to licensing and other regulations, and despite supportive policies for small-scale and cottage industries, the state failed to prevent the concentration of economic power in the hands of a few big business houses.² Towards the mid-1960s, there was a major shift in the orientation of state policies. Growth assumed a clear priority over any redistributive concerns. The adoption of new agricultural strategy – the so-called green revolution – with its inclination to concentrate state resources meant for the agricultural sector among the well-to-do farmers with land and irrigation facilities, implied turning away from the poorer strata, thus further marginalising their position in society, on the one hand, and adding to their poverty, on the other.³ Despite the labour-surplus conditions of production, rather than provide incentives for labour absorption, industrial policies rewarded the investment of capital, thereby discouraging the growth of employment.⁴ Economic growth, it was argued, was the first priority, and it could not be compromised for any other objective.

The weak welfare dimension of general economic policies became very noticeable by the beginning of the 1970s. The increasing hardships of the people were to be addressed separately – through specific welfare policies and programmes – even as general economic policies moved farther away from welfare. There was a spurt in welfare policies and programmes during this phase. This, of course, does not imply that such policies were missing during the earlier phase; only that now these formed a major component of the welfare armoury of the state. Thus, from the early years the Indian state sought to regulate the conditions and outcomes of work in various sectors of the economy – regulation of minimum wages, working hours, social security provisions such as maternity benefits, workmen's compensation, insurance benefits, etc. have been steps in that direction. It also enacted legislation for the protection of certain vulnerable sections of society – the Children's Acts, the Dowry Prohibition Act, the Child Marriage Restraint Act, the Shops and Establishments Act, the Juvenile Justice Act, the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act, the Equal Remuneration Act, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, etc. fall in this category. Many of the existing laws, however, were either passed or amended after the 1970s, primarily because of the increasing pressure from various activist groups. Numerous welfare schemes were also adopted to help specific sections of society – scheduled castes and tribes, women, children, handicapped, etc.

The 1970s witnessed the adoption of several more extensive programmes like the Integrated Rural Development Programme, the Tribal Development Programme, the Integrated Child Development Programme, etc. The number of schemes forming part of these programmes as well as those outside these also registered an increase. There emerged schemes of direct financial assistance, as for self-employment of women or youth; schemes providing for indirect economic support, as for marketing tribal produce; and schemes aimed at improving social security for the weak and vulnerable, such as those making provision for short-stay homes for women in trouble, hostels for working women, hostels for tribal girls, day-care centres for children of working women, etc.⁵ State expenditure on other social policy areas which were not under the charge of the department of social welfare – health and education, for instance – was also integrated with some welfare programmes. State subsidies on food and several other items too increased on the grounds of concern for the welfare of those who could not fulfil their basic needs through the market system. The period after the mid-1960s, but especially that after the 1970s, thus saw both an increase

in growth-orientation of economic policies and a rise in welfare provisioning as well as welfare legislation. How does one interpret this pattern of indulgence on the part of the Indian state? Does this justify its being labelled a welfare state?

II

Interpreting Welfare: On Meanings and Reasons

Any attempt to interpret the state's interventions in respect of welfare without taking into account the perspectives and experiences of people whose welfare is supposedly addressed through such involvement, can be quite misleading. It is relevant therefore to dispense with state-centred evaluations of welfare. The extent of public expenditure or the population covered – two of the most widely used criteria of success in state evaluations – do not explain much about the meaning of policies and programmes. How much of their effect actually shows in the lives of people is what matters most. A glance at the prevailing state of people and their welfare needs is desirable at this point in order to reflect on their relationship to policies.

Whether looked at in terms of statistics or observed without any technical and methodological sophistication, the state of the people of India at large presents a very gloomy picture. This is true not only when compared with the developed world but even in terms of their capacity to meet certain most basic needs – of food, safe drinking water, shelter, health and security. Hunger is still widespread, disease not difficult to catch, pavement and slum-dwellers ever increasing in number, child workers not very far from sight and exploitation of women and tribals or other weaker sections an integral part of socio-economic processes. Almost 38 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line.⁶ Nearly, four million children die every year before attaining the age of five. An estimated 45 to 50 million children below five years subsist on a calorie-deficient diet. About 200 million people are without access to safe drinking water. More than 5,000 villages have no source of drinking water. The organised sector of the economy accounts for only 10 per cent of employment, the rest of it being in the unorganised sector. Nearly 28 million people are estimated to be either unemployed or severely underemployed, and over 200 million have employment for only a small part of the year. Women constitute about one-third of the working population, but their share in the unorganised sector is much higher – nearly 98 per cent of working women are in unorganised sector employment. Children account for about 6 per cent of the workforce – nearly 44 million children have to work for a living, and many of them are

engaged in hazardous occupations (even the most conservative estimates placed their number at 0.671 million in 1981). The number of female child workers too is rising, and almost 94 per cent of them do not attend school. Almost 85 per cent of women (main) workers and 50 per cent of male (main) workers are illiterate. While literacy rates have increased over the years, the number of educated unemployed has also risen in both rural and urban areas. The health status of the population remains poor. Though the mortality rate has shown some decline, the health of the surviving child as well as adult population does not offer reasons for satisfaction. Nutrition levels of people below the poverty line are extremely low. With the concentration of productive assets in the hands of a few in both rural and urban areas, and employment opportunities shrinking further in the organised sector, an increasing number of people are being pushed towards not only unorganised sector employment but also towards increased dependence on common-pool resources for survival. Atrocities against women, harijans, tribals and other weaker sections of society too have risen over the years; instances of rape, molestation, kidnapping, dowry deaths, and various other forms of criminal assaults have registered an unprecedented increase.⁷ The Indian state, in short, has not succeeded in providing for the basic needs of the people of India.

What explains this undoubtedly poor state of welfare in India despite enormous exertions – legislative, administrative and financial – by the state? What prevented the extensive welfare mechanisms – laws, policies and programmes of support – utilised by the state from satisfying the welfare needs of the people? Or, what went wrong? And, where exactly? To understand this, it is pertinent to take a close look at the nature of state interventions and interpret them in terms of the experiences, perceptions and needs of the people themselves. Such analysis in the Indian context points to three sources of trouble in the policy-welfare relationship. These are: (a) the evasive tendencies of state; (b) the manipulating and distorting capacities of powerful interests in both state and society; and (c) the anti-welfare fall-outs of other policies. A brief discussion of how these account for the prevailing state of welfare in India is desirable at this point.

EVASIVE TENDENCIES

In spite of extensive interventions in various spheres, whether through social legislation or welfare provisioning, the Indian state has in effect been extremely evasive of the needs of a large section of society. Those poorly organised and politically silent, in particular, failed to acquire a significant

place on the welfare agenda of state. At best, it adopted some symbolic gestures of support towards these; and, at worst, it further reinforced the position of those dominating the existing social relations. Thus, for instance, through several social policies it sought to express its sensitivity to women's welfare; yet due to its own implicit gender bias it also evaded the question of women's equal rights as crucial to women's welfare. Various programmes of welfare assistance only reinforced the dominant position of men within the household, for example, by treating them as head of the family and transferring assistance, whether in the form of productive assets or money, in the name of men rather than women. Even women's contribution in running the household was not considered for this purpose. The practice of providing credit against securities also evaded the claims of women, most of whom could not qualify for it because of lack of control over resources. Likewise, while the state enacted some social security legislation, by making it applicable through the workplace it in effect overlooked and undermined the needs of the large number of informal and unorganised sector workers, most of whom happened to be women.⁸ The social security claims of women who did not work for the market have also been evaded through the very definition of conditions for entitlement. Evasion of welfare rights through welfare legislation itself has also been characteristic of other spheres. The enactment of legislation against the exploitation of child labour, for instance, could not deter this practice (especially in the absence of reasonable alternatives for survival of children and their families which depended on them). Yet, it denied these children the right to organise and fight for improving the conditions of work which they had to bear.⁹

The evasive tendencies of the state also took another form, namely, inadequate legislation/provisioning so characteristic of its welfare gestures. The meaning of social legislation, whether related to bonded labour, dowry prohibition, social security or any other sphere, has been evaded beyond recognition because of inadequate provision for its execution. Inadequate provisioning in case of the welfare programmes amounted to denial of welfare as a matter of right, and conditioned its availability on the discretion of implementing authorities. It was offered subject to the availability of provision, and limited availability made room for its discretionary evasion by those responsible for providing it. The adoption of the project approach to welfare interventions of the state, for benefits were concentrated on some area or a select number of beneficiaries, decided on the basis of available provisions rather than needs or rights to welfare. Non-availability became the pretext for evasion.

There has been a third form of evasion too. This involved the evasion of real issues in favour of mere symbolic responses. Detailed policy planning, elaborate programming and even effective policy action took place in response to certain problems; and yet problems continued to drag on because real issues remained unattended. Child labour, for instance, was sought to be abolished through legislative enactments; yet the compulsions which dictated children to work even under hazardous conditions were not even addressed for long. Women's welfare was addressed through a limited number of programmes of assistance and some protective legislation. The basic values of patriarchy, however, remained characteristic of the state's approach to welfare in general. Child survival/health programmes came to be symbolised by the immunisation programme primarily, even as only eight out of 100 child deaths have reportedly been due to diseases covered by the programme. It has been repeatedly emphasised by several health activists and researchers that the most important reason for the poor resistance of children to several infectious diseases is malnutrition, and that even immunisation is ineffective when a child has a low nutritional status.¹⁰ Yet, the fragmented approach of the state has prevented it from going beyond symbolic solutions. Technological fixes were offered to solve problems rooted in complex socio-economic contexts; these symbolic solutions, however, have fallen short of offering effective remedies. This has also been the story of women's health which is projected as conditioned upon her acceptance of family planning - a very large part of health expenditure in fact have been in the sphere of family planning itself.¹¹

Yet another kind of evasive tendency of the state which is fast taking prominence over all others is reflected in its inclination towards direct abdication of its responsibility for welfare in favour of either the private sector or the voluntary sector. Although there is little doubt regarding the limited purchasing power and poor resource position of a large section of the population, and there are no easy roads available for changing this, privatisation is being advocated on grounds of the need to fight inefficiency and corruption of the state sector.¹² Both the limits of the market system to relate to the needs of the poor and marginalised, and the possibilities of inefficiency and corruption in the private sector, are not considered despite existing experiences to that effect. The voluntary sector is expected to fill in where the market fails, and thus take care of the limits inherent in the market-centred welfare model. Once again, this reflects little regard for the fact that the voluntary sector has always been quite selective in its operations both in terms

of the areas covered and the needs addressed. Besides, inasmuch as the state is inclined to shed its own welfare responsibilities rather than find better ways of managing these, whether it opts for the market or the voluntary sector, its withdrawal reflects a tendency towards evasion rather than a genuine search for alternatives.

MANIPULATION AND DISTORTION

The second major source of trouble in the policy-welfare relationship is the manipulative and distortive capacity of interests in both state and society. Welfare has been turned into a commodity of exchange as a consequence. Powerful interests in society who could benefit from the non-implementation of some social welfare legislation often evoked relations of exchange or reciprocity with state elites in order to ensure inaction against non-implementation of these laws. Many private sector employers, for instance, privately admit to having made regular payments to relevant state functionaries for an oversight of the non-implementation of social security/welfare legislation. In some cases, of course, this could also be done without involving state functionaries at all - under conditions of job scarcity, for instance, the losers readily admitted on paper that they did receive the benefits even when these were denied to them, simply because they needed the job.

Welfare policies and programmes have also been manipulated by relatively powerful interests because they apprehended their implications for their own social position - the beneficiaries could challenge their domination, or refuse to work for them at low or nominal wages, and thus become a source of trouble. Or, manipulation was engaged in to obtain undue benefits for themselves; studies have indicated that in contexts marked by lack of organisation of potential beneficiaries, underserving and non-eligible interests captured a significant amount of provisions meant for poor and weaker sections with considerable ease. In certain situations, welfare benefits were wrongly appropriated by the state functionaries themselves. Health functionaries in some primary health centres have been found to illegally sell certain medicines which were meant for the patients who approached them. There have been several complaints about misuse of even relief funds meant to help people faced with disasters like floods, earthquakes, etc. In a very large number of cases, even when benefits reached the right people, administrative functionaries swallowed a part of them as commission for having considered them favourably in the first place.

Yet another variant of distortion of welfare programmes has come to notice in several regions. Officially identified beneficiaries

of programmes were often used as mediators between buyers and sellers of some provisions at the expense of the state. Thus, for instance, some evaluations of the Integrated Rural Development Programme pointed out that production assets distributed under the programme were sometimes resold by the beneficiaries because they could not maintain them. Often, this was done at the instance of the distributing officials themselves, and the latter decided on the buyers too. The buyers benefited because assets could be obtained at prices much lower than the market price; the involved officials obtained commission from both sides; and the loser believed it was a net-gain situation, for provision of assistance itself was perceived as conditioned upon the agreement to sell as suggested. The proposed beneficiaries were thus themselves manipulated to distort the meaning of welfare programmes.¹³

ANTI-WELFARE FALL-OUTS OF POLICIES

The third significant source/dimension of trouble in the policy-welfare relationship in India lies outside the realm of what is traditionally considered to be welfare policy, especially by the welfare administration scholars. This relates to the anti-welfare fall-outs of various other general or specific policies of the state. In many ways, these not only neutralised the effects of several welfare provisions which already existed, but they also accounted for the further decline in the state of people's welfare. To analyse the role of the state in relation to welfare only in terms of its specific welfare policies can therefore be quite misleading. One needs to examine the welfare-sensitivity of its other policies too. In the context of India it is disturbing to find that all along, state policies, including so-called development policies, have been extremely insensitive to the welfare needs of large sections of the poor, weak and vulnerable in society; and further, that these have in fact added to their hardships in numerous ways. A few illustrations to this effect may be in order here.

As mentioned earlier, a major change in the agricultural policy of the Indian state in the mid-1960s related to the adoption of the 'green revolution strategy'. This strategy was justified primarily in terms of the need to increase foodgrains production, which in turn was considered essential to fight hunger. The use of high-yielding strains of wheat, chemical fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, irrigation and mechanisation formed part of the package for increasing production. Wheat production did increase quite rapidly, but hunger and malnutrition could not be abolished. On the contrary, in several regions the success of this strategy itself increased the vulnerability of the poor who lacked the purchasing power to obtain fine grains –

production for the market overlooked the benefits of coarse crops and thereby affected the capacity of the poor to feed themselves. Production of pulses, an important source of protein in the Indian diet, also suffered as a result of the increased prospects of profits in wheat production. Furthermore, this production strategy resulted in serious ecological and environmental damage.¹⁴ Ironically, every form of environmental degradation which resulted from the concern for increasing food production – soil erosion, water scarcity, desertification, deforestation, water pollution, loss of biological diversity – is in turn affecting the prospects of food availability itself.¹⁵ People are already faced with serious threats to life as a result of many perverse consequences of the green revolution in certain regions.¹⁶ Not that these problems have been peculiar to India. But many aspects of indigenous systems of production which had positive social and environmental implications were not even considered by policy-makers, eager to follow the road travelled by others.¹⁷ Many anti-welfare implications of the policy could have been avoided if a careful appraisal of the local contexts was made before rushing in any specific directions.

As another instance of policies with negative implications for the state of people's welfare, one may mention the forest policy pursued by the Indian state till very recently. As a consequence of this, despite all its proclaimed concern for scientific forestry, the state failed to use scientific knowledge for anything but promotion of commercial interests. State support for clear-felling of forests and plantation of commercial and industrial species, its subsidisation of the exploitation of commercial and industrial interests, and its unwillingness to protect the rights of poor forest-dependent forest-dwellers, all added to the hardships of the latter.¹⁸ These policies adversely affected not only the availability of food items and medicinal herbs but also fuel-wood and water, all crucial for the survival of poor forest people who could not afford to depend on the market for the purpose of meeting these needs.¹⁹ Women have been the worst victims of this crisis, for traditionally cooking and fetching water are women's responsibility – now they needed to walk long distances, sometimes miles together, in order to meet these needs, thanks to the negative fall-outs of forest policies.²⁰ Changes in forest policy proposed recently are likely to add to the misery of the poor and marginalised forest-dwellers.

Several other anti-welfare policies promoted in the name of development – of agriculture, industry, forestry, tourism, exports – too have not only neutralised the effect of much welfare provisioning but also contributed to further decline in the living conditions of people at large. Most of these

indeed benefited a small elite but also qualified in official evaluations as achievements. The displacement of large numbers of people, mostly poor, for promoting various development projects, especially irrigation and power projects, without ever attempting to rehabilitate them, created, not answered, welfare problems for them.²¹ The promotion of water-intensive commercial crops through state support, even in areas where water scarcity could affect the drinking water supply, implied hardships for the people at large, though increased profits for commercial farmers and sometimes increased export earnings for the state. The policy-induced droughts and floods in several regions have only worsened the state of the poor and even forced them to migrate to urban areas, thereby subjecting them to unhealthy conditions of life in urban slums, invariably marked by an implicit denial of a meaningful socio-cultural existence too. An increased incidence of labour displacement due to increased mechanisation of agriculture, especially in the absence of any other employment opportunities; the displacement of numerous traditional handloom weavers on account of state support to textile mills; the destruction of several village handicrafts – either because of the diversion of raw material towards other urban/industrial consumers or because of the capture of markets by industrial goods; and the disruption of village-based economies without creating any meaningful alternatives, too, have generated similar pressures. State policies have played a very significant role in all these processes.²²

Many of the state policies have not only sustained but also furthered gender, caste and class based inequalities by worsening the state of those at the weaker end of the relationship. These patterns of decline of welfare of the poor, weak and marginalised are likely to be furthered as a result of the recent policy of structural adjustment, for despite all talk of 'adjustment with a human face', state support is clearly being withdrawn, not strengthened. Expenditure cuts and the swift dismantling of welfare provisions, however unsatisfactory their present status might have been, will only have numerous extremely anti-welfare fall-outs. As is already evident from the experiences of several African and Latin American countries, neither the increased freedom of the market, nor mere delegation of welfare responsibilities to the voluntary sector, have actually helped the cause of welfare.²³ Even if there have been problems with state involvement in the sphere of welfare, to suggest state withdrawal as its solution will be the worst option in the prevailing realities of India.

While the above discussion underlined the three major points of trouble in the policy-welfare relationship in India – viz,

the persistent evasion of policies which may address the genuine needs of the powerless, the excessive accommodation of the power elites through frequent manipulation and distortion of policies, and the burden of perverse effects of policies in general falling on the already deprived and marginalised – it is important to emphasise that these themselves need to be understood in terms of the conditions which permitted their emergence in the first place. Two dominant tendencies are noteworthy in the explanatory exercises currently in vogue: one, to lay blame on the weak resources position of the state; two, to point to the poverty of policy-analysis. While the former is more characteristic of policy-makers' own explanations, the latter is generally offered by policy analysts and policy evaluators. There indeed is an element of truth in both the explanations; both are also somewhat related – weak analysis only worsens a weak resources position and lack of resources limits the scope for extensive analysis being carried out before policy-making. These, however, are at best partial explanations; at their worst these turn out to be only superficial, rationalising exercises, providing justifications for the policy choices already made or avoided for various reasons.

Lack of resources, for instance, is readily offered as the reason for certain needs remaining unattended. Yet, it remains a hard fact that evasion involves a choice over pattern of resource-spending too; the pattern of prioritisation of resource spending cannot be explained simply in terms of resource scarcity. How resources are spent in certain directions and not others remain unexplained. Likewise, the failure of analysis may be offered as a convincing reason for negative fall-outs of policies; yet, it is not difficult to see that the negative outcomes of policies are not always unanticipated, and far more disturbing is the fact that these are sometimes deliberately not accounted for – analysis itself is used to suppress them. Even manipulation and distortion are at times discreetly built into the framework of policy through analysis rather than its failure.

Far more significant than to look for meanings in these explanations, then, is the need to find their reasons themselves. The most plausible reasons in the Indian context appear to lie in the realm of power relations. The framework of policy analysis as well as the nature of resource-mobilisation/spending patterns themselves are very much conditioned by these. It is pertinent therefore to place the policy-welfare troubles alongside the nature of state power and its relationship to (a) other power centres in society; (b) the powers which lie beyond the jurisdiction of state; and (c) those without any power worth the name.

As mentioned earlier, the adoption of a democratic framework of polity created a

political basis for state concern for welfare in India. Renewal of support during elections was perceived by policy-makers to depend on the nature of policies they would adopt. The conflicting demands and possibilities generated by the capitalist-feudal context of operating this democracy, however, exposed the state elites to contrary pressures and demands for accommodative policies. The possibilities of exchange built around the power of those who dominated the framework of socio-economic relations enabled them to collect rent on authority by accommodating those in a position to enter exchange relations. The exercise of power and policy became heavily inclined towards accommodating the power elites in society – both policy evasion and policy manipulation and distortion in implementation spaces became characteristic features of the policy process.

This had serious negative implications for the less vocal, less organised, weak and marginalised sections of Indian society. Policies adopted in the name of welfare remained only symbolic and ineffective primarily because of the organisational weakness of those without social or economic power. The latter's lack of organisation, politicisation, demand-making as well as poor capacity to have access to those in authority itself, enabled the power elites to strengthen their position further and capture policy benefits beyond any justifiable extent. For the same reason, as and when some of them could overcome these constraining factors and increase the political costs of evasion of their claims by the policy-makers, their capacity to weaken the negative policy-welfare linkage improved considerably.

This indeed provides grounds for hope as far as providing welfare through state policy is concerned; yet the meanings of this evidence for welfare possibilities cannot be exaggerated. Certain factors which characterise the prevailing politico-economic context seriously constrain the capacity of the resource-poor to effectively intervene. For one thing, the exercise of power in the existing framework is so shrouded in mystery that often it becomes apparent long after its implications are already a fact, thereby limiting the possibilities for timely intervention or participation by people lacking access to those in power, even when they are relatively more organised and vocal. For another, the centralised nature of policy-making activity lends complexity to the policy process, making genuine participation not simply costly but almost impossible for those who live on the margins of survival, except, of course, when survival itself is at stake.

Of late, the role of exogenous forces, such as the multilateral aid agencies, in policy-making has also increased considerably, adding further to the constraints on participation which confront the powerless

in society. The declining autonomy of policy-makers itself has widened the hiatus between people and the policy process and made policy increasingly insensitive to welfare concerns. All this only implies that although the possibilities for strengthening the policy-welfare relationship are conditional upon the extent to which social relations themselves are altered, the scope for a change in this regard cannot be defined irrespective of the framework of political power itself. Given this framework of power and powerlessness, and given the extreme forms of deprivation and dependence experienced by a large section of the Indian people, the question which cries for an answer is: can something possibly be done about the welfare needs of the powerless? And is it possible to do this within the framework of the existing model of welfare? Or, do we need an alternative model of welfare?

III

Welfare Reconsidered: Alternatives and Continuities

As has been discussed above, state policies have attempted to answer some of the immediate needs of people through various gestures of support or regulation – welfare legislation in India has grown considerably and welfare schemes have multiplied too. It is quite disturbing, however, that not only have the needs of the most needy remained largely evaded, they have also borne the brunt of the negative fall-outs of several other policies of the state. Worse still, most benefits of policies, including those of several welfare policies, have disproportionately been captured by powerful interests in both state and society. The positive effects of welfare policies and programmes have been only marginal, especially when assessed in terms of their expected results from the viewpoint of the powerless and marginalised in society. And yet this end-result cannot be taken to suggest that these interventions can be dispensed with, or that the state can withdraw in favour of either the market or voluntary sector welfare agencies. Both these alternatives to state intervention, as has been emphasised earlier, have limitations in the context of countries like India where the sheer magnitude and scale of welfare problems itself is immense.

What then is the possibility for arresting the decline in people's welfare and contributing to its promotion in these contexts? Do we not need to explore the possibilities of an alternative welfare model? A model which is at once more promising and less symbolic, more egalitarian and less discriminating, more humane and less alienating, more lasting and less ephemeral? What should be the framework and elements of such a model?

On the basis of the study of the Indian context, a three-dimensional alternative model of welfare is proposed here for consideration. Inasmuch as most third world countries share similar historical contexts and are faced with similar problems and possibilities as India, this model may be of some relevance to these too; its specifics, of course, will differ with their respective specificities. Since the major reasons for policy-welfare delinking in India lie in the realm of power relations, it is imperative that alternatives are worked out in this domain itself. The prevailing nexus between power and state authority needs to be challenged much as the social and economic processes which protect and promote exploitative relations in society need to be questioned and denied space for growth. Since these relations are sustained and furthered by the very model of development which is being promoted, a change in this respect is crucial to the possibilities for welfare. The alternative model, so to say, will imply a three-dimensional shift towards a people-centred welfare. The three major constitutive elements of this shift ought to be: sustainability, participative content and autonomy. All three of these are quite interrelated and interdependent. These also imply a major break with the pattern of policies currently being pursued.

The central element of the proposed model of welfare is its sustainability. Concerns for sustainability presuppose the need for reconceptualisation of welfare outside the framework of the western model of development. Welfare needs to be conceptualised not only in terms of its capacity to respond to the basic needs of people in the immediate, or even simply in terms of its redistributive capacities. Both these are essential yet insufficient for coping with the problems of welfare. Welfare must be worked out in terms of sustainable patterns of development. It is not just management of residual problems, for such problems would go on increasing if the pattern of development itself is unsustainable. It implies management of natural resources and organisation of production structures and relationships in ways which ensure a fair distribution of income, power and opportunities, and which have minimum negative implications for the immediate environment and its long-term carrying capacity. This will necessitate a shift away from the market-oriented, production and profit-maximising strategies of growth²⁴ towards a more sustainable pattern of natural resource utilisation on the one hand, and a concern for avoiding the anti-welfare fall-outs of production and consumption patterns, and, where necessary, altering these to save the environment as well the likely victims of its decay, on the other. Only then can welfare itself become a sustainable proposition.

Second, this model of sustainable welfare must make space for people's participation in the very realisation of their own welfare. This, however, is not a proposal for withdrawal of the state in order to let people take care of their needs individually – either through the market or at the household level. Rather, this is a plea for adopting a more integrated and participative approach to development, one which not only integrates people with the benefits which may flow from it but also enables them to participate in determining the very nature of these benefits. This will involve the planning of development needs as well as decisions regarding ways of their realisation taking shape with active participation of people themselves. Further, this will mean close involvement of people in the process of realising these, as well as an equitable sharing of benefits. This is not an ideal-type situation which cannot be realised. There have been some very reassuring instances of participatory management of local resources by local people leading to marked improvements in the state of people's welfare in the area. Sukhomajri, Seed, Ralegan Siddhi are some such areas where people's participation in the management of local forests and water resources further strengthened their capacity to handle other local problems, and thus resulted in marked changes in their living conditions.²⁵ There have been numerous other not so widely known yet very effective exercises in participatory management, especially of common property resources, in several local contexts. Strengthening participatory spaces to enable people to take active interest in, and make valuable contributions to, resolving their problems of welfare in a collective exercise is essential to attain the objective of sustainable welfare.

Third, this model of sustainable welfare has to be, as far as possible, self-supporting rather than dependent on exogenous support. An important requisite for securing welfare for the people in third world countries in fact will be to reduce their linkages with global economy. For, invariably, as experience shows, it subjects them to exploitative conditions of unequal terms of exchange, on the one hand, and painful conditionalities attached to foreign assistance offered to them, on the other. Welfare states in the west no doubt benefited immensely in the course of their economic development from the very fact of their linkages with other economies; but it is too well known to need elaboration here that their location in that context – not only economic but also political – was extremely favourable to them. Some of them also had colonies to exploit in their own interest. Most third world countries, on the contrary, have themselves been colonies for long. During the period of colonial domination their economies were invariably

restructured to suit their rulers, a fact of history which left its imprint on their post-colonial status. Not only did most of these experience the violent disruption of their indigenous management systems; most of these were also reduced to a position of dependence in the global economy. The weak and subordinate position of these countries continues to characterise their economic relations with the industrialised world; but worse, in most cases, it has also affected their political autonomy, forcing them to take decisions which conflict with the welfare needs of their own people.²⁶ Without coming out of this scenario of dependence, these states will find it increasingly hard to resist outside pressures for pursuing policies which may have negative implications for people's welfare. In the emerging global context, with structural adjustment policies being forced down the throats of third world countries, the latter will invariably end up bearing the costs of welfare in the developed world while sacrificing the welfare needs of their own people.²⁷ Any search for alternative welfare models, therefore, must address the question of the contradictory relationship of welfare needs of people in unequal exchange contexts.

All three elements of the alternative welfare model suggested in this paper – sustainability, participative content and autonomy – being interrelated must be attempted simultaneously. Since these elements imply a major change in prevailing socio-economic structures as well as political processes, and these will have far-reaching implications for existing power equations, it will not be easy to make space for them. A beginning can, however, be made by initiating an alternative discourse – not only in academic circles but in the wider public domain. Evolving alternatives which are not meant to be centrally directed, and which involve an active role for people themselves, is bound to be time-consuming; but that cannot be a basis for their rejection. Especially so, when existing approaches have thrown up some paradoxes which also suggest their inherent limitations in answering the needs of the most needy in third world countries like India.

Since this model cannot be simply instituted from above, and since it will take some time before it emerges as an effective answer to the welfare question, it is extremely important that state provisioning of welfare is not disrupted suddenly. The already accumulated needs of welfare, primarily because of the so-called development policies which abruptly destroyed local management systems as well as traditional coping mechanisms, do not warrant such a step till alternatives are actually worked out. A re-orientation of policies to serve the needs of the powerless rather than the power elites

will be essential to prevent further decline of the welfare of the powerless in the prevailing state of relations. Yet, its possibilities depend on the very state of power relations themselves. Strengthening of the public domain therefore is both the condition and essence of the alternative welfare model. Any challenge to existing power equations can emerge only in this domain and any possibilities of welfare of the people remain conditional upon the strength and autonomy of this domain too: this basic truth about welfare must not be forgotten.

Notes

[An earlier version of this paper was presented at the XVth World Congress of the International Political Science Association held at Berlin in August 1994.]

- 1 The political speeches of most of India's first generation power-wielders, but especially those of Nehru, the first prime minister of India, reflect their faith in this model of development even more than the actual policies do – policies actually formulated reflect the influences of other factors also. The role of visions in defining the framework and directions of policies cannot, however, be denied.
- 2 On this, see, Government of India, Ministry of Industry, *Report of the Monopolies Inquiry Commission*, New Delhi, 1965; also, Government of India, Ministry of Industry, *Report of the Industrial Licensing Policy Inquiry Committee, Main Report*, New Delhi, 1969.
- 3 Francine R Frankel, *India's Political Economy 1947-1977: The Gradual Revolution*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1978.
- 4 Fiscal incentives offered for the use of capital, such as development rebates, double deprivation allowance and tax holidays, cheap credit and various other subsidies tended to favour capital-intensive technologies over labour-intensive technologies, with the result that even small-scale industries which were a good source of employment generation show a trend towards adopting labour-saving technologies/techniques of production.
- 5 For an account of various social welfare schemes operative in India, see, D R Sachdeva, *Social Welfare Administration in India*, Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 1992.
- 6 This estimate of 38 per cent of poor population is for the years 1987-88, as provided by the Planning Commission, *Report of the Expert Group on Estimation of Proportion and Number of the Poor*, New Delhi, 1993, Poverty is believed to have increased immensely in recent years, especially since the adoption of the structural adjustment programme under the prescriptions of the IMF-World Bank combine. The disproportionate increase in the prices of essential items of consumption has also increased the intensity of poverty. The poverty line itself appears very low in view of such rise in prices of food items.
- 7 UNDP, *Human Development Report-1992*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992; UNICEF, *Children and Women in India: A Situational Analysis-1990*, New Delhi, 1991; Planning Commission, *Eighth Five Year Plan 1992-97*, New Delhi, 1992; Public Interest Research Group, *Alternative Economic Survey 1993-94*, PIRG, New Delhi, 1994.
- 8 On the state of women in the informal sector, see Government of India, *Shramshakti*, Report of the National Commission of Self-Employed Women and Women in Informal Sector, New Delhi, 1989.
- 9 Though in recent years some projects have been started for the rehabilitation of child labour in areas of heavy concentration, without basic changes in the economic structures one does not see much hope in changing the situation.
- 10 Ritu Priya, 'The Medico-Friend Circle on Child Health', *IFDA Dossier*, Vol 69, January 1989.
- 11 For an analysis of the state's approach to women's health, see, Padma Prakash, 'New Approach to Women's Health: Means to an End?' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXVIII, No 51, December 18, 1993, Prakash also indicates the growing role of international organisations in influencing the approach of the state.
- 12 There is no doubt about the large-scale corruption which characterises state sector operations. But its reasons have to be carefully understood and remedies worked out in the context of these. On this, see my 'Conceptualising the Context and Contextualising the Concept: Corruption Reconsidered', *The Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol XXXIX, No 1, January-March 1993, pp 1-19.
- 13 These various kinds of manipulative practices have been taken note of by several evaluations of specific welfare programmes carried out by governmental as well as non-governmental agencies and individuals. The reports of the Programme Evaluation Organisation of the Planning Commission are of particular interest in this respect. Some of the research studies of anti-poverty programmes also confirm these realities of welfare provisioning. See, for instance, Sandeep Bagchee, 'Poverty Alleviation Programmes: An Appraisal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXII, No 4, January 24, 1987, pp 139-48.
- 14 Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics*, Third World Network, Penang, Malaysia, 1991.
- 15 Lester Brown et al, *Saving the Planet: How to Shape an Environmentally Sustainable Global Economy*, Worldwatch Environmental Series, Earthscan, London, 1992.
- 16 J Bandhyopadhyaya and Vandana Shiva, 'Green Revolution and Increased Vulnerability to Drought and Desertification in Arid Regions', in Bahuguna et al (eds), *Environment Crisis and Sustainable Development*, Natraj, Dehradun, 1992.
- 17 See Ignacy Sachs, 'Towards a Second Green Revolution?' in Bernhard Glaeser (ed), *The Green Revolution Revisited: Critique and Alternatives*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1987.
- 18 Madhav Gadgil, 'State Subsidies and Resource Use in a Dual Society' in Anil Agarwal (ed), *The Price of Forests*, Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi, 1992.
- 19 See Centre for Science and Environment, *The State of India's Environment, 1984-85: The Second Citizens Report*, New Delhi, 1985.
- 20 Bina Agarwal, *Cold Hearths and Barren Slopes: The Wood-Fuel Crisis in Third World*, Allied, New Delhi, 1986.
- 21 See Walter Fernandes, 'Power and Powerlessness: Development Projects and Displacement of Tribals', *Social Action*, Vol XLI, No 3, July-September 1911, pp 243-70.
- 22 L C Jain, 'Handlooms Facing Liquidation: Powerlooms Mock at Yojana Bhawan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XVIII, No 35, August 27, 1983; C T Kurien, *Growth and Justice Aspects of India's Development Experience*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992.
- 23 *Alternative Economic Survey, 1993-94*, op cit.
- 24 For a revealing discussion of the problems thrown up by western consumer cultures and economics which promote these in order to profit from them, see Alan Thein Durning, *How Much Is Enough?: The Consumer Society and the Future of Earth*, Earthscan, London, 1992.
- 25 See Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain, *Towards a Green World: Should Global Environmental Management Be Built on Legal Conventions or Human Rights?* CSE, New Delhi, 1992, pp 147-70.
- 26 The Human Development Report for 1992 too admitted the widening gap in global opportunities for the developed and developing countries, for "global markets do not operate freely"; UNDP, *Human Development Report, 1992*, Oxford University Press, 1992. Commenting on who had borne the brunt of structural adjustment policies in Latin America, the World Labour Report of ILO for the year 1989 stated, "In most countries those outside the modern or organised sector have suffered the worst setbacks. Youth, women and depressed in rural areas have been unable to find jobs in the organised and formal sector and have increasingly resorted to insecure and low-paid jobs in the informal sector or to sub-contracts or casual employment on the fringes of formal sector enterprises. In traditional agriculture, hired workers have experienced a decline in real earnings in some countries over long periods of time" (p 29); in the context of Africa it says, "Evidence is accumulating that such programmes are not making satisfactory progress towards renewed growth and development in the region" (p 39); ILO, *World Labour Report, 1989*, Vol IV, ILO, Geneva, 1989. Yet, more and more countries are being forced to adopt these programmes and policies.
- 27 The contradictory position of western nations which dominate the international order – economic as well as political – is as revealing in case of issues related to environment as these are in respect of general economic policies. On this, see Agarwal and Narain, *Towards a Green World*, op cit.