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INCOME AS ENTITLEMENT: UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME, THE DIRECTIVE PRINCIPLES AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE INDIAN WELFARE STATE

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ABSTRACT

The idea that every person should receive a regular, unconditional cash payment from the State, simply by virtue of being a member of the political community, has moved from the margins of political philosophy into mainstream policy debate. In India, the Economic Survey of 2016-17 devoted an entire chapter to universal basic income, a pilot in Madhya Pradesh tested it in villages, and a wave of direct cash transfers to farmers and women by the Union and State governments has made unconditional income support a defining feature of contemporary Indian politics. This paper examines universal basic income from an interdisciplinary perspective that combines political theory, political economy and constitutional law. It traces the intellectual foundations of the idea, from Thomas Paine to Philippe Van Parijs and Amartya Sen, and situates it within the evolution of India's welfare architecture from rights-based programmes for food and work to direct benefit transfers. It reviews the evidence from Indian and international experiments. It then asks whether the Directive Principles of State Policy, read with the expansive interpretation of Article 21, provide a constitutional foundation for a basic income, and examines the constraints imposed by federalism, fiscal capacity, the jurisprudence on electoral freebies and the risks of exclusion through digital identification. The paper argues that a basic income is best understood not as a replacement for India's welfare state but as a constitutional floor beneath it, and proposes a phased model grounded in the Directive Principles.

KEYWORDS

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Abstract

The idea that every person should receive a regular, unconditional cash payment from the State, simply by virtue of being a member of the political community, has moved from the margins of political philosophy into mainstream policy debate. In India, the Economic Survey of 2016-17 devoted an entire chapter to universal basic income, a pilot in Madhya Pradesh tested it in villages, and a wave of direct cash transfers to farmers and women by the Union and State governments has made unconditional income support a defining feature of contemporary Indian politics. This paper examines universal basic income from an interdisciplinary perspective that combines political theory, political economy and constitutional law. It traces the intellectual foundations of the idea, from Thomas Paine to Philippe Van Parijs and Amartya Sen, and situates it within the evolution of India's welfare architecture from rights-based programmes for food and work to direct benefit transfers. It reviews the evidence from Indian and international experiments. It then asks whether the Directive Principles of State Policy, read with the expansive interpretation of Article 21, provide a constitutional foundation for a basic income, and examines the constraints imposed by federalism, fiscal capacity, the jurisprudence on electoral freebies and the risks of exclusion through digital identification. The paper argues that a basic income is best understood not as a replacement for India's welfare state but as a constitutional floor beneath it, and proposes a phased model grounded in the Directive Principles.

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1. Introduction

When the framers of the Indian Constitution set out the goals of the new Republic, they did not stop at guaranteeing liberties that the State must respect. In Part IV, they set out a list of duties that the State must strive to fulfil: securing an adequate means of livelihood for all citizens, preventing the concentration of wealth, and making effective provision for public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement. These Directive Principles of State Policy were declared to be fundamental in the governance of the country, though not enforceable in any court. More than seventy-five years later, the question of how the State should fulfil these duties remains open, and one of the most ambitious answers on offer is the idea of a universal basic income.

In its purest form, a universal basic income is a periodic cash payment made by the State to every individual, without any means test and without any requirement to work. The idea is radical in its simplicity. Instead of designing hundreds of schemes, each with its own eligibility rules and delivery system, the State would simply give every person enough money to secure a basic minimum, trusting them to decide how to use it. In India, this idea attracted official attention when the Economic Survey of 2016-17 presented a detailed case for it, and it has since been echoed in a range of cash transfer schemes run by the Union and State governments.

This paper approaches universal basic income from three directions at once. As a matter of political theory, it asks what justifies the idea and what conception of citizenship it embodies. As a matter of political economy, it asks how cash transfers have reshaped the Indian welfare state and the relationship between voters and parties. As a matter of constitutional law, it asks whether the Directive Principles and the jurisprudence on Article 21 provide a foundation for a basic income, and what limits the Constitution places on it. The argument is that a basic income, properly designed, would give concrete form to the welfare vision of Part IV, but that it must complement rather than replace the rights-based programmes that India has built over the last two decades.

Part 2 traces the intellectual foundations of basic income. Part 3 examines the evolution of India's welfare architecture, including the lessons of the pandemic. Part 4 reviews the evidence from experiments in India and abroad. Part 5 analyses the constitutional foundations, and Part 6 the constitutional and political constraints. Part 7 engages with the principal objections, Part 8 proposes an Indian model and Part 9 concludes.

2. The Idea of a Basic Income: Origins and Justifications

2.1 From Agrarian Justice to Real Freedom

The idea of an unconditional income has a long history. Writing at the end of the eighteenth century, Thomas Paine argued that because the earth was originally the common property of humanity, those who had been dispossessed by the system of private landed property were entitled to compensation in the form of a capital sum at adulthood and an annual pension in old age, paid out of a national fund financed by a tax on inheritance.[1] Paine's argument was framed not as charity but as a matter of justice: a share of the common inheritance owed to every person.

The most influential modern philosophical defence comes from Philippe Van Parijs, who argued that a just society should maximise the real freedom of its least advantaged members, meaning not merely the formal right to do what one wishes but the actual means to do it. An unconditional basic income, set at the highest sustainable level, was in his view the policy best suited to that goal.[2] In later work with Yannick Vanderborght, he set out the practical case for basic income in contemporary economies and responded to the main objections, particularly the concern that it would reward idleness.[3]

2.2 Capabilities and Development

A different but related justification comes from Amartya Sen's capability approach. Sen argued that development should be understood as the expansion of the real freedoms that people enjoy, and that poverty is best seen as a deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely a shortfall of income.[4] The capability approach does not lead straightforwardly to a basic income. Sen himself has emphasised that income is only one means to capability, and that public provision of education, health care and nutrition is often more effective in expanding the freedoms of the poor. But the approach supplies a vocabulary for evaluating any welfare policy: the question is not only how much money people receive, but what they are able to do and to be as a result.

2.3 The Precariat and Changing Work

A third strand of argument concerns the changing nature of work. Guy Standing has described the emergence of a "precariat", a growing class of people in insecure, short-term and informal work, without the protections associated with stable employment.[5] For such

[1] Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice* (1797).
[2] Philippe Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All: What (If Anything) Can Justify Capitalism?* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995).
[3] Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2017).
[4] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999).
[5] Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2011).

workers, welfare systems built around formal employment offer little protection. In India, where the great majority of workers have always been in the informal sector, this argument has particular force. A basic income detached from employment status would reach workers whom labour law has historically failed to protect. Concerns about automation and artificial intelligence have added a further dimension to this debate, though its relevance to India's labour-abundant economy is contested.

3. India's Welfare Architecture: From Rations to Transfers

3.1 The Rights-Based Turn

For much of the period after independence, Indian welfare policy relied on subsidised goods and services: food grains through the public distribution system, subsidised fertiliser and fuel, and a large number of targeted schemes. In the 2000s, India's welfare policy took a distinctive rights-based turn. Prompted in part by public interest litigation on the right to food, in which the Supreme Court issued a series of interim orders converting welfare schemes into legal entitlements,[6] Parliament enacted statutes guaranteeing work and food. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 guarantees one hundred days of wage employment a year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer for unskilled manual work,[7] and the National Food Security Act, 2013 provides legal entitlements to subsidised food grains for a large proportion of the population.[8]

Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen have described these developments as part of a broader effort to address India's long neglect of basic public services and social support, which they argue explains why India lagged behind countries with lower incomes on many indicators of human development.[9] The rights-based programmes are significant for this paper because they established the principle that the State's welfare obligations can be given legal form and made enforceable by citizens.

3.2 The Rise of Direct Benefit Transfers

The second major shift has been towards direct cash transfers. As early as 2008, economists argued that cash transfers to the poor could reduce the leakages and administrative costs that plagued in-kind subsidies.[10] The expansion of bank accounts, the Aadhaar biometric identification system and mobile telephony created what the Economic Survey of 2014-15 called the "JAM trinity", a platform that could deliver transfers directly to beneficiaries.[11] The

[6] *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, Writ Petition (Civil) No. 196 of 2001, Supreme Court of India (interim orders).
[7] The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (Act 42 of 2005).
[8] The National Food Security Act, 2013 (Act 20 of 2013).
[9] Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions* (Allen Lane, London, 2013).
[10] Devesh Kapur, Partha Mukhopadhyay and Arvind Subramanian, "The Case for Direct Cash Transfers to the Poor" 43(15) *Economic and Political Weekly* (2008).
[11] Ministry of Finance, Government of India, *Economic Survey 2014-15*, Vol. I, ch. 3 (New Delhi, 2015).

Aadhaar Act, 2016 provided a statutory basis for requiring authentication as a condition for receiving subsidies, benefits and services financed from the Consolidated Fund of India.[12]

3.3 The Emergence of Quasi-Basic Incomes

Building on this infrastructure, governments at both levels have introduced schemes that resemble basic income in important respects. Telangana's Rythu Bandhu scheme, launched in 2018, provided investment support to farmers per acre of land owned, without conditions on its use. Odisha's KALIA scheme extended support to small farmers and landless agricultural households. At the national level, the PM-KISAN scheme introduced in 2019 provides income support of six thousand rupees a year to eligible farmer families, paid directly into their bank accounts. More recently, several States have introduced monthly cash transfers to women, such as Madhya Pradesh's Ladli Behna Yojana and Maharashtra's Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana.

These schemes are not universal basic incomes in the strict sense. They are targeted at particular groups, often exclude the landless or the urban poor, and depend on executive policy rather than legal entitlement. But they share two important features of basic income: payments are made in cash and are largely unconditional in their use. They also demonstrate that the Indian State now has the administrative capacity to make regular cash payments to tens of millions of people, which was the principal practical objection to basic income only a decade ago.

3.4 The Pandemic as a Turning Point

The COVID-19 pandemic tested India's welfare system as never before. When the national lockdown was imposed in March 2020, millions of informal workers lost their incomes overnight, and the plight of migrant workers walking home from the cities exposed how thin the safety net was for those outside formal employment. The Union government responded with a relief package under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, which included free food grains through the public distribution system and cash transfers of five hundred rupees a month for three months to women holding Jan Dhan bank accounts.[13] The episode revealed two things at once. It showed that the State could deliver emergency cash to a very large number of people within days, using the infrastructure built over the previous decade. It also showed the limits of a system in which support depends on being enrolled in the right scheme, holding the right account or living in the right State. Many of those in greatest need, particularly migrant workers away from their home States, struggled to access benefits tied to

[12] The Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and Other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Act, 2016 (Act 18 of 2016), s. 7.

[13] Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Finance, "Finance Minister Announces Rs 1.70 Lakh Crore Relief Package under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana for the Poor to Help Them Fight the Battle against Corona Virus" (Mar. 26, 2020).

their place of registration. The pandemic thus strengthened the case for a universal floor of income security that does not depend on prior enrolment in particular programmes.

4. The Evidence: Experiments in India and Abroad

4.1 The Madhya Pradesh Pilot

India's most important experiment with basic income took place in Madhya Pradesh between 2011 and 2013. Organised by the Self Employed Women's Association with the support of UNICEF, the pilot provided small unconditional monthly payments to every man, woman and child in a group of villages, and compared outcomes with similar villages that did not receive payments. The researchers reported improvements in nutrition, health, school attendance and economic activity, along with a reduction in debt, and found no evidence that the payments were wasted on alcohol or other harmful spending. They also observed that the benefits were often greatest for women and for marginalised groups.[14] The pilot was small and its results cannot be extrapolated simply to the national level, but it challenged the common assumption that poor households cannot be trusted with unconditional cash.

4.2 The Economic Survey of 2016-17

The Economic Survey of 2016-17 took the debate to the highest level of government. Its chapter on universal basic income, subtitled "A Conversation With and Within the Mahatma", argued that a basic income could promote social justice, reduce poverty, improve the efficiency of welfare spending and respect the agency of the poor. It estimated that providing about seven thousand six hundred rupees a year to seventy-five per cent of the population would cost roughly 4.9 per cent of GDP, and suggested that such a scheme could be partly financed by phasing out existing subsidies and schemes.[15] The Survey candidly acknowledged the obstacles, including the political difficulty of withdrawing existing benefits, the risk of exclusion through flawed identification and the fiscal cost. Its decision to propose a "quasi-universal" scheme covering three-quarters of the population revealed the tension between the ideal of universality and the constraints of public finance.

4.3 International Experiments

Experiments abroad add to the evidence. In Kenya, a large randomised study of a long-term universal basic income found positive effects on economic activity and household welfare, with no evidence of reduced work effort, and suggested that the design of payments, whether as regular monthly amounts or lump sums, shapes their effects.[16] In Finland, a two-year

[14] Sarath Davala, Renana Jhabvala, Soumya Kapoor Mehta and Guy Standing, *Basic Income: A Transformative Policy for India* (Bloomsbury, London, 2015).

[15] Ministry of Finance, Government of India, *Economic Survey 2016-17*, ch. 9, "Universal Basic Income: A Conversation With and Within the Mahatma" (New Delhi, 2017).

[16] Abhijit Banerjee, Michael Faye, Alan Krueger, Paul Niehaus and Tavneet Suri, "Universal Basic Income: Short-Term Results from a Long-Term Experiment in Kenya" (Working Paper, 2023).

experiment that paid an unconditional monthly amount to unemployed people found small effects on employment but notable improvements in well-being, trust and confidence in the future.[17] In the United States, the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend, which has paid an annual dividend to every resident from oil revenues since 1982, has been studied extensively, and research has found that it did not reduce overall employment.[18] None of these experiments can be transplanted directly to India, but together they weaken the claim that unconditional income necessarily discourages work.

5. The Constitutional Foundations of a Basic Income

5.1 The Directive Principles

The Directive Principles provide the clearest constitutional foundation for a basic income. Article 38 directs the State to secure a social order in which social, economic and political justice informs all institutions of national life and to minimise inequalities in income. Article 39(a) requires the State to direct its policy towards securing that citizens have the right to an adequate means of livelihood. Article 41 requires the State, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, to make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement. Article 43 speaks of securing to all workers a living wage and conditions of work ensuring a decent standard of life.[19] Article 37 declares these principles to be fundamental in the governance of the country and imposes on the State a duty to apply them in making laws.

A basic income could be understood as a direct means of fulfilling the duty in Article 39(a) to secure an adequate means of livelihood and the duty in Article 41 to provide public assistance. The qualification in Article 41, which ties the duty to the State's economic capacity, is significant. It recognises that the level of support the State can offer depends on its resources, which is precisely the question at the heart of the basic income debate.

The framers were clear about the purpose of these principles. In the Constituent Assembly, B.R. Ambedkar described the Directive Principles as an instrument of instructions to future governments, and emphasised that although they were not enforceable in courts, any government would have to answer for its record in fulfilling them before the electorate.[20] Granville Austin, in his classic study of the Constitution, described the Directive Principles

[17] Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland, *The Basic Income Experiment 2017–2018 in Finland: Preliminary Results* (Helsinki, 2019).
[18] Damon Jones and Ioana Marinescu, "The Labor Market Impacts of Universal and Permanent Cash Transfers: Evidence from the Alaska Permanent Fund" 14 *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 315 (2022).
[19] The Constitution of India, arts. 37, 38, 39(a), 41 and 43.
[20] Constituent Assembly Debates, Vol. VII (Nov. 19, 1948) (statement of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar).

and the Fundamental Rights together as the conscience of the Constitution, expressing a commitment to social revolution.[21]

5.2 From Subordination to Harmony

The judicial treatment of the Directive Principles has changed markedly over time. In *State of Madras v. Champakam Dorairajan*, decided soon after the Constitution came into force, the Supreme Court held that the Directive Principles must conform to and run subsidiary to the Fundamental Rights.[22] Over the following decades, this position gave way to a view of the two Parts as complementary. In *Kesavananda Bharati*, several judges emphasised the importance of the Directive Principles in the constitutional scheme,[23] and in *Minerva Mills*, the Court held that the Constitution is founded on the bedrock of the balance between Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles, and that harmony between them is an essential feature of the basic structure.[24]

5.3 Article 21 and the Right to Livelihood

The most important development has been the use of the Directive Principles to give content to Article 21. In *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation*, the Supreme Court held that the right to life includes the right to livelihood, reasoning that no person can live without the means of living, and drew support from Articles 39(a) and 41.[25] In *Unni Krishnan*, the Court relied on Article 41 to hold that the right to education flows from Article 21, within the limits of the State's economic capacity.[26] In *Paschim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samity*, it held that the failure of government hospitals to provide timely emergency treatment violated Article 21, and that financial constraints could not justify the State's failure to discharge this constitutional obligation.[27]

5.4 Is There a Constitutional Right to a Basic Income?

Do these developments mean that there is a justiciable constitutional right to a basic income? The honest answer is no, at least not at present. The courts have recognised the right to livelihood, but they have not held that the State must guarantee a minimum income to every person, and it would be a large step for a court to order the creation of such a scheme. The design of a basic income involves choices about amounts, coverage and financing that are quintessentially matters for the legislature and the executive. The qualification in Article 41 that the State's duty operates within the limits of its economic capacity and development also

[21] Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1966).
[22] *State of Madras v. Champakam Dorairajan*, AIR 1951 SC 226.
[23] *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973) 4 SCC 225.
[24] *Minerva Mills Ltd. v. Union of India* (1980) 3 SCC 625.
[25] *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation* (1985) 3 SCC 545.
[26] *Unni Krishnan, J.P. v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1993) 1 SCC 645.
[27] *Paschim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samity v. State of West Bengal* (1996) 4 SCC 37.

cuts both ways. It recognises fiscal constraints, but it also implies that as India's economy grows, the State's capacity, and therefore its obligation, to provide public assistance grows with it. An economy that is now among the largest in the world can no longer plausibly treat basic income security as beyond its means. The Directive Principles therefore operate here in the way the framers intended: as a source of obligation that governments must honour through policy, and as a standard by which voters and courts can assess the State's record. What the jurisprudence does establish is that once the State creates welfare entitlements, it must administer them fairly and cannot arbitrarily withdraw or deny them, and that the State's welfare duties are not mere acts of grace but expressions of constitutional purpose.

6. Constitutional and Political Constraints

6.1 Federalism and Fiscal Capacity

A basic income in India would have to operate within a federal structure. Social security and social insurance, and welfare of labour, are subjects in the Concurrent List, which allows both Parliament and the State legislatures to legislate on them.[28] In practice, the fiscal capacity to fund a large transfer lies predominantly with the Union, while the administrative capacity to identify beneficiaries and deliver services lies largely with the States. The proliferation of State-level cash transfer schemes shows the risk of a fragmented system, in which a person's entitlement depends on the State in which they live and on the electoral calculations of its government.

Fiscal discipline is also a constitutional and statutory concern. The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, 2003 commits the Union government to targets for reducing deficits and debt.[29] A basic income on the scale contemplated by the Economic Survey would require either substantial new revenue or the withdrawal of existing subsidies, both of which are politically difficult. Any serious proposal must therefore be accompanied by a credible financing plan.

6.2 Freebies and the Electoral Process

Cash transfers have become central to electoral politics, and this has raised constitutional questions. In *S. Subramaniam Balaji v. State of Tamil Nadu*, the Supreme Court held that promises of distributing goods in election manifestos did not amount to corrupt practices under the election law, because the implementation of such schemes in accordance with the Directive Principles fell within the domain of State policy. The Court nonetheless recognised that such promises could influence voters and directed the Election Commission to frame guidelines on the contents of manifestos.[30] The Court's reasoning is significant for basic

[28] The Constitution of India, Seventh Schedule, List III, Entries 23 and 24.
[29] The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, 2003 (Act 39 of 2003).
[30] *S. Subramaniam Balaji v. State of Tamil Nadu* (2013) 9 SCC 659.

income. It accepts that welfare transfers are legitimate expressions of the Directive Principles, while recognising the danger that they become instruments of electoral competition rather than of social justice.

From the perspective of political science, this tension is central. A transfer introduced shortly before an election, at the discretion of the ruling party, and without statutory backing, may function as a form of patronage, binding voters to particular leaders. A transfer established by law, with clear criteria and a guarantee of continuity regardless of which party is in power, functions instead as a right of citizenship. The difference lies not in the amount of money but in the legal and political form of the entitlement. The sociologist T.H. Marshall famously described the development of citizenship in three stages: civil rights, which secured individual liberty; political rights, which secured participation in the exercise of power; and social rights, which secured a share in economic welfare and the right to live according to the standards prevailing in society.[31] On this account, social rights are not gifts from the State but part of what it means to be a full member of the political community. A basic income established by law would be a clear instance of social citizenship in Marshall's sense. A transfer that depends on the goodwill of the ruling party would not, however generous it might be.

6.3 Identification, Exclusion and Privacy

The delivery of transfers through Aadhaar-based systems raises further concerns. In the Aadhaar judgment, the Supreme Court upheld the use of Aadhaar authentication for the delivery of subsidies and benefits under section 7 of the Aadhaar Act, while striking down or reading down several other provisions and emphasising that no person should be denied a benefit because of failure of authentication.[32] Experience with welfare delivery has shown that failures of biometric authentication, errors in databases and problems with bank access can exclude the very people a scheme is meant to help. A basic income, precisely because it is meant to reach everyone, must be designed with robust alternatives to biometric authentication and accessible grievance redress.

6.4 Inflation and the Value of Transfers

A further practical constraint concerns the real value of cash. One of the advantages of in-kind provision, such as subsidised food grains, is that it protects recipients against rising prices: a household entitled to a fixed quantity of grain receives that grain regardless of what happens to market prices. A fixed cash payment, by contrast, loses value with inflation unless it is regularly revised. Many existing cash transfer schemes in India have fixed nominal

[31] T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1950).
[32] *K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* (2019) 1 SCC 1.

amounts that are revised only occasionally and at the discretion of the government. A basic income worthy of the name would need an automatic mechanism for indexing payments to prices, established by law rather than left to political discretion. Without such a mechanism, a basic income could quietly erode over time, transferring risk from the State to the poorest households precisely when prices rise fastest.

7. The Principal Objections

7.1 Universality versus Targeting

The strongest objections to basic income in India come not from opponents of welfare but from some of its most committed advocates. Jean Drèze has argued that a universal basic income, if financed by dismantling existing programmes such as the public distribution system and employment guarantee, could leave the poor worse off, because those programmes provide protection against inflation and have proven effective in reaching vulnerable groups.[33] He and others have also warned that the fiscal cost of a meaningful universal income would crowd out spending on health, education and nutrition, which do more to expand capabilities than modest cash payments.

Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, while sympathetic to unconditional transfers, proposed for India a more modest "ultra basic income", a small universal payment intended as a safety net rather than a full replacement for earnings, financed in part by eliminating certain subsidies.[34] Their approach reflects a pragmatic middle ground: universality as a design principle to avoid the errors and stigma of targeting, but at a level that does not require dismantling public services.

7.2 Work, Dignity and Gender

A second objection is moral: that paying people without requiring work undermines the dignity of labour and encourages dependence. The evidence reviewed above does not support the fear that basic income significantly reduces work. Moreover, much of the most valuable work in Indian society, particularly care work performed by women, is unpaid and unrecognised. A basic income paid to each individual, rather than to the household head, would give women an independent source of income and recognise the value of work that markets ignore. This feminist argument connects basic income to the constitutional commitment to equality and to the Directive Principle that men and women equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood.

[33] Jean Drèze, *Sense and Solidarity: Jholawala Economics for Everyone* (Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2017).
[34] Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Good Economics for Hard Times* (Juggernaut Books, New Delhi, 2019).

7.3 International Standards

India's international commitments point in the same direction. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognises the right of everyone to social security,[35] and the International Labour Organization has recommended that States establish social protection floors guaranteeing at least basic income security throughout the life cycle.[36] These standards do not require a universal basic income specifically, but they establish basic income security as a goal that States should pursue progressively.

7.4 Cash, Kind and the Question of Agency

Underlying the debate between cash and in-kind support is a deeper question about agency. In-kind provision reflects a judgement by the State about what the poor need: grain rather than money, a school rather than a stipend. Cash transfers reflect a different judgement: that people are generally the best judges of their own needs, and that respecting their choices is itself part of treating them with dignity. Neither view is entirely right. Some goods, such as public health, basic education and sanitation, are better provided collectively because markets supply them poorly or not at all. Other needs vary so much from one household to another that only cash allows people to meet them. The strength of a basic income lies precisely in its respect for individual agency, and its proper place is alongside, not instead of, the public goods that only the State can provide well. Seen in this light, the debate is less a choice between cash and kind than a question of the right balance between them.

8. Towards an Indian Model: Recommendations

First, India should adopt a statutory framework for basic income security, enacted by Parliament with reference to Articles 38, 39(a) and 41. Placing income support on a statutory footing would convert discretionary schemes into legal entitlements, protect them from the electoral cycle and make them accountable through grievance redress and judicial review.

Second, a basic income should be introduced as a floor beneath existing rights-based programmes, not as a replacement for them. The public distribution system, the employment guarantee and public spending on health and education should be preserved. Subsidies that disproportionately benefit better-off households, rather than these core programmes, should be the first candidates for redirection.

Third, implementation should be phased. A sensible starting point would be a universal payment to particular groups whose need is clear and whose identification is relatively straightforward, such as women, older persons and persons with disabilities, before extending

[35] International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966, art. 9.
[36] International Labour Organization, *Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202)*.

coverage. Payments to women should be made in their own names and into their own accounts.

Fourth, the Union and States should coordinate through a cooperative federal framework, with the Union providing a common base payment financed from central revenues and States free to supplement it. This would reduce fragmentation and ensure a basic minimum regardless of where a person lives.

Fifth, delivery systems must be designed to minimise exclusion. No person should be denied a payment because of an authentication failure, alternative means of verification should be available, and an independent grievance mechanism should be established with power to order payment of arrears.

Finally, the scheme should be evaluated rigorously and transparently, with data published regularly so that its effects on poverty, work, health and gender equality can be assessed and the design improved over time.

9. Conclusion

The idea of a universal basic income asks a fundamental question about the relationship between the citizen and the State: is a minimum share of the nation's resources a privilege granted at the discretion of those in power, or an entitlement that belongs to every member of the political community? The framers of the Indian Constitution gave a clear answer in principle. Through the Directive Principles, they committed the State to securing an adequate means of livelihood for all, minimising inequalities of income and providing public assistance to those in need. The Supreme Court has drawn on these principles to give content to the right to life, recognising that life without the means of living is not life in any meaningful sense.

India has also come a long way in practice. It has built rights-based programmes for food and work, an administrative infrastructure capable of making direct payments to hundreds of millions of people, and a range of cash transfer schemes that approach basic income in form. What remains is to give these developments coherence and constitutional grounding. A basic income that sits beneath, rather than in place of, India's welfare programmes, that is established by law rather than announced on the eve of elections, and that is paid to individuals as a matter of right, would transform cash transfers from instruments of patronage into expressions of social citizenship.

Such a reform would not be costless, and it would require difficult choices about financing and design. But it would also honour a promise made at the founding of the Republic. In Ambedkar's terms, the Directive Principles were instructions to future governments. A

carefully designed basic income would be one way for the Indian State, at last, to follow them.