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Portable Welfare and Internal Migration in India: Reassessing Social Protection in the Era of Cooperative Federalism

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Abstract

Internal migration has become an integral part of India's development trajectory, driven by regional disparities in employment opportunities, urbanization, and economic transformation. Millions of migrant workers contribute significantly to the country's economy, yet many continue to face barriers in accessing social welfare benefits because these are often linked to their place of residence rather than their citizenship. The COVID-19 pandemic brought this issue into sharp focus, exposing the vulnerability of interstate migrant workers and highlighting the limitations of India's residence-based welfare system.

Against this backdrop, the Government of India has introduced several initiatives, including the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC), e-Shram, and Ayushman Bharat, to improve the portability of welfare benefits across state boundaries. This paper examines these reforms within the broader framework of cooperative federalism and social citizenship. It argues that welfare portability should be understood not merely as a technological or administrative innovation but as an important step towards ensuring that citizens can access essential social protection regardless of where they live or work.

Drawing on existing academic literature, government reports, and policy documents, the paper critically analyses the opportunities and challenges associated with India's evolving portability framework. While recent reforms have enhanced access to welfare for many migrant workers, their effectiveness continues to be shaped by variations in state capacity, digital inclusion, institutional coordination, and public awareness. The paper concludes that achieving truly portable social protection requires stronger intergovernmental cooperation, greater institutional integration, and a rights based approach that places citizens, rather than administrative boundaries, at the centre of welfare governance.

Keywords: Internal migration, welfare portability, social protection, cooperative federalism, One Nation One Ration Card, e-Shram, social citizenship, digital governance, India

Introduction

Internal migration has become one of the defining features of India's socio-economic transformation. Every year, millions of people move across state boundaries in search of better employment opportunities, higher wages, education, and improved living conditions. This movement of people has played a crucial role in supporting industrial growth, urbanization and the expansion of the service sector. Despite their substantial contribution to the economy, however,

interstate migrant workers often remain excluded from many social welfare programmes because these benefits are generally linked to their place of residence rather than to their status as Indian citizens.

This contradiction raises an important policy question. Although the Constitution guarantees citizens the right to move freely, reside, and work anywhere in the country, access to many welfare schemes has traditionally depended on domicile or local registration. As a result, migration

frequently disrupts access to subsidised food, healthcare, social security, and other essential public services. For many migrant workers employed in the informal sector, relocating for work has often meant sacrificing welfare entitlements available in their home states.

The limitations of this welfare model became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The nationwide lockdown of 2020 exposed the precarious living and working conditions of millions of migrant workers, many of whom suddenly lost their jobs, income, shelter, and access to food security. The humanitarian crisis that followed demonstrated that India's welfare architecture was not adequately equipped to protect a highly mobile workforce. The experience generated widespread debate among policymakers, researchers, and civil society organisations regarding the need to redesign welfare systems so that benefits remain accessible irrespective of geographical movement.

Recognising these challenges, the Government of India introduced a series of reforms aimed at improving the portability of welfare benefits. Initiatives such as the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC), e-Shram, and Ayushman Bharat represent important attempts to ensure that essential social protection can accompany citizens across state boundaries. These initiatives also reflect the growing role of digital public infrastructure in welfare delivery through biometric authentication, integrated databases, and interoperable digital platforms. While these reforms mark a significant departure from earlier residence-based models of welfare administration, their success depends on much more than technological innovation. Effective portability also requires institutional coordination, administrative capacity, political commitment, and sustained cooperation between the Union and state governments.

The growing importance of welfare portability has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Existing studies have explored the causes of internal migration, the vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers, and the implementation of individual welfare schemes. The introduction of ONORC, in particular, has generated considerable discussion regarding the role of digital governance in improving food security for migrant households. However, much of the existing literature examines portability primarily as an issue of programme implementation or administrative efficiency. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding welfare portability as a broader transformation in India's welfare state and federal governance.

This paper seeks to address that gap by examining welfare portability through the interconnected perspectives of social citizenship, cooperative federalism, and digital governance. It argues that portability is not simply a technical reform designed to improve service delivery; rather, it represents an important shift in the relationship between citizenship, mobility, and social protection. As labour mobility becomes an increasingly permanent feature of India's development, welfare systems must adapt to ensure that social rights are not constrained by administrative boundaries.

The paper is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including academic literature, government reports, policy documents, and publications by national and international organisations. Instead of evaluating the

operational performance of individual schemes, it analyses the broader institutional changes that have shaped the evolution of portable welfare in India.

The study has four objectives. First, it examines how internal migration influences access to social welfare programmes. Second, it analyses the emergence of welfare portability as a policy response to migrant vulnerability. Third, it explores the role of cooperative federalism and digital governance in facilitating portable social protection. Finally, it identifies the institutional challenges that continue to hinder the development of an inclusive and mobility-sensitive welfare system.

The central argument of this paper is that welfare portability marks an important step towards building a more inclusive welfare state in India. Nevertheless, portability cannot be achieved through digital platforms alone. Its long-term success depends on strengthening institutional coordination, reducing administrative fragmentation, improving awareness among beneficiaries, and adopting a citizenship-centred approach to welfare governance. Only by addressing these broader governance challenges can India ensure that the constitutional right to mobility is accompanied by meaningful and uninterrupted access to social protection.

The paper is organised into eight sections. Following this introduction, the next section reviews the existing literature on internal migration, welfare portability, and social protection. The subsequent sections develop the theoretical framework, examine the evolution of portable welfare in India, critically analyse major portability initiatives, discuss the principal institutional challenges, propose policy recommendations, and conclude by reflecting on the future of portable social protection in India's federal welfare system.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding welfare portability in India requires more than an economic explanation of why people migrate. While migration theories help explain the movement of people across regions, they do not fully capture how public institutions respond to the needs of a mobile population. Welfare portability is essentially a question of governance, citizenship, and social justice. It concerns whether citizens can continue to enjoy basic social rights after moving from one state to another.

To analyse this issue, this paper draws on four complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Citizenship, the Capability Approach, Cooperative Federalism, and Digital Governance. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding why portable welfare has emerged as an important policy priority in India and the institutional conditions required for its successful implementation.

Social Citizenship: Linking Welfare to Citizenship

The concept of social citizenship, developed by T. H. Marshall argues that citizenship extends beyond civil and political rights to include social rights such as education, healthcare, income security, and access to welfare. These rights enable individuals to participate fully and equally in society.

Viewed from this perspective, welfare is not simply a government benefit; it is an essential component of

citizenship. Every citizen should be able to access basic social protection irrespective of where they live within the country.

India presents an interesting paradox. While the Constitution guarantees citizens the freedom to move, reside, and work anywhere in the country, many welfare schemes have historically been tied to place of residence. Consequently, interstate migrants often lose practical access to welfare benefits even though their constitutional rights remain unchanged.

This contradiction makes social citizenship an appropriate lens for understanding welfare portability. If welfare is regarded as a citizenship entitlement, then access to essential services should accompany citizens wherever they move. Initiatives such as the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC) can therefore be interpreted as efforts to align welfare administration with the constitutional principle of equal citizenship.

The Capability Approach: Welfare as an Expansion of Human Freedom

While social citizenship explains why welfare matters, the Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen helps explain what welfare should ultimately achieve.

According to Sen, development should be assessed not only by economic growth but also by the extent to which people have the freedom and opportunity to live the lives they value. Public policy should therefore expand people's capabilities rather than merely provide material assistance.

For migrant workers, portable welfare contributes directly to this objective. Continued access to food security, healthcare, and social protection reduces vulnerability and enables individuals to pursue employment opportunities without losing access to essential public services. In this sense, portability strengthens people's ability to make meaningful economic and social choices.

Conversely, when welfare remains tied to a fixed place of residence, migration often results in the loss of social protection. Such arrangements limit individual capabilities by forcing workers to choose between livelihood opportunities and welfare benefits.

The Capability Approach therefore highlights that the success of welfare portability should be judged not only by administrative efficiency but also by its contribution to improving people's well-being and expanding their substantive freedoms.

Cooperative Federalism: Governing Welfare Across State Boundaries

Because India is a federal country, many welfare programmes are implemented through shared responsibilities between the Union and state governments. As a result, ensuring portability is not simply an administrative task but also an exercise in intergovernmental cooperation.

The idea of cooperative federalism emphasises collaboration, coordination, and mutual responsibility among different levels of government. Rather than working in isolation, governments coordinate policies, resources, and institutions to achieve common objectives.

Portable welfare reflects this principle in practice. Schemes such as ONORC require states to integrate beneficiary

databases, adopt common technological standards, and coordinate administrative procedures. The success of these initiatives therefore depends on sustained cooperation between governments rather than on central direction alone.

At the same time, differences in administrative capacity, fiscal resources, and institutional readiness mean that portability is implemented unevenly across states. This highlights an important point: digital platforms may facilitate portability, but effective federal coordination ultimately determines whether citizens can access welfare seamlessly across state boundaries.

Digital Governance: Enabling Modern Welfare Delivery

Advances in digital technology have transformed the way governments deliver public services. In India, the expansion of digital public infrastructure including biometric authentication, digital identity systems, and integrated databases has created new opportunities for improving welfare administration.

Within the context of welfare portability, digital governance enables beneficiaries to access services without being restricted to a single location. Programmes such as ONORC, e-Shram, and Ayushman Bharat illustrate how digital systems can improve transparency, reduce duplication, and facilitate the delivery of benefits across state boundaries.

However, technology should not be viewed as a solution in itself. Digital systems are only as effective as the institutions that support them. Problems such as limited digital literacy, connectivity gaps, authentication failures, and unequal access to technology can prevent eligible beneficiaries from receiving services.

Accordingly, digital governance should be understood as an enabling mechanism that supports portability, while recognising that inclusive institutions, administrative capacity, and accountability remain equally important.

Each of the four theoretical perspectives contributes a distinct dimension to the analysis

Social Citizenship explains why welfare should remain attached to citizens rather than to places of residence. The Capability Approach demonstrates how portable welfare improves people's freedom and well-being. Cooperative Federalism explains the institutional arrangements necessary for delivering welfare across state boundaries, while Digital Governance illustrates the technological mechanisms that make portability operationally possible.

Taken together, these perspectives provide a holistic framework for analysing India's evolving welfare system. They shift the discussion beyond the performance of individual schemes and instead focus on the broader transformation of welfare governance in a society characterised by increasing labour mobility.

Drawing on the above theoretical framework, this paper advances four propositions

First, welfare portability strengthens social citizenship by ensuring that access to basic welfare is linked to citizenship rather than geographical location.

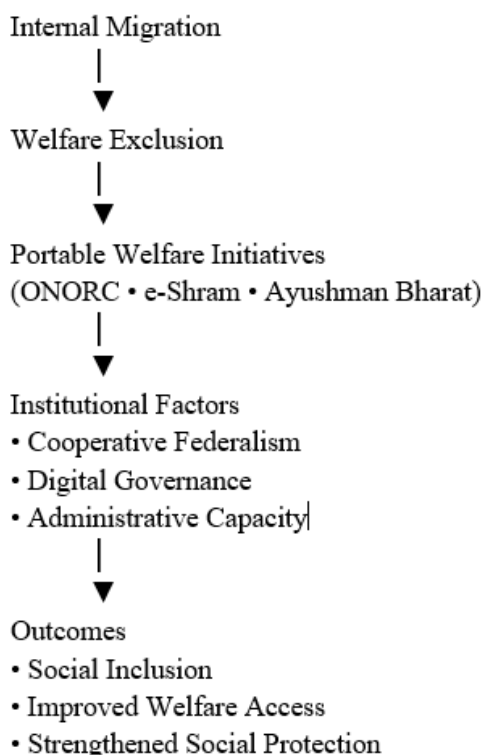
Second, portable welfare expands individual capabilities by enabling migrant workers to retain essential social protection while pursuing employment opportunities.

Third, the effectiveness of portability depends on the quality

of cooperative federalism, particularly the ability of the Union and state governments to coordinate policies and administrative systems.

Finally, digital governance enhances welfare portability, but technology alone cannot guarantee inclusive access. Lasting success depends on strong institutions, effective implementation, and a rights-based approach to welfare governance.

These propositions provide the analytical foundation for examining the evolution of welfare portability in India and assessing its implications for social protection in an increasingly mobile society.



Evolution of Welfare Portability in India: From Residence-Based Welfare to Portable Social Protection

India's welfare system has undergone significant changes over the past few decades in response to economic transformation, rapid urbanisation, and increasing labour mobility. For a long time, social welfare programmes were designed on the assumption that people would continue to live and work in the same place where they were registered. However, this assumption has become increasingly unrealistic as millions of Indians migrate across state boundaries every year in search of employment and better livelihoods.

This growing mobility has exposed an important limitation of India's welfare architecture. While workers move to new states for economic opportunities, their welfare entitlements often remain tied to their place of origin. As a result, many interstate migrants struggle to access essential services despite being eligible citizens. The evolution of welfare portability can therefore be understood as India's attempt to adapt its social protection system to the realities of a mobile workforce.

In the decades following Independence, most welfare programmes were administered through state and local

governments. Since beneficiaries generally lived where they were registered, linking welfare to residence appeared administratively practical. Programmes such as the Public Distribution System (PDS), social pensions, housing schemes, and several state welfare initiatives relied on locally maintained records and proof of residence to identify beneficiaries.

Over time, however, this model became increasingly inadequate. Economic liberalization, industrial growth, and widening regional disparities encouraged large-scale interstate migration. Although workers relocated to cities and industrial centres, their welfare records often remained in their home villages. Consequently, they found themselves excluded from many public services at their destination.

This situation created a contradiction within India's welfare system. Citizens enjoyed the constitutional freedom to move anywhere in the country, but access to welfare frequently remained confined to a particular geographical location. In effect, labour became mobile while welfare remained immobile.

The expansion of internal migration fundamentally changed the relationship between employment and social protection. Destination states increasingly relied on migrant workers in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, transport, hospitality, domestic work, and logistics. Despite their contribution to economic growth, these workers often lacked stable access to welfare because most were employed in the informal sector and had limited social security.

As migration became a permanent feature of India's economy, it became evident that residence-based welfare was no longer sufficient. A worker who moved from Bihar to Maharashtra or from Odisha to Gujarat should not have to choose between better employment opportunities and continued access to food security or healthcare.

This changing socio-economic context created growing pressure for reforms that would ensure continuity of welfare irrespective of geographical mobility. Welfare portability gradually emerged as a practical response to this challenge.

Although discussions on migrant welfare had existed for several years, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically accelerated policy attention to welfare portability.

The nationwide lockdown in 2020 exposed the vulnerability of millions of migrant workers who suddenly lost employment, income, housing, and access to essential services. Many were unable to obtain subsidised food or other welfare benefits because their entitlements remained linked to their home states. The humanitarian crisis highlighted the limitations of a welfare system that assumed beneficiaries would remain in one place.

The pandemic therefore marked a turning point in India's social policy. It demonstrated that protecting migrant workers required structural reforms rather than temporary relief measures. In this context, portability came to be viewed not simply as an administrative improvement but as an essential feature of a modern welfare system capable of responding to large-scale labour mobility.

The rapid expansion of India's digital public infrastructure created new possibilities for redesigning welfare delivery. Digital identity systems, biometric authentication, and interoperable databases made it possible to verify beneficiaries across state boundaries without requiring them to return to their place of registration.

These technological developments provided the institutional foundation for initiatives such as the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC), e-Shram, and Ayushman Bharat. Together, they marked an important shift towards nationally accessible welfare services.

However, technology alone cannot guarantee effective portability. Digital platforms can facilitate access, but their success ultimately depends on accurate databases, reliable infrastructure, administrative coordination, and the ability of beneficiaries to use these systems. Digital innovation is therefore best understood as an enabler of portability rather than its sole determinant.

The transition towards portable welfare has also reshaped the practice of cooperative federalism in India. Since many welfare programmes involve shared responsibilities between the Union and the states, portability requires close coordination across different levels of government.

Schemes such as ONORC depend on common technical standards, integrated beneficiary databases, and agreed administrative procedures. Their implementation demonstrates that effective welfare delivery increasingly depends on collaboration rather than isolated action by individual governments.

At the same time, differences in administrative capacity and institutional readiness mean that the experience of portability varies across states. Some states have adopted digital reforms more rapidly than others, leading to uneven implementation. Strengthening cooperative federalism therefore remains central to the long-term success of portable welfare.

Although food security has been the most visible area of welfare portability, recent policy developments indicate a broader shift in India's approach to social protection. Portability is gradually being extended to healthcare, labour registration, insurance, and other welfare services.

This expansion reflects an important change in policy thinking. Instead of viewing portability as a feature of individual schemes, governments are increasingly recognising it as a guiding principle for welfare governance. The objective is to ensure that citizens can continue to access essential services regardless of where they live or work.

If this process continues, India's welfare system will move beyond fragmented programme-based reforms towards a more integrated and mobility-sensitive model of social protection.

The evolution of welfare portability illustrates how India's welfare state is adapting to changing patterns of labour mobility. What began as a system largely organised around residence is gradually being transformed into one that seeks to provide continuity of social protection across state boundaries.

Important progress has been made through digital reforms and greater intergovernmental cooperation. Nevertheless, portability remains an ongoing process rather than a completed reform. Administrative fragmentation, unequal state capacity, digital exclusion, and institutional coordination continue to shape the effectiveness of welfare delivery.

Ultimately, the significance of welfare portability lies not only in improving access to individual schemes but also in redefining the relationship between mobility, citizenship,

and social protection. As internal migration continues to shape India's development, building a welfare system that supports mobile citizens will remain an essential challenge for public policy.

Welfare Portability in Practice: A Critical Analysis of India's Major Social Protection Initiatives

The idea of welfare portability has moved from policy discussion to practical implementation through a number of national initiatives aimed at improving access to social protection for migrant workers. Although these programmes differ in their objectives and institutional design, they share a common goal: reducing the disadvantages created when welfare benefits are tied to place of residence rather than to citizenship.

This section examines three key initiatives the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC), e-Shram, and Ayushman Bharat to understand how they have contributed to the development of portable welfare in India. Rather than assessing them individually, the analysis considers how they collectively reflect a gradual shift towards a more integrated and mobility-sensitive welfare system.

One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC): Making Food Security Portable

Among the various reforms introduced in recent years, the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC) has been the most significant step towards welfare portability. Before its introduction, beneficiaries under the Public Distribution System (PDS) could usually access subsidised food grains only through the Fair Price Shop where their ration card was registered. For migrant workers, this often meant losing access to food security after moving to another state.

ONORC addressed this limitation by allowing eligible beneficiaries to obtain their food entitlements from any integrated Fair Price Shop across the country using biometric authentication. In doing so, it shifted the focus from residence-based eligibility to citizen-centred access.

From the perspective of social citizenship, ONORC reinforces the principle that access to food security should not depend on geographical location. It allows migrant workers to retain an important welfare entitlement while exercising their constitutional right to move and work anywhere in India.

The scheme also has broader developmental implications. Reliable access to subsidised food reduces household vulnerability and enables migrants to seek employment without worrying about the loss of essential welfare benefits. In this sense, ONORC contributes not only to food security but also to greater economic mobility and social inclusion.

Despite these achievements, implementation challenges remain. Biometric authentication failures, inconsistent internet connectivity, limited awareness among beneficiaries, and variations in state-level administrative capacity continue to affect the scheme's effectiveness. Moreover, ONORC addresses only one dimension of social protection. While it has significantly improved access to food security, it does not automatically ensure portability of other welfare benefits.

e-Shram: Creating the Foundation for Portable Labour Welfare

The launch of the e-Shram portal marked another important development in India's approach to migrant welfare. Unlike ONORC, which directly enables the portability of food benefits, e-Shram focuses on creating a comprehensive national database of workers in the unorganised sector.

For decades, the absence of reliable information on informal workers limited the government's ability to design and implement effective labour welfare policies. By registering workers on a single digital platform, e-Shram seeks to bridge this gap and create a common database that can support future social security initiatives.

The portal represents an important institutional reform because it establishes a nationwide framework for identifying and tracking workers across state boundaries. This has the potential to improve coordination between central and state governments and facilitate better targeting of welfare programmes.

However, registration alone does not guarantee social protection. The effectiveness of e-Shram ultimately depends on how successfully the database is linked with existing and future welfare schemes. Without such integration, the portal risks becoming primarily a repository of information rather than a mechanism for delivering portable benefits.

Another challenge concerns digital inclusion. Many informal workers continue to face difficulties related to digital literacy, documentation, and access to registration facilities. Addressing these barriers is essential if e-Shram is to fulfil its broader objective of strengthening labour welfare.

Ayushman Bharat: Expanding Portability in Healthcare

Healthcare is another area where portability has become increasingly important. Migrant workers often relocate to places where they have limited access to affordable medical services, making continuity of healthcare an important component of social protection.

Ayushman Bharat has attempted to address this issue by enabling eligible beneficiaries to receive treatment at empanelled hospitals across participating states. This represents an important departure from earlier arrangements in which access to publicly supported healthcare was often linked to state-specific administrative systems.

From the perspective of the Capability Approach, portable healthcare enhances individual well-being by reducing financial risks associated with illness and improving access to essential medical services. It enables migrant workers to maintain their livelihoods without facing catastrophic healthcare expenses.

Nevertheless, the availability of services varies considerably across states and regions. Differences in healthcare infrastructure, the distribution of empanelled hospitals, and levels of public awareness continue to influence the actual experience of portability. As a result, the formal availability of portable healthcare does not always translate into equal access for all beneficiaries.

When examined together, ONORC, e-Shram, and Ayushman Bharat illustrate the direction in which India's welfare system is evolving. Each initiative addresses a different dimension of social protection, yet all seek to reduce the barriers created by geographical mobility.

At the same time, these reforms remain largely scheme-specific. Food security, healthcare, labour welfare, pensions,

housing, and other programmes continue to operate through separate institutional arrangements, databases, and administrative procedures. This fragmentation limits the overall effectiveness of portability and increases the complexity of accessing multiple welfare benefits.

A more integrated approach would allow these initiatives to complement one another, creating a coherent social protection system that supports citizens throughout their migration journey rather than through isolated interventions. Although important progress has been made, several structural challenges continue to shape the implementation of portable welfare.

Administrative capacity varies considerably across states, resulting in uneven implementation. Digital exclusion remains a concern for workers with limited internet access, low digital literacy, or difficulties with biometric authentication. Many migrant workers are also unaware of the benefits available to them or the procedures required to access those benefits.

These issues suggest that portability should not be viewed solely as a technological achievement. Its success depends equally on effective institutions, responsive administration, and sustained efforts to ensure that welfare programmes remain accessible to the populations they are intended to serve.

The analysis demonstrates that India has made meaningful progress in adapting its welfare system to the realities of a mobile workforce. ONORC has significantly improved the portability of food security, Ayushman Bharat has expanded access to healthcare across state boundaries, and e-Shram has laid the groundwork for a more integrated approach to labour welfare.

However, these initiatives also reveal that portability is still evolving. The current system combines important institutional innovations with continuing administrative and governance challenges. Achieving a truly portable welfare system will therefore require greater integration across welfare schemes, stronger coordination between different levels of government, and sustained attention to the needs of migrant workers.

Viewed together, these initiatives represent more than a collection of policy reforms. They reflect a gradual reorientation of India's welfare state towards recognising that social protection should accompany citizens wherever they choose to live and work.

Challenges and Policy Gaps: Towards an Inclusive Portable Welfare System

The introduction of portable welfare initiatives marks an important shift in India's approach to social protection. Schemes such as the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC), e-Shram, and Ayushman Bharat have demonstrated the government's commitment to making welfare benefits more accessible to interstate migrant workers. However, these initiatives have also highlighted the complexity of implementing portability in a country characterised by vast regional diversity, varying administrative capacities, and a federal system of governance.

Although considerable progress has been made, welfare portability in India is still evolving. The remaining challenges are not limited to technology or programme

implementation; they are rooted in broader institutional, administrative, and governance issues. Addressing these challenges is essential if portability is to become a meaningful instrument of social inclusion rather than a collection of isolated policy reforms.

One of the most significant obstacles to portable welfare is the fragmented nature of India's social protection system. Welfare programmes have developed over time under different ministries, departments, and state governments, each with its own eligibility criteria, beneficiary database, and implementation mechanism.

As a result, portability has progressed unevenly across sectors. While food security has become more portable through ONORC, other benefits such as housing support, pensions, education, and certain state-sponsored welfare schemes often remain linked to place of residence. This fragmentation creates unnecessary complexity for migrant workers, who may have to navigate multiple administrative systems to access different forms of assistance.

Moving towards a more integrated welfare architecture would not only simplify access for beneficiaries but also improve coordination and efficiency within the public administration.

Unequal Administrative Capacity Across States

India's federal structure gives states considerable responsibility for implementing welfare programmes. However, states differ significantly in terms of administrative capacity, financial resources, digital infrastructure, and institutional preparedness.

These differences influence how effectively portability is implemented on the ground. States with stronger administrative systems are generally better equipped to maintain updated databases, resolve grievances, and integrate digital platforms. In contrast, states with limited institutional capacity may struggle to deliver the same level of service.

Consequently, the experience of welfare portability is not uniform across the country. A migrant worker's ability to access benefits may still depend, to some extent, on the administrative efficiency of the destination state. Strengthening state capacity is therefore an essential component of making portability more equitable.

Digital Inclusion Beyond Digital Infrastructure

Digital technology has become the backbone of India's portability initiatives, but access to technology remains uneven. While digital platforms have improved efficiency and transparency, they have also introduced new forms of exclusion for some groups.

Many migrant workers face practical challenges such as poor internet connectivity, limited digital literacy, language barriers, or difficulties with biometric authentication. These issues are particularly relevant for older workers, women, and those employed in remote or informal settings.

This suggests that digital governance should be complemented by accessible offline support systems. Help centres, multilingual assistance, simplified grievance mechanisms, and community-level facilitation can ensure that technological innovation remains inclusive rather than exclusionary.

Limited Awareness Among Beneficiaries

The effectiveness of any welfare programme depends not only on its design but also on whether eligible individuals are aware of their rights and know how to access available benefits.

Many interstate migrant workers continue to have limited knowledge of portability initiatives, registration procedures, or grievance redressal mechanisms. In the absence of reliable information, they often rely on employers, contractors, or informal social networks, which may not always provide accurate guidance.

Improving awareness through targeted outreach campaigns, collaboration with civil society organisations, trade unions, local governments, and employers can significantly increase the utilisation of existing welfare schemes.

Strengthening Cooperative Federalism

Portable welfare cannot function effectively without sustained cooperation between the Union and state governments. Although digital platforms facilitate information sharing, successful implementation ultimately depends on coordination in areas such as data management, financial arrangements, administrative procedures, and monitoring.

Differences in policy priorities and institutional practices sometimes lead to inconsistencies across states, affecting the quality of service delivery. Strengthening cooperative federalism therefore requires more than technological integration; it requires continuous dialogue, clearly defined responsibilities, and mechanisms for resolving administrative challenges.

Institutional cooperation should be viewed as an ongoing process that supports the long-term sustainability of portable welfare.

The Need for a More Coherent Policy Framework

Current portability initiatives have largely developed on a scheme-by-scheme basis. While this incremental approach has produced notable achievements, it has also resulted in a welfare system that lacks overall coherence.

A more comprehensive policy framework would enable different welfare programmes to function as parts of an integrated social protection system rather than as separate initiatives. Such an approach would reduce duplication, improve coordination, and provide a more seamless experience for beneficiaries.

Developing common standards for data sharing, beneficiary identification, and service delivery would be an important step towards achieving this objective.

Looking Beyond Scheme-Specific Portability

The future of welfare portability lies in expanding the concept beyond individual programmes. Rather than focusing exclusively on food security or labour registration, policymakers should work towards ensuring continuity of welfare across multiple sectors, including healthcare, education, housing, pensions, insurance, and employment services.

An integrated approach would better reflect the realities of migration, where individuals require access to a range of social protections rather than a single welfare benefit. Such

a transition would also strengthen the resilience of India's welfare system in the face of increasing labour mobility and urbanisation.

The analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates that India's portability initiatives have established an important foundation for a more inclusive welfare system. However, achieving meaningful portability requires addressing structural issues that extend beyond the design of individual schemes.

Administrative fragmentation, uneven state capacity, digital exclusion, limited awareness, and gaps in intergovernmental coordination continue to influence the accessibility and effectiveness of welfare programmes. These challenges highlight that portability is fundamentally a question of governance as much as it is of technology.

As India continues to experience large-scale internal migration, future reforms should focus on building an integrated, citizen-centred system of social protection that reflects the realities of a mobile population. Welfare portability should not be viewed simply as an administrative convenience but as an essential element of an inclusive and responsive welfare state capable of ensuring that citizens retain access to basic social rights wherever they live and work.

Policy Recommendations: Building a More Inclusive and Portable Welfare System

The preceding analysis shows that India has made important strides in making social welfare more accessible to interstate migrant workers. Initiatives such as the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC), e-Shram, and Ayushman Bharat have demonstrated that portability is both feasible and necessary in a country characterised by high levels of labour mobility. However, the current framework remains uneven across sectors and states. To realise the full potential of portable welfare, policy reforms must move beyond isolated schemes and focus on creating a more integrated, inclusive, and citizen-centred social protection system.

The recommendations outlined below build upon the challenges identified in the previous chapter and offer a roadmap for strengthening welfare portability within India's federal governance framework.

Move Towards an Integrated Social Protection System

India's welfare programmes have evolved under different ministries and administrative structures, resulting in multiple databases, varying eligibility criteria, and fragmented service delivery. While individual portability initiatives have addressed specific issues, a more integrated approach is now required.

Developing a unified social protection framework that connects food security, healthcare, labour welfare, pensions, insurance, housing, and employment services would simplify access for beneficiaries and improve administrative coordination. Integration would also reduce duplication, strengthen data management, and enhance the overall efficiency of welfare delivery.

Place Citizenship at the Centre of Welfare Delivery

As patterns of internal migration continue to evolve, welfare policies must reflect the constitutional principle that every citizen has equal rights regardless of where they live or

work. Basic social protection should therefore be linked to citizenship rather than administrative residence.

This does not imply reducing the role of state governments. Instead, it calls for a system in which states continue to implement welfare programmes while ensuring that core benefits remain accessible across state boundaries. Such an approach would strengthen both social inclusion and the constitutional promise of equal citizenship.

Deepen Cooperative Federalism

Portable welfare depends on sustained cooperation between the Union and state governments. Digital infrastructure alone cannot ensure seamless access unless it is supported by effective institutional coordination.

Regular intergovernmental consultations, common operational standards, interoperable databases, transparent financial arrangements, and shared monitoring mechanisms would improve consistency in implementation. Strengthening these institutional processes would also help reduce regional disparities in service delivery while respecting the federal distribution of responsibilities.

Expand Portability Across Welfare Sectors

Food security has been the primary focus of portability reforms, but migrant workers require a much broader range of social protections. Healthcare, pensions, labour welfare, housing assistance, education, insurance, and skill development programmes should progressively adopt portability as a guiding principle.

A comprehensive approach would ensure that migrants experience continuity of welfare throughout different stages of their lives rather than receiving portable access to only a limited number of services.

Promote Inclusive Digital Governance

Digital technologies have significantly improved the efficiency of welfare delivery, but their benefits can only be realised if all eligible citizens are able to access them.

Policy efforts should therefore focus not only on expanding digital infrastructure but also on improving digital literacy, strengthening offline support systems, simplifying enrolment procedures, and providing multilingual assistance. Accessible grievance redressal mechanisms should complement digital platforms so that technological innovation enhances, rather than limits, inclusion.

Strengthen Awareness and Community Outreach

Many migrant workers remain unaware of the welfare schemes available to them or the procedures required to access portable benefits. Improving public awareness is therefore as important as improving programme design.

Governments should work closely with local bodies, employers, labour departments, trade unions, civil society organisations, and community groups to disseminate information in multiple languages. Outreach initiatives should focus particularly on sectors with high concentrations of migrant workers, where information gaps are often greatest.

Develop a Coherent Legal Framework for Welfare Portability

Although recent reforms have expanded portability through

executive action and administrative measures, a more comprehensive legal framework would provide greater consistency and long-term stability.

A legislative framework could establish common principles for welfare portability, clarify institutional responsibilities, strengthen accountability, and create uniform grievance redressal mechanisms. Such a framework would reinforce the constitutional values of equality, social justice, and freedom of movement while reducing uncertainty in the implementation of portability initiatives.

Reimagining Welfare in a Mobile Society

The growing scale of internal migration calls for a broader rethinking of welfare governance. Rather than viewing portability as an exception designed specifically for migrant workers, policymakers should recognise mobility as a normal feature of India's economic and social landscape.

This paper therefore argues for a shift towards a mobility-sensitive welfare framework, in which access to essential social protection remains continuous irrespective of geographical movement. Such a perspective reflects the realities of a modern economy, where citizens frequently relocate in search of education, employment, and better opportunities.

Viewing portability through this broader lens encourages policymakers to design welfare systems that are flexible, inclusive, and responsive to changing patterns of mobility.

India has entered an important phase in the evolution of its welfare state. The transition from residence-based entitlements to portable social protection reflects a growing recognition that welfare systems must adapt to the realities of an increasingly mobile population.

Future reforms should therefore focus on strengthening institutional coordination, integrating welfare programmes, improving administrative capacity, and ensuring that digital innovation remains inclusive. A welfare system built on these principles would not only improve the lives of migrant workers but also contribute to a more equitable and resilient model of governance.

Ultimately, the success of welfare portability should be measured not simply by the number of schemes made portable, but by the extent to which every citizen can exercise their social rights without those rights being constrained by administrative boundaries.

Implications for Public Policy

The findings of this paper have several important implications for the future of welfare governance in India. Most importantly, they suggest that internal migration should no longer be viewed as a temporary or exceptional phenomenon. Instead, labour mobility has become an integral part of India's development process, requiring public institutions to adapt accordingly. Welfare policies designed around fixed places of residence are increasingly misaligned with the realities of a mobile workforce.

The analysis also indicates that welfare portability should be regarded as a structural reform of India's social protection system rather than merely an administrative innovation. Initiatives such as the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC), e-Shram, and Ayushman Bharat demonstrate that it is possible to extend welfare benefits across state boundaries through digital integration and institutional

cooperation. However, these initiatives also reveal that portability cannot be achieved through technology alone. Effective implementation depends equally on administrative capacity, policy coordination, and sustained collaboration between the Union and state governments.

From the perspective of public policy, future reforms should move beyond programme-specific portability towards a more integrated approach to social protection. Instead of creating separate mechanisms for individual schemes, policymakers should seek to develop institutional arrangements that allow different welfare programmes to function as part of a coherent system. Such integration would improve administrative efficiency, reduce duplication, and provide a more seamless experience for beneficiaries.

The findings also reinforce the importance of cooperative federalism in welfare governance. As responsibilities for social protection are shared between the Union and the states, portability requires continuous coordination, transparent data-sharing arrangements, and common administrative standards. Strengthening these institutional mechanisms will be essential for ensuring that portability is implemented consistently across different regions of the country.

Another important implication concerns the role of digital public infrastructure. India's experience demonstrates that digital technologies can significantly improve the delivery of welfare services by facilitating beneficiary identification and reducing geographical barriers. Nevertheless, digital systems should complement rather than replace responsive public institutions. Investments in digital infrastructure must therefore be accompanied by measures that improve digital literacy, expand offline support services, strengthen grievance redressal mechanisms, and ensure that vulnerable groups are not excluded from welfare programmes.

Finally, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on migration and social policy by suggesting that welfare systems should increasingly be designed around citizens rather than places of residence. As internal migration continues to expand, portability should become a guiding principle in the formulation of social protection policies. Such an approach would better align welfare governance with constitutional guarantees of equality, freedom of movement, and social justice, while making India's welfare state more responsive to the needs of an increasing

Conclusion

Internal migration has become an increasingly important feature of India's development process, reshaping labour markets, urbanisation, and patterns of economic growth. As millions of people continue to move across state boundaries in search of better opportunities, the relationship between mobility and social protection has emerged as a critical public policy concern. While India's constitutional framework guarantees citizens the freedom to live and work anywhere in the country, the welfare system has historically been organised around administrative boundaries, making access to social protection difficult for many interstate migrant workers.

This paper has examined how recent policy reforms are attempting to address this long-standing challenge through the introduction of welfare portability. It has argued that

portability should be understood not merely as an administrative or technological reform, but as a broader transformation in the way social protection is conceptualised and delivered in a federal democracy. By allowing welfare benefits to accompany citizens across state boundaries, portability represents an important step towards making India's welfare system more responsive to the realities of a mobile workforce.

The analysis shows that initiatives such as the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC), e-Shram, and Ayushman Bharat have significantly expanded the scope of portable social protection. Together, these programmes demonstrate an increasing policy commitment to reducing the barriers that migrant workers face in accessing essential welfare services. At the same time, the paper has shown that portability remains uneven across sectors and continues to be influenced by differences in administrative capacity, institutional coordination, digital access, and public awareness.

A central contribution of this study is its attempt to place welfare portability within the broader frameworks of social citizenship, cooperative federalism, the capability approach, and digital governance. Examining portability through these perspectives shifts the discussion beyond programme implementation and highlights its wider implications for citizenship, equality, and governance. In doing so, the paper argues that the effectiveness of portable welfare depends not only on technological innovation but also on the quality of institutions and the ability of different levels of government to work together.

The findings also suggest that the future of welfare portability lies in greater policy integration. Rather than treating portability as a feature of individual schemes, India needs to move towards a more coherent social protection system in which food security, healthcare, labour welfare, pensions, housing, insurance, and other essential services are designed to support citizens throughout their mobility. Such an approach would better reflect the realities of a rapidly changing economy and reduce the institutional barriers that continue to affect migrant workers.

Although this paper has focused primarily on conceptual and policy analysis based on secondary sources, it also points to several areas for future research. Comparative studies across Indian states could provide valuable insights into how differences in governance and administrative capacity influence the implementation of portability initiatives. Similarly, empirical research based on the experiences of migrant workers would deepen our understanding of how portable welfare functions in practice and identify areas where further policy improvements are needed.

In conclusion, welfare portability represents one of the most significant developments in India's contemporary social policy. It reflects a growing recognition that access to social protection should not be interrupted by geographical mobility. While important progress has already been made, achieving a truly inclusive system will require stronger institutional coordination, continued investment in administrative capacity, greater public awareness, and sustained cooperation between the Union and state governments. As internal migration continues to shape India's social and economic landscape, building a welfare

system that is accessible, portable, and responsive to the needs of mobile citizens will remain an essential priority for both policymakers and scholars.

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