



John Rawls and social welfare: An analysis of welfare schemes in West Bengal

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Abstract

The idea of social justice is closely related to the role of the state in reducing inequality and supporting disadvantaged groups through welfare policies. The theory of justice developed by John Rawls provides an important framework for understanding how fairness can be achieved in society. Rawls' concept of "justice as fairness" emphasises equal basic liberties for all citizens and argues that social and economic inequalities are acceptable only when they benefit the least advantaged members of society.

This paper examines the relevance of Rawls' theory of justice in the context of social welfare schemes implemented by the Government of West Bengal. The study briefly explains key ideas of Rawls, such as the original position, the veil of ignorance, and the difference principle, and uses these concepts as a framework to analyse selected welfare programmes of the West Bengal government.

The paper discusses major welfare schemes such as Lakshmir Bhandar, Kanyashree Prakalpa, Krishak Bandhu, and the recently introduced Banglar Yuva Sathi scheme. These programmes aim to provide financial assistance, social security, and better opportunities to vulnerable groups, including women, farmers, and unemployed youth.

The study concludes that these welfare initiatives reflect an attempt to promote social justice and reduce inequality. However, effective implementation and expansion of opportunities in education and employment are necessary to achieve long-term fairness and inclusive development.

Keywords: Rawls' theory of justice, social welfare, difference principle, west bengal welfare schemes, social justice.

Introduction

The question of how a society should distribute its resources and opportunities in a fair way is an important issue in political philosophy and public policy since the discourse began. Many scholars have tried to explain how justice can be achieved in society. Among them, the work of John Rawls in his famous book *A Theory of Justice* (1971) [2] has had a strong influence on modern political thought. Rawls developed the idea of "justice as fairness." According to him, the principles of justice should be decided by free and rational individuals who imagine themselves in a situation called the "original position." In this situation, individuals make decisions behind a "veil of ignorance," which means they do not know their social status, wealth, or position in society (Rawls, 1971) [2]. Because of this uncertainty, they would choose fair principles that protect everyone in society.

Rawls argued that a just society should follow two important principles. The first principle guarantees equal basic liberties for all citizens. The second principle, known as the difference principle, states that social and economic inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society (Freeman, 2003) [1]. These ideas provide a useful framework for analysing government welfare policies that aim to reduce inequality and improve the living conditions of disadvantaged groups.

In India, the Constitution encourages the development of a welfare state, where the government plays an active role in promoting social justice and reducing inequality. Many states have introduced welfare schemes to support vulnerable sections of society. The state of West Bengal has implemented several welfare initiatives over the years, including schemes such as Lakshmir Bhandar, which

provides financial support to women, and Banglar Yuva Sathi, which aims to assist unemployed youth. These programmes are designed to provide economic support and improve opportunities for marginalised groups.

This article examines the welfare schemes of the West Bengal government from the perspective of Rawls' theory of justice. By applying Rawlsian ideas—especially the difference principle—the paper analyses whether these schemes truly benefit the least advantaged sections of society. The study also explores the relationship between theoretical ideas of justice and practical welfare policies.

Conceptual Framework: Rawls' Theory of Justice

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the theory of justice developed by John Rawls. In his famous book *A Theory of Justice* (1971) [2], Rawls attempted to answer an important question in political philosophy: how can a society organize its institutions in a fair and just way? Rawls argued that justice should be the primary principle guiding social and political institutions. According to him, a just society is one in which rights, opportunities, and resources are distributed fairly among all citizens (Rawls, 1971) [2].

Rawls described his theory as "justice as fairness." This idea means that the rules and institutions of society should be arranged in a way that treats individuals fairly and ensures equal respect for all. To explain how fair principles of justice can be chosen, Rawls introduced a hypothetical situation called the "original position." In this situation, individuals come together to decide the basic principles that will govern their society. However, these individuals make decisions behind a "veil of ignorance." This means that they do not know their future position in society, such as their

social class, income level, gender, religion, or natural abilities. Because they are unaware of their own advantages or disadvantages, they are more likely to choose fair and unbiased principles of justice that protect everyone's rights (Freeman, 2007).

From this original position, Rawls argued that rational individuals would agree on two main principles of justice. The first principle is the principle of equal liberty. According to this principle, every individual should enjoy the same basic rights and freedoms. These include freedoms such as freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of association, and equal political rights. Rawls believed that these liberties are fundamental and should be guaranteed equally to all members of society (Rawls, 1971)^[2].

The second principle of justice deals with social and economic inequalities. Rawls accepted that complete equality may not always be possible in society, but he argued that inequalities are justified only under certain conditions. This principle has two parts. The first part is fair equality of opportunity, which means that social and economic positions should be open to all individuals under conditions of equal opportunity. In other words, people should have equal chances to access education, employment, and other opportunities regardless of their background.

The second part of the second principle is known as the difference principle. According to this principle, social and economic inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. This means that policies and institutions should aim to improve the conditions of those who are economically and socially disadvantaged (Freeman, 2007). The difference principle emphasizes the importance of distributive justice and encourages governments to adopt policies that reduce inequality and support vulnerable groups.

Rawls' theory has important implications for the idea of the welfare state. Governments often introduce welfare policies and social assistance programmes to improve the living standards of marginalised communities. From a Rawlsian perspective, such policies can be justified if they help reduce inequality and improve opportunities for the least advantaged sections of society. Therefore, Rawls' theory provides a strong philosophical framework for analysing welfare policies and evaluating whether they promote fairness and social justice.

In the context of this study, Rawls' theory of justice helps to examine whether welfare schemes in West Bengal contribute to improving the socio-economic conditions of disadvantaged groups. By applying Rawlsian concepts such as equal liberty, fair equality of opportunity, and the difference principle, it becomes possible to analyse how these schemes relate to broader ideas of justice and welfare in society.

Social Welfare and the Indian Context

Social welfare is an important aspect of governance in India. The idea of social welfare is closely connected with the concept of a welfare state, where the government takes responsibility for improving the living conditions of its citizens, especially the poor and marginalised sections of society. In a welfare state, public policies and programmes are designed to reduce poverty, promote social justice, and ensure equal opportunities for all.

In India, the foundation of social welfare policies can be found in the Constitution of India, which emphasises justice, equality, and social welfare as key goals of the state. The Directive Principles of State Policy encourage the government to create policies that reduce economic inequality, provide social security, and improve the standard of living of the people. These constitutional provisions highlight the commitment of the Indian state to promote social and economic justice.

From the perspective of John Rawls' theory of justice, welfare policies can be understood as efforts to improve the conditions of the least advantaged members of society. Rawls argued that social and economic inequalities are acceptable only when they benefit disadvantaged groups (Rawls, 1971)^[2]. In this sense, welfare programmes in India aim to reduce inequality and create a more just society.

Therefore, the study of social welfare policies in India provides an important context for understanding how governments attempt to achieve social justice through public programmes. It also helps to analyse whether these policies effectively improve opportunities and living conditions for marginalised communities.

Social Welfare in West Bengal: Context and Key Schemes

To understand the significance of West Bengal's current welfare policies, it is important to first look at how the state's approach to social welfare has evolved over time.

The Evolution of Welfare in West Bengal

West Bengal has a long and distinctive history of social welfare interventions, shaped by its political landscape. For over three decades, from 1977 to 2011, the state was governed by the Left Front, a coalition of communist parties. During this period, the focus of welfare was largely structural and institutional. The Left Front government is best known for its land reforms, which included the redistribution of surplus land to the landless and the formalisation of contract rights through "Operation Barga" (The Hindu, 2021)^[4]. These measures were complemented by a significant strengthening of the *panchayati raj* system (local self-government), which aimed to decentralise power and give rural populations a greater voice in development. The underlying philosophy was one of structural transformation—changing the fundamental basis of rural power and ownership to benefit the poorest.

Since 2011, under the government of the Trinamool Congress (TMC), the welfare paradigm has shifted noticeably. While maintaining some of the earlier programs, the TMC government has placed a much greater emphasis on direct benefit transfer (DBT) schemes. These are programs that deliver cash or benefits directly to the bank accounts of identified beneficiaries, bypassing intermediary institutions. This approach prioritises immediate financial support to vulnerable groups, often with a universal or near-universal reach. Schemes like *Kanyashree* (for girl children) and *Sabooj Sathi* (distribution of bicycles to students) became flagship programs, gaining national and international recognition (UNICEF, 2017). This shift reflects a move from institution-building towards targeted, individual-level financial assistance as the primary mode of welfare delivery.

1. The 2026 Interim Budget and Its Welfare Priorities

The interim budget presented in February 2026^[5] by the West Bengal government continues and deepens this focus on direct cash transfers. It is particularly significant because it comes just before a state election, a context that often sees governments announcing new benefits to appeal to voters (The Hindu, 2026). Two schemes stand out as the centrepieces of this budget: *Lakshmir Bhandar* and *Banglar Yuba Sathi*. Both schemes are designed to provide direct financial support to large segments of the population, and they form the core of this paper's analysis.

2. Lakshmir Bhandar

The *Lakshmir Bhandar* scheme was originally launched by the West Bengal government as a cash transfer program aimed at women. It is designed to provide financial assistance to adult women in the state to support their economic independence and well-being. The scheme is broadly inclusive, covering a large number of women across both rural and urban areas.

In the 2026 interim budget, the government announced a significant enhancement to this scheme. The monthly financial assistance was increased by ₹500, meaning that eligible women now receive a higher amount directly into their bank accounts (The Hindu, 2026). According to government figures, the scheme has an enormous reach, with over 2.21 crore (22.1 million) women enrolled as beneficiaries. The scale of this scheme makes it one of the largest direct cash transfer programs for women in the country.

Banglar Yuba Sathi

The *Banglar Yuba Sathi* scheme is a newly announced initiative in the 2026 budget, aimed at addressing the issue of unemployment among the youth. The scheme targets unemployed individuals in the age group of 21 to 40 years (The Hindu, 2026). It promises to provide a monthly unemployment allowance of ₹1,500 to eligible beneficiaries. This scheme represents a direct attempt by the state government to address the economic distress caused by a lack of job opportunities. To facilitate enrolment, the government has announced plans to set up special camps across the state where unemployed youth can register for the scheme. Later on Government also launch separate website for online registration. The use of physical camps for registration is notable, as it reflects an attempt to reach individuals who may not have easy access to online systems or who may face digital barriers.

3. Other Relevant Initiatives

While the focus of this paper is on the two major cash transfer schemes mentioned above, it is worth briefly noting other welfare initiatives in the state to provide a complete picture. One such initiative is the WE-LAMPS programme. WE-LAMPS stands for Women's Empowerment through Livelihood and Market Promotion. This project, supported by organisations like Caritas India, focuses on empowering tribal women by helping them form collectives, improve their agricultural livelihoods, and access markets (Caritas India, 2026). Unlike *Lakshmir Bhandar*, which provides direct cash, WE-LAMPS focuses on building institutions (like self-help groups) and enhancing skills and productive capacities. This distinction is important because it represents a different approach to welfare—one that aligns more

closely with Rawls's idea of "fair equality of opportunity" by trying to equip people with the means to improve their own condition, rather than simply providing income support.

Analysis: Rawlsian Principles and West Bengal's Welfare Architecture

Having outlined the key concepts of Rawls's theory and the details of West Bengal's welfare schemes, this section brings the two together. The goal is to systematically analyse the schemes—primarily *Lakshmir Bhandar* and *Banglar Yuba Sathi*—through a Rawlsian lens. This means asking: Do these schemes reflect the principles that would be chosen from behind a "veil of ignorance"? Do they genuinely benefit the least advantaged? Do they promote fair equality of opportunity? The analysis is organised thematically around key Rawlsian concepts.

4. Identifying the "Least Advantaged" in the West Bengal Context

Before we can apply the difference principle, we must first identify who the "least advantaged" members of society are in the context of West Bengal. Rawls (1971)^[2] defined the least advantaged as those who have the fewest primary goods—the basic things any rational person would want, such as rights, opportunities, income, wealth, and the social bases of self-respect. In a practical sense, this refers to those at the bottom of the social and economic ladder.

In West Bengal, several groups can reasonably be considered among the least advantaged:

- **Landless agricultural laborers:** Despite land reforms, many rural households still lack productive assets and depend on uncertain wage labor.
- **Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) communities:** These groups face historical disadvantages in terms of education, employment, and social status.
- **Women in patriarchal households:** Women often have less access to income, decision-making power, and opportunities outside the home.
- **Uneducated and unskilled youth:** Young people who lack formal education or vocational skills face chronic unemployment or underemployment.

Any genuine effort to apply Rawls's difference principle must prioritize these groups. The question is whether West Bengal's welfare schemes do so effectively.

5. The Difference Principle in Action: Redistributive Intent

The most obvious connection between Rawls's theory and West Bengal's schemes lies in their redistributive intent. Both *Lakshmir Bhandar* and *Banglar Yuba Sathi* are designed to channel resources directly to groups that can be considered among the least advantaged.

Lakshmir Bhandar: Targets women, a group that faces systematic disadvantages in terms of income and autonomy. By providing a direct cash transfer, the scheme increases the income and wealth of over 2.21 crore women in the state (The Hindu, 2026). From a Rawlsian perspective, this is a

clear example of using state policy to improve the condition of the least advantaged. The cash can be used for household needs, health expenses, or small investments, potentially increasing the recipient's economic security and bargaining power within the family.

Banglar Yuba Sathi: Targets unemployed youth, another vulnerable group. Unemployment is not just a loss of income, it is also a loss of self-respect and social standing, which Rawls would call a primary good. By providing a monthly allowance of ₹1,500, the scheme offers a modest safety net for those who cannot find work. It acknowledges that society has some obligation to support those who, through no fault of their own, are unable to participate in the labour market.

In both cases, the schemes align with the spirit of the difference principle. They represent a deliberate effort by the state to redistribute resources downward, from the general tax-paying public to specific disadvantaged groups. As Freeman (2003) ^[1] notes, the difference principle requires that inequalities work to the advantage of everyone, especially the worst-off. These schemes, by directly improving the income of women and the unemployed, seem to meet this basic test.

6. The Question of Fair Equality of Opportunity

While the redistributive intent of the schemes is clear, a deeper Rawlsian analysis raises questions about fair equality of opportunity. For Rawls, it is not enough to simply transfer income to the disadvantaged. A just society must also ensure that everyone has a genuine chance to attain positions of advantage—whether in education, employment, or public life. This requires addressing the underlying barriers that prevent people from competing on a fair basis.

Lakshmir Bhandar: Income Support vs. Empowerment
Does *Lakshmir Bhandar* promote fair equality of opportunity for women? The cash transfer undoubtedly provides material relief. However, it does little, by itself, to address the structural barriers that limit women's opportunities. These barriers include:

- Lower levels of education and skill development.
- Social norms that restrict women's mobility and work outside the home.
- Lack of access to childcare makes it difficult to take up employment.
- Discrimination in the labour market.

A scheme that truly promoted fair equality of opportunity would need to complement cash transfers with investments in education, skill training, and social mobilisation. This is where a program like WE-LAMPS becomes relevant. By helping tribal women form collectives, improve their livelihoods, and access markets, WE-LAMPS aims to build their long-term capabilities and economic independence (Caritas India, 2026). It seeks to give women the tools to compete on a more equal footing. *Lakshmir Bhandar*, while valuable, does not have this transformative ambition. It provides a floor, but not a ladder.

Banglar Yuba Sathi: Relaxing or Pathway?

A similar question arises for *Banglar Yuba Sathi*. Is it just a relaxing—a way to soften the pain of unemployment—or does it create a pathway to real opportunity? The scheme, as

announced, provides an allowance, but it does not appear to be linked to skill development, job placement, or education. An unemployed youth receiving ₹1,500 per month is still unemployed. Their opportunity to attain a good job or a secure livelihood remains unchanged.

Rawls's principle of fair equality of opportunity would demand more. It would ask whether the scheme is part of a larger strategy to equip young people with the skills and qualifications they need to compete in the job market. Without such linkages, the scheme risks becoming a permanent dole—a form of support that keeps people alive but does not help them advance. This is not to say the scheme is without value, but a Rawlsian analysis highlights its limitations in promoting genuine equality of opportunity.

Discussion: The Relevance and Limits of Rawls in the Indian Context

After examining the welfare schemes of West Bengal through the ideas of John Rawls, it is useful to reflect on what this analysis tells us about the relevance of Rawls's theory for understanding social policy in a regional context like West Bengal. The aim is not only to judge whether particular schemes fully follow Rawls's principles, but also to understand how his theory helps us evaluate welfare policies more critically.

One important contribution of Rawls's theory is that it provides a strong moral framework for evaluating welfare programmes. Welfare policies are often judged only by their cost, popularity, or the number of beneficiaries. However, Rawls encourages us to ask deeper questions about fairness and justice. His theory asks whether policies truly help the least advantaged members of society. In West Bengal, schemes such as Lakshmir Bhandar and Banglar Yuva Sathi are designed to support economically weaker groups like women and unemployed youth. From a Rawlsian perspective, this reflects an attempt to follow the difference principle, which states that social and economic inequalities are acceptable only when they benefit the least advantaged sections of society.

Rawls also highlights the importance of institutions in achieving justice. According to his idea of the basic structure of society, justice depends not only on individual policies but also on the strength and fairness of institutions that implement them. Welfare schemes can contribute to justice only when they are properly implemented and easily accessible to citizens. If beneficiaries face administrative delays, a lack of information, or bureaucratic barriers, then the schemes may fail to achieve their intended goals.

At the same time, Rawls's theory has certain limitations when applied to real-life political contexts. Rawls mainly discusses what a perfectly just society should look like, which is known as ideal theory. In reality, welfare policies operate in a non-ideal world where problems such as administrative inefficiency, corruption, and political competition exist. In states like West Bengal, welfare schemes are sometimes introduced or expanded during election periods, which raises questions about the political motivations behind policy decisions.

Another important critique comes from Amartya Sen, who argues that justice should focus not only on the distribution of resources but also on people's real opportunities or capabilities. According to Sen, simply providing financial benefits may not always improve people's actual freedom or quality of life if social and structural barriers remain.

Therefore, Rawls's theory should be viewed not as a strict policy guide but as a normative framework for evaluating welfare policies. It helps scholars and policymakers examine whether government programmes truly promote fairness and support disadvantaged groups. In this way, Rawls's ideas remain highly relevant for analysing welfare policies and understanding the broader goal of building a more just society.

Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, it is concluded that the welfare policies of West Bengal reflect an important attempt to promote social justice and inclusive development. Schemes targeting women, youth, farmers, and other disadvantaged groups aim to reduce inequality and improve economic security. When examined through the theoretical framework of John Rawls, these initiatives can be understood as efforts to apply the idea of justice as fairness in practical governance.

Many of these welfare programmes show a clear intention to support the least advantaged members of society, which aligns with Rawls' difference principle. By providing financial assistance, educational support, and social protection, these schemes attempt to create a more balanced distribution of opportunities and resources.

However, achieving social justice requires not only welfare distribution but also long-term institutional development that ensures equal opportunities for all citizens. Therefore, while the welfare schemes of West Bengal represent an important step toward social justice, continuous policy improvement, effective implementation, and sustainable economic development are necessary to achieve the broader goals of fairness and equality in society.

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