TAKING IDEAS AND DISCOURSES SERIOUSLY: A DISCURSIVE INSTITUTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL PROTECTION POLICY IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Roti, kapda, makaan; *bijli, sadak, paani*; and *shiksha, swaasthya, suraksha*. These familiar phrases in public policy discourse have long set the standard for what social protection means in the Indian context. While these ideas have remained stable in their normative orientation, their meanings and policy expressions have evolved significantly over time. This paper argues that institutional stability and change in social protection policy in India are best explained through the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse. However, traditional institutionalist theories, whether rational choice, sociological, or historical, tend to underplay the role of ideas and discourse as drivers of institutional stability and change. This paper therefore turns to Discursive Institutionalism, the fourth and most recent variant of New Institutionalism conceptualised by Vivien Schmidt, to examine how ideas and discourse interact to shape social protection policy in India. The analysis finds that together, the three trinities reveal a progressive reorientation in the conception of social protection in India: from provision, to building, to enabling. Their persistence across decades of political and institutional change is evidence not of institutional inertia but of the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse: as the normative implication of these ideas is made explicit and institutionally embedded over time, these ideas define what is expected, what is legitimate, and what is possible in public policy.

1. Introduction

Among the many definitions of public policy [see (Cairney, 2011) for a review], Thomas Dye's (1992) articulation remains unrivalled in concision: whatever governments choose to do or not to do. The government, one of the four foundational components of the nation-state (alongside population, territory, and sovereignty), reflects the will of the state and acts as a visible instrument of its power. Most importantly, it serves as a bridge between the citizens' aspirations and the state's authority. The outcome of this interaction between the citizens and the state is 'public policy', a key mechanism through which governments translate authority into legitimacy, making state power meaningful in the everyday lives of its citizens. At its core, public policy has always been about governance (Chakrabarti & Sanyal, 2017).

To understand how the state exercises its will through the government, it is useful to look at public policy using an institutional lens. There is plenty of literature, across both economics and political economy, that argues that behind every *choice* made and *action* taken in public policy, the state defers to political intent, bureaucratic strategy, as well as lessons from social and cultural history. The state possesses 'institutional capacities' that encompass, on one hand, the *functions* that institutions should have the *competence to perform*, and on the other, the *resources* and *structures* they need to *perform those functions* (Bhagavan & Virgin, 2004).

A critical test of the state's institutional capacity is its ability to deliver social protection through public policy. This becomes particularly salient in the context of the Indian nation-state, where competing visions of development in the 21st century intersect with traces of a tragic imperial legacy. As Tirthankar Roy (2018) reminds us, India's developmental trajectory has been deeply conditioned by historical constraints on state capacity, which continue to shape how governments approach redistribution and welfare. On one hand, the state must demonstrate the *competence to deliver* social protection (such as designing, implementing, and monitoring social protection programs) effectively; on the other, it requires the necessary *resources* and *structures* (including financial, procedural, and administrative) to *implement* social protection programs reliably across diverse regions and populations. However, behind every *choice* and *action*, there also lies a deeper struggle- one that reflects not only the institutional capacities of the state, but also its conviction. This conviction draws its strength from the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse in public policy.

The study of public policy, particularly in the sphere of social protection, offers fertile ground for a discursive interpretation: one that looks beyond institutional logic and material interests. Traditional institutionalist theories have made immense contributions to the study of stability and path dependence of institutions; however, these perspectives are often better at explaining continuity rather than change. As a result, they tend to underplay the role of ideas and discourses as drivers of institutional stability and change. But the government is more than just a "state machinery where policy is determined, affairs are regulated, or interests are promoted" (Garner, 1928). It is therefore necessary to shift the focus of the study of public policy to recognise that governance is not purely logical or objective, but rather, persuasive. A public policy investigation of social protection should not only be concerned with the technocratic questions of resource allocation or institutional design but also ask the rhetorical questions of *ethos* (credibility) and *pathos* (emotion) in addition to *logos* (logic).

This paper, therefore, turns to Discursive Institutionalism (DI), a relatively new branch of New Institutionalism, to examine how ideas and discourse interact to shape institutional stability and change in social protection policy in India. DI offers two powerful conceptual tools: the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse. It asks not just what

institutions and policies for social protection are or how they function, but also how their ideas have evolved and how they are being communicated in public policy discourse. In a policy landscape like India's, where activism, electoral politics, bureaucratic negotiation, and constitutional ideals constantly interact, such an approach offers a unique perspective that focuses on the public policy processes that stabilise and shape institutions. It allows us to treat social protection not just as state-sponsored redistributive justice in pursuit of development goals, but as an outcome of evolving ideas and interactive discursive processes mediated by various actors, from grassroots activists to high-ranking technocrats.

In this paper, I study the social protection discourse in India and find that public policy debates have long revolved around a set of enduring welfare ideas that articulate the state's commitments to citizens' well-being and dignity. While these ideas have remained stable in their normative orientation, their meanings and policy expressions have evolved over time through interaction across the policy and political domains of discourse. This paper examines three such ideas that have shaped social protection discourse in India: *roti, kapda, makaan; bijli, sadak, paani; and shiksha, swaasthya, suraksha*. Each represents a distinct endowment necessary for the well-being and long-term development of the nation-state and its populace, corresponding broadly to personal capital, physical capital, and human capital, respectively. The paper argues that the persistence and transformation of these ideas demonstrate how institutional stability and change in social protection policy are shaped through the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 presents a brief history of New Institutionalism and situates Discursive Institutionalism within this broader intellectual tradition. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework by outlining the core components of Discursive Institutionalism, including the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse. Section 4 applies this framework to the Indian context by analysing the evolution of three enduring ideas in social protection discourse and discussing how their meanings and policy expressions have evolved across the policy and political domains. Lastly, Section 5 draws on the analysis in Section 4 to discuss how the three trinities, taken together, illustrate the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse in shaping institutional stability and change in social protection policy in India.

2. A brief history of New Institutionalism

The term 'New' Institutionalism assumes an older institutional tradition. Around the turn of the 20th century, scholars such as Thorstein Veblen and John R. Commons illustrated how economic action is embedded in social, legal, and cultural structures. Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) and *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (1904) present an evolutionary view of economic behaviour driven by habits of thought and social norms. Commons, in *Legal Foundations of Capitalism* (1924) and *Institutional Economics* (1934), emphasises the importance of working rules, institutions as collective action, and market transactions that are legitimised through legally institutionalised practice. In sociology, Max Weber (reviewed in 1978, 2013) developed a historical framework for analysing law, bureaucracy, and economic action, highlighting how authority and legitimacy shape institutional stability and change. Together, these contributions formed what later came to be called 'Old' institutionalism (OI): a tradition rooted in culture, history, and collective experiences to explain economic, social, and political realities (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Hodgson, 2000; Scott, 2007).

This earlier institutionalism, however, was gradually overshadowed by the rise of neoclassical economics, which formalised individual rational choice into mathematics-based 'models'. Hodgson (2000) and Hall & Taylor (1996) noted that institutionalism in economics was marginalised by neoclassicals, not because it lacked insight, but because the profession increasingly valued technical rigour and predictive elegance over historically grounded, institutionally rich explanations of economic, social, and political reality. Notably, one of the earliest, and arguably the most influential challenge to the neoclassical perspective came from Ronald Coase. In *The Nature of the Firm* (1937) and *The Problem of Social Cost* (1960), Coase questioned the assumptions of costless transactions and perfect information. He argued that the existence of transaction costs, such as bargaining, enforcement, and information costs, necessitated the creation of firms and legal structures to manage these costs effectively. By highlighting the importance of these hidden frictions, Coase laid the foundation for a more institutionally grounded understanding of market behaviour. Building on this insight, Oliver Williamson (1981) formalised the concept of transaction costs and extended it to explain organisational behaviour, thereby advancing what came to be known as New Institutional Economics. This was followed by Douglas North (1990), who further expanded on this framework by applying it to the study of long-term economic development. While Coase focused on firms, North examined how societies develop institutions to reduce transaction costs at a macro level. He made a critical distinction between formal institutions such as constitutions, laws, and property rights, and informal institutions, including customs, norms, and conventions. According to North, the quality and adaptability of institutions influence economic performance by reducing uncertainty and facilitating cooperation. His work fundamentally reshaped the study of economic history and became a cornerstone of the New Institutional Economics tradition.

In more recent scholarship, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson have revitalised institutional theory through a political economy lens. In *Why Nations Fail* (2012), they argue that inclusive institutions, that is, those that promote participation, secure property rights, and uphold the rule of law, enable sustained economic growth. In contrast, extractive institutions, that is, those that concentrate power and wealth, lead to stagnation. Their historical case studies demonstrate how institutional configurations shape development trajectories, offering compelling evidence of institutions' centrality in shaping long-term economic and political outcomes.

Therefore, it becomes clear that 'New' Institutionalism (NI) emerged in the mid-20th century as a critique of neoclassical approaches in the social sciences, particularly economics and political science, which tended to overemphasise individual rationality while downplaying the structural and historical role of institutions in shaping human behaviour. It builds on the ideas of both OI and neoclassical economics by taking a broader, analytical approach that accounts for both formal and informal institutions. Over time, the NI tradition has incorporated distinct perspectives on how institutions shape and are shaped by human behaviour. Hall & Taylor (1996) distinguish between three such strands of institutionalism: rational choice institutionalism, which emphasises strategic action within rules; sociological institutionalism, which focuses on norms and legitimacy; and historical institutionalism, which stresses path dependence and critical junctures. Taken together, they form a layered set of perspectives that move from rules and strategies to cultural contexts and finally to historical trajectories. These are discussed below.

Rational Choice Institutionalism (RI) is similar to a neoclassical approach, wherein it assumes that individuals are rational actors with fixed preferences, seeking to maximise their utility through strategic calculation. Rooted in economics and game theory, it views institutions as external sets of rules that lower transaction costs, provide information, and create incentives for cooperation. In this view, institutions act as the 'rules of the game', structuring but not fundamentally altering the actors who play it. While RI is powerful in explaining why rational actors might design and

uphold institutions, it risks reducing them to nothing more than instruments that facilitate efficient strategic behaviour. It therefore struggles to account for why rules persist when they are inefficient, or why people comply with them even when self-interest might suggest otherwise.

Sociological Institutionalism (SI) broadens the lens by embedding institutions inside wider social and cultural contexts. Instead of assuming that actors are rational and preferences are fixed, SI argues that institutions help shape and constitute those very individual identities and preferences. Compliance is not only a matter of rational calculation but also of following what appears appropriate according to established norms. SI emphasises how actors follow norms and rules based on symbolic gestures rather than being driven by purely utilitarian motivations. This approach, therefore, adds a cultural dimension missing from RI: it explains how institutions endure not only through incentives but also by providing shared meanings, reinforcing identities, and defining standards of behaviour that stretch beyond cost-benefit analyses.

Historical Institutionalism (HI) expands the perspective further by placing institutions within the flow of time. Whereas RI emphasises strategic design and SI stresses cultural context, HI highlights how institutions are the sedimented product of historical struggles, compromises, and contingent decisions. Central to this view are two ideas: 'path dependence', wherein, a path once chosen becomes increasingly difficult to reverse with the passage of time, and 'critical junctures', which are moments when existing paths can be disrupted and new institutional orders established. In this sense, HI adds a temporal dimension: it shows not only that institutions embody cultural meanings but also that they bear the imprint of the political and historical conditions under which they were created. This allows HI to explain why ineffective institutions can persist for long periods, why change is often incremental, and why moments of rapid transformation are relatively rare but profoundly consequential.

Seen together, the three perspectives form a cumulative progression. RI views institutions primarily as sets of external rules that enable rational coordination. SI adds depth by showing how those rules are socially and culturally constructed, shaping actors' very identities and preferences. Historical Institutionalism then adds still greater depth by explaining how both rules and cultural patterns are rooted in specific historical trajectories, which condition how institutions endure and transform. Each approach thus surpasses the limits of the previous one by moving from strategic interaction to cultural contextualisation to historical path dependence. Together, they provide a fuller picture of how institutions are created and maintained over time.

Despite its broad applicability and acceptability, New Institutionalism has faced significant criticism. It has frequently been critiqued, particularly in its rational choice variant, which tends to dominate the mainstream, for being more effective at explaining continuity rather than change, while also downplaying the substantial impact of socio-cultural factors on the rise and fall of institutions. Francis Fukuyama (2014) has raised concerns regarding New Institutionalism's emphasis on formal institutions and minimal focus on informal norms, culture, and social trust. He argues that institutions alone cannot explain economic and political development without considering deeper socio-cultural dynamics and historical forces that shape effectiveness. He is deeply critical of rational choice and historical institutionalism for being overly deterministic and failing to explain why some societies successfully develop strong institutions while others do not. Deirdre McCloskey (2010, 2016) offers another perspective, wherein she argues that institutions alone do not explain the rise and fall of modern economies. She asserts the role of ideas, rhetoric, and cultural values in fostering economic development. McCloskey critiques early institutionalists for placing an excessive burden on the role of property rights and governance. While acknowledging that such institutions are necessary, she argues that this does not provide a complete understanding of economic growth. She contends that economic history has been

shaped not only by institutions but also by shifts in values and discourse, an argument that aligns in many ways with discursive institutionalism's emphasis on the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse.

This history suggests that NI is not a single, unified tradition. Early figures like Coase and Williamson challenged neoclassical orthodoxy by highlighting frictions and grounding analysis in real organisational practices. However, later contributions, such as those by Acemoglu and Robinson, are more firmly based on rational-choice modelling, extending rather than overturning neoclassical logic. This distinction explains why some critics, including McCloskey, feel more sympathetic to Coase than to Acemoglu: the former opened the door to historically grounded institutional reasoning, while the latter reduced institutionalism back to its formulation in mainstream economics. This is a key insight, and it is another reason why taking a discursive approach to public policy on social protection is necessary.

3. An argument for Discursive Institutionalism

Having traced the development of the three NI perspectives, it becomes clear that they represent a progressive enveloping of context, going from strategic rules and incentives of RI, to the cultural norms of SI, to the historical trajectories and path dependencies of HI, with each successive layer offering an even richer understanding of how institutions are shaped, sustained, and transformed. Yet they offer little in the way of a discursive perspective on the ideas that shape institutions, their ever-changing interpretations, and the channels through which they are proposed, justified, and made acceptable. As Deirdre McCloskey has long argued, human beings do not merely respond to incentives or inherit traditions; they also persuade one another, argue, justify, and narrate their worlds into being. It is precisely this gap that Discursive Institutionalism (DI), the fourth and most recent variant of NI, seeks to fill. Conceptualised by Vivien Schmidt (2008), DI foregrounds ideas and discourse as powerful components of public policy that constitute and transform institutions. Unlike the other three (RI, SI, HI), which focus on incentives, norms, or path dependencies, DI emphasises how the communication of ideas through deliberation and rhetoric ensures institutional stability and shapes change.

Several other similar frameworks, such as ideational institutionalism (Hay, 2001), constructivist institutionalism (Hay, 2006), and strategic constructivism (Jabko, 2006) have explored related themes. Schmidt argues that scholars whose work fits the DI rubric share four characteristics. First, scholars adopting this approach place significant emphasis on ideas and discourse, although their interpretations and applications of these concepts may vary considerably. Second, they situate ideas and discourse within an institutional framework, often aligning with one or more of the three established forms of new institutionalism (RI, SI, or HI). Third, they analyse ideas within their broader 'meaning context' where they see discourse following a certain 'logic of communication', even if they differ in how they define what is communicated, in what manner, and under what circumstances. Most importantly, DI adopts a 'processual' approach to institutional change, asserting that the study of ideas and discourse can overcome obstacles that traditional institutionalists find challenging.

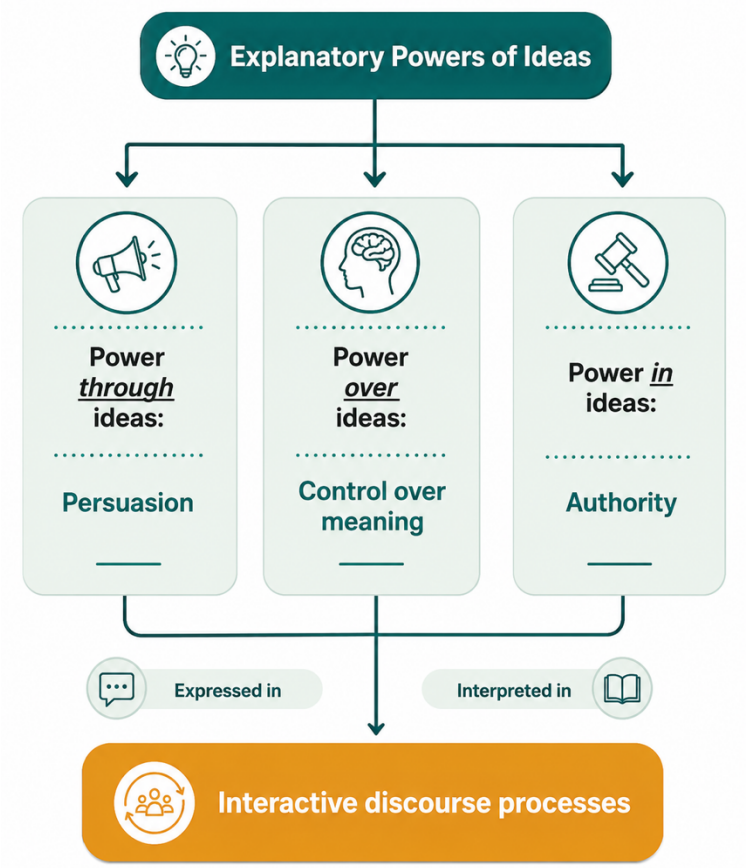
3.1. Establishing a link between Ideas and Discourse

Vivien Schmidt's discursive institutionalism (DI) framework focuses on the explanatory powers of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse within institutional contexts, lending meaning to institutional stability and change. Within DI, there is a tendency to divide those who focus on ideas from those who privilege discourse. However, the difference is merely one of emphasis, as

discourse enables a meaningful interpretation of the ideas, and so it is a matter of how much embeddedness or context is allowed for.

In Carstensen & Schmidt (2016), the authors delineate three distinct forms of powers associated with ideas: power through ideas, power over ideas, and power in ideas (refer figure 1). These 'explanatory powers' exist in the realm of ideas, and can only be expressed and interpreted through the interactive processes of discourse.

Figure 1: Explanatory Powers of Ideas



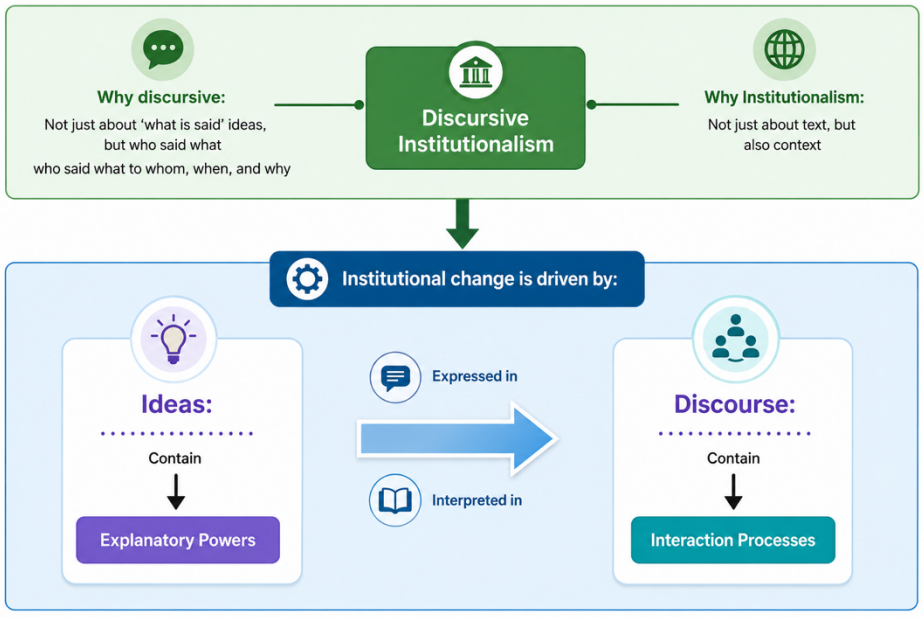
Power through ideas refers to the capacity of actors to persuade others to accept and adopt their views by using ideational elements (arguments, narratives, or frames) to establish cognitive validity or normative value. It is a process centering on persuasion and reasoning, where actors seek to convince others about what to think or do, shaping what is seen as common knowledge or legitimate solutions. Power over ideas manifests as control over the meaning and dissemination of ideas. Actors exert power over ideas when they dominate, marginalise, or exclude alternative viewpoints, often by controlling forums, gatekeeping expert knowledge, or shaping the boundaries of acceptable discourse. It focuses on the imposition of meaning and the suppression or endorsement of certain ideas within institutional or policy debates. Lastly, power in ideas emerges when certain ideas become embedded within institutional structures or prevailing meaning systems, shaping or constraining what is conceivable or possible within a society or organisation. It is about the authority of established concepts and frameworks that define the boundaries for thinking, discussion, and policy action over time. Taken together, these are the 'explanatory powers' of ideas.

While these powers exist in the realm of ideas, a meaningful expression and interpretation of these three powers is only possible through the interactive processes of discourse. Discourse provides the logic of communication and exchange through which actors can persuade, contest, and legitimise ideas in pursuit of specific goals. In other words, discourse acts as the conduit through which the explanatory power of ideas is both expressed and interpreted. Whether it is 'persuasion' in 'power through ideas', 'control over meaning' in 'power over ideas', or 'authority' in 'power in ideas', all powers are expressed and interpreted through discourse. Without this exchange in discourse, it is difficult to explain how ideas transition from individual thought to collective action (Schmidt , 2010). Therefore, by linking the explanatory powers of ideas to the interactive processes of discourse in this manner, it becomes possible to explain institutional stability as well as change.

3.2. The Discursive Institutionalism Toolkit

Figure 2 illustrates the DI framework as conceptualised by Vivien Schmidt. The DI toolkit is 'discursive' because an idea in DI is not just about what is said, but also about how it is communicated: who said what, to whom, when, and why. These interactions happen within established discourse processes set against the backdrop of context-sensitive institutional settings. Hence, it is grounded in 'institutional' thinking because the idea is not just limited to its content, but also its context. As noted earlier, ideas are embedded within specific discourses, which enable their meaningful expression and interpretation. Therefore, Discursive Institutionalism offers a useful toolkit to examine institutional stability and change through the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse.

Figure 2: The Discursive Institutionalism Toolkit



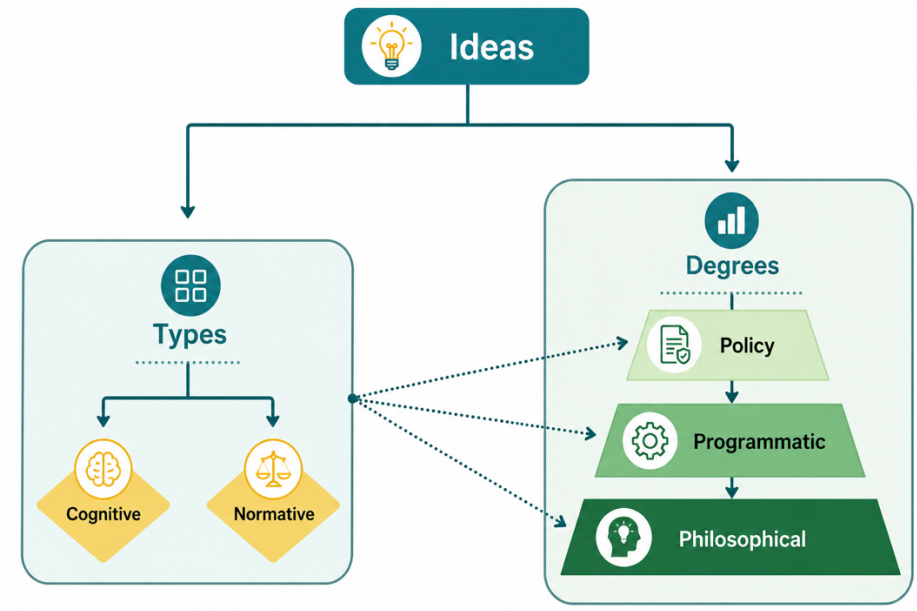
A detailed discussion of the two components of the DI framework are presented below:

3.2.1. Ideas

There are many ideas about ideas. It is not just about what is said, but about what is said to whom, when, and why. Scholars across different disciplines have adopted a wide range of investigative approaches to the study of ideas. Their conceptualisation of ideas can vary based on the

manifestations of those ideas, which include strategic instruments for control, frames that act as knowledge guides or frames of reference, narratives, best practices, shared beliefs, norms, and ideologies, among others. As shown in figure 3, it is possible to differentiate the study of ideas based on two parameters- type of investigation (two types based on what these ideas value and the ends they serve) and degree of change (three levels based on their affective depth and rate of change). The two parameters are discussed below.

Figure 3: Ideas



Scholars differ in the types of ideas they investigate. The comparative politics and comparative political economy literature tends to be more concerned with cognitive ideas. Such ideas emphasise guidelines for political action that are based on certain logics to serve and justify programs. These logics are usually based on principles of causal reasoning, functional efficiency, or usefulness. Meanwhile, those in international relations tend to rely on normative ideas that attach moral and ethical justifications to political action. These ideas serve to legitimise policies through arguments based on their necessity and appropriateness (Schmidt, 2015).

It is worth acknowledging that while the two types of ideas appear distinct, they are bound by an important relationship. Cognitive is the more encompassing category in that all normative ideas are cognitive. However, not all cognitive ideas are normative. A cognitive claim that is not necessarily normative asserts what is the cause, or what instrumentally produces a desired outcome or effect, and therefore carries no moral or affective weight. A normative claim, by contrast, asserts what ought to be the cause of a desired outcome or effect, and is therefore always already embedded in both a moral and affective understanding of the world. In practice, public policy carries both types of ideas simultaneously. Nonethless, this distinction has an important implication for how discourse functions in DI: rather than converting a cognitive idea into a normative one, discourse makes the normative implication of an idea increasingly explicit and institutionally embedded over time, as demonstrated in the sections that follow.

Scholars in political science have observed the evolution of ideas based on their affective depth and rate of change: they seek to understand whether an idea is fast or slow, incremental or abrupt, shallow or deeply entrenched within institutions. This parameter is therefore called the degree of

change, which results in three levels of ideas. The first level consists of policy ideas. These are meant to address specific solutions to specific problems in the short term. Policy ideas exist at the most immediate level and tend to change rapidly, especially when new opportunities arise or existing policies fail to address current issues. For example, the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) typically reviews and changes the repo rate every two months in India. At the second level, broader frameworks underpin policy ideas by defining problems and suggesting suitable solutions. Also known as programmatic ideas, these help define issues, set goals, identify norms, and deploy instruments. For instance, the 1991 New Economic Policy in India can be interpreted as a programmatic idea with the objective of liberalising the economy, reducing government control, and integrating India into the global market through liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation (LPG) instruments. Finally, at the most fundamental level are philosophical ideas. These are worldviews or collective sentiments that form the foundation for programmatic (and by extension, policy ideas) ideas. These are rarely articulated explicitly but serve as the cognitive and normative foundations upon which programmatic (and subsequently, policy ideas) ideas are constructed. Sowell's (*A Conflict of Visions*, 1987) formulation of constrained and unconstrained visions, though originating outside the DI tradition, functions precisely at this philosophical level in Schmidt's framework. They are not merely political preferences or policy positions, but rather, actions driven by fundamental worldviews about human nature, knowledge, and social causation, what Sowell calls a 'sense of how the world works'. An example would be Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's unconstrained vision of human society[1]. It could be said to conform to Sowell's unconstrained view that society could be rationally redesigned, that traditional institutions represented obstacles rather than repositories of wisdom, and that enlightened leadership could engineer optimal outcomes. The policies and programs introduced during his leadership such as the Five-year Plans, the abolition of the Zamindari system as part of land reforms, the establishment of the Atomic Energy Commission, peace treaties with China and Pakistan, etc., are a direct reflection of his largely unconstrained vision for Indian society, and ultimately, for Indian citizens.

It is possible for either type of idea to manifest at any of the three degrees of change. However, keeping the two parameters of distinction separate allows for a systematic understanding of ideas within institutional contexts. The type of idea reveals the value orientations that guide political reasoning, while the degree of change captures the temporal and structural dynamics through which ideas acquire stability or undergo change. Irrespective of the types or degrees of ideas, the expression of their explanatory powers and subsequent interpretation can only occur through discourse.

3.2.2. Discourse

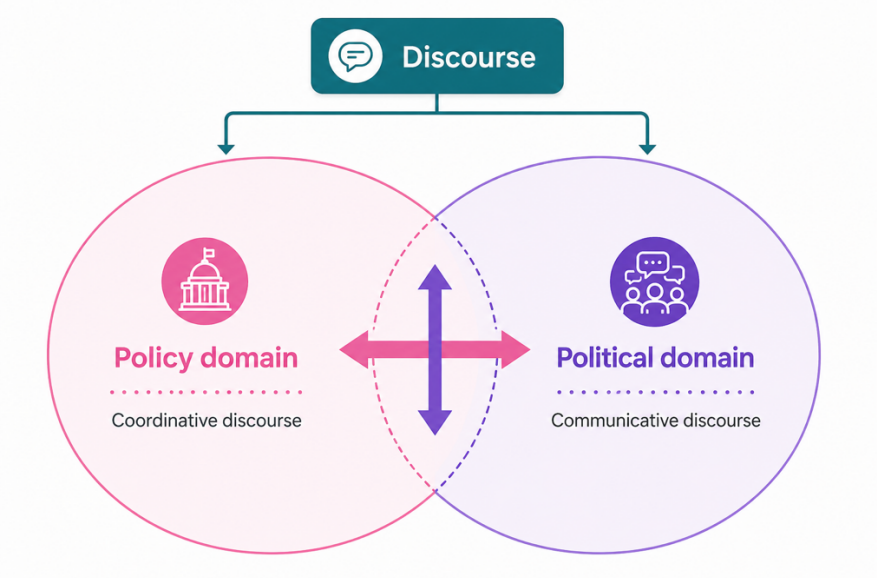
Although many scholars have contributed ideas to the study of ideas, very little emphasis has been placed on the role of discourse. This does not stem from insufficient effort; instead, it arises from how narrowly discourse has been conceptualised. A purely ideational understanding of discourse might focus solely on the ideas themselves, offering nothing more than an empirical variable to be tested in sophisticated econometric models. On the other hand, treating discourse as an abstract system of beliefs and language strips it of meaningful analytical value, reducing it to a vague heuristic. The DI toolkit emphasises a 'thicker' conception of discourse, where it is not just about

[1] Sowell characterises the constrained and unconstrained visions as endpoints on a spectrum, rather than being mutually exclusive categories. While most individuals and ideologies may gravitate toward one or the other, real-world positions often fall somewhere in between. People may exhibit varying degrees of constrained and unconstrained thinking depending on the issue or context, suggesting that these visions are not fixed camps but broad tendencies. Nevertheless, Sowell emphasises their opposition in basic premises: the constrained vision sees human nature as fixed and self-interested, requiring compromises and trade-offs, while the unconstrained vision presumes human nature is perfectible and social problems have ideal solutions.

content but also about context. In other words, all objects and practices, including natural things, physical processes, and social and cultural phenomena, gain meaning and significance within specific discourses. It is these embedded ideas within specific discourses that enable a meaningful interpretation of institutional stability and change.

Schmidt's framework emphasises that at its core, discourse is the exchange/communication of ideas by sentient agents capable of thinking, speaking, and acting (Schmidt, 2015). It entails 'interactive' processes to the extent that various elements of discourse are constantly transacting with ideas and the agents who communicate them in different ways. In other words, ideas are expressed within discourses in a way that enables a meaningful expression and interpretation of institutional stability and change. This occurs through power 'through', 'over', and 'in' ideas (refer previous section). Without this exchange, it is difficult to explain how ideas transition from individual thought to collective action (Schmidt, 2010).

Figure 4: Discourse



As shown in figure 4, she identifies two domains where the interactive processes of discourse occur: the policy domain comprising bureaucrats, politicians, civil society, academia and business, and the political domain comprising political leaders, media, interest groups, social movements, and citizens. Each domain is characterised by a distinct interactive process. The two processes are discussed below.

The first is the *policy domain*, wherein coordinative discourse takes place among policy actors. It involves the processes of creating, deliberating, arguing, bargaining, and reaching an agreement on policies. This process employs a commonly understood and interpretable language for policy construction that often occurs behind closed doors. Its intensity, defined as the depth and frequency of exchange among policy actors, can vary based on institutional context. According to Schmidt, coordinative discourse is more intense in policy domains of pluralist or coalition-based governance structures than in systems where authority is concentrated. On the other hand, communicative discourse occurs within the *political domain* between political actors and citizens. Its primary purpose is to present policy ideas and legitimise policy actions to the public. Together, the two processes of discourse serve both an ideational function, appealing to the cognitive logic and normative appropriateness of ideas, and an interactive function, providing common language and frameworks for policy construction, consultation, and legitimation through coordination and communication.

Typically, communicative discourse processes in the political domain flow vertically: either top-down (e.g., government communicating to the public) or bottom-up (e.g., social movements mobilising). On the other hand, there is less visibility regarding the direction of co-ordinative discourse processes in the policy domain. Nonetheless, since co-ordinative discourse processes involve creating, deliberating, arguing, bargaining, and reaching agreements on policies, it is possible to think of them as flowing horizontally among various actors. Regardless of the direction of discourse, as long as the process is functional, an idea can naturally move between domains (details follow in the next section). For instance, a social movement (starting as bottom-up communicative discourse in the political domain) may get picked up for discussion in coordinative discourse of the policy domain and subsequently result in the enactment of laws or regulations to address the issues raised in the social movement.

As Schmidt (2010, 2011) notes, the 'true' direction and intensity of discourse depend on the institutional context. In systems with pluralist or deliberative traditions, co-ordinative discourse tends to be dominant and reciprocal, with continuous exchanges feeding back into policy deliberations. In contrast, in more hierarchical or centralised systems, discourse tends to flow in a predominantly communicative and top-down direction, where ideas are transmitted from policy and political actors directly to the public with limited feedback. Notably, Schmidt's recent work conceptualises these directional movements or the 'ebbs and flows' primarily in the context of European politics and populist discourse (Schmidt, 2020). However, their application to public policy discourse in the context of social protection remains underexplored. The following section takes up this task, drawing on the four key elements of directional movement in discourse, as identified by Schmidt, namely message, messenger, medium, and media (Schmidt, 2020; 2022). Together, these elements serve as analytical tools for tracing how public policy discourse moves across domains, fluctuates, intensifies, and recedes at different moments in the policy cycle.

3.2.3. Ebbs and Flows in Public Policy Discourse

This section assumes that the underlying governance structure of the public policy system is primarily democratic. Even though there are many versions and degrees of democracy, this section assumes a purely theoretical description of a democratic governance structure: one where 'power' is vested with its people, and exercised by them directly through a freely 'elected' representative. As a result of the varying degrees of 'power' and types of 'elections', different nation-states may represent different democratic governance structures. The rationale for assuming a 'loose' description of a democratic governance structure is purely methodological: by establishing a theoretical baseline of governance in a 'typical' democracy, it becomes possible to trace, in Sections 4 and 5, how India's specific institutional context shapes the direction and intensity of public policy discourse.

This assumption does not imply that the processes discussed below are exhaustive or uniformly present across all democracies. In actuality, democratic governance structures may display greater or lesser degrees of interaction within public policy processes, both in direction and intensity. Rather, the approach adopted here provides a foundational understanding of the potential ebbs and flows that may emerge within public policy discourse under democratic conditions.

In a democratic governance structure, public policy unfolds as a continuous and iterative process that spans agenda setting, policy development, adoption, implementation, evaluation, revision, and even reversal. This process is inherently non-linear, involving ongoing negotiation between competing approaches and constant sensitivity to political, social, and institutional contingencies.

At various points, these dynamics produce outcomes in the form of institutional stability or change, manifesting as government action or inaction that affects all four foundational components (government, population, territory, and sovereignty) of the nation-state. From a discursive-institutionalist perspective, such stability or change can be explained by focusing on the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes through which they are expressed and interpreted.

Given the cyclical and continuous nature of public policy, the four key elements of discourse (message, messenger, medium, and media) play a critical role in determining its ebbs and flows. The *message* refers to the substantive content of the ideas communicated, including, but not limited to, problem statements and calls for action. The *messenger* refers to the actor or institution that conveys the message. The *medium* refers to the channel or form through which the communication is transmitted, and the *media* refers to the wider social and technological infrastructures that enable or constrain the dissemination of information. Each of these elements perform actions that influence public policy processes, often in overlapping and mutually reinforcing ways. In practice, individual elements may perform multiple actions simultaneously, either independently or in combination with others. Table 1 summarises the actions performed by each discursive element and its implication for public policy:

Table 1: Summary of Actions performed by Discursive Elements

Element	Action(s)	Implication
Message (constitutes an idea or action)	• **Shapes** how problem statements are understood • **Narrates** experiences, harms, needs, urgency, etc.	Determines which issues enter agenda setting, guides problem definition during policy development, and allows reframing during evaluation and revision
Messenger (conveys idea or action)	• **Establishes** authority and recognises expertise • **Validates** interpretation	Affects whose ideas are taken up during policy development and adoption, how actions or inactions are justified, and which critiques are considered during evaluation
Medium (channels and directs the transmission of ideas)	• **Structures** the pathway and direction through which ideas move between actors and domains • **Shapes** the form and timing of how ideas travel through the policy cycle	Structures how ideas move through the policy cycle through agenda setting, shapes the direction and form in which they travel during development and interpretation, and determines whether feedback informs revision
Media (prioritises and orders messages)	• **Amplifies** or suppresses the visibility of ideas • **Sequences** and frames the order in which ideas receive attention	Determines visibility during agenda setting, maintains scrutiny during implementation, and facilitates public reassessment during evaluation, often prompting revision or reversal

While these four elements are drawn from Schmidt's DI framework, their application here differs in two important respects. First, Schmidt developed these elements primarily in the context of European politics and populist discourse, while this paper extends their application to public policy discourse on social protection, specifically in the Indian context. Second, this paper maps these elements systematically onto the stages of the public policy cycle spanning agenda setting,

development, implementation, evaluation, and revision, which is something that Schmidt's framework directs at but does not explicitly undertake.

Taken together, the actions performed by these discursive elements illustrate how public policy discourse is produced and reproduced over time. Rather than operating in isolation, messages, messengers, mediums, and media frequently act in combination, with their actions often overlapping and reinforcing one another at different points in the policy cycle. Moreover, variation in how these elements function (in visibility, credibility, structure, or circulation) shapes the movement of ideas as they move from one domain, the public or the political, to the other. It is through these variations that public policy discourse exhibits its characteristic ebbs and flows, producing periods of relative stability as well as moments of contestation, redirection, or change.

In the next section, I apply the DI framework to the Indian context, tracing how three enduring ideas have shaped social protection discourse in India through the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse.

4. Social Protection Trinities

Public policy discourse on social protection in India is a unique blend of ideological continuity and pragmatic adaptation. Core ideas surrounding welfare and dignity have remained consistent, yet their meaning has evolved in response to the evolving discourse. The outcome is a kind of public policy that maintains its foundational commitments while adapting to the shifting contours of discourse and governance priorities.

Below, I discuss three such ideas that have shaped public policy on social protection in India: *'Roti, kapda, makaan'*, *'Bijli, sadak, paani'*, and *'Shiksha, swaasthya, suraksha'*. Each of these encapsulates a distinct endowment necessary for ensuring the well-being and long-term development of the nation-state and its populace, corresponding broadly to Akhilesh Tilothia's (2021) categories of personal capital (personal consumption security), physical capital (physical infrastructure), and human capital (human development), respectively. While Tilothia presents these capitals as sequential stages in a 'developmental ladder', the focus of this paper is slightly different. In the realm of social protection, these ideas do not signal a linear progression; rather, they embody enduring concepts whose meanings have evolved over time through reconstruction across the policy and political domains in discourse.

Following Vivien Schmidt's call to 'take ideas seriously', this section examines how the interactions among the elements of discourse in public policy processes have shaped the social protection ambitions associated with these ideas.

4.1. Roti, kapda, makaan

The phrase *'roti, kapda, makaan'*, which translates to 'food, clothing, shelter', represents the fundamental necessities of the citizen. Some historical accounts attribute it to the former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who used it as her election slogan leading up to the 1967 general elections, wherein the incumbent Indian National Congress government retained power. Others attribute it to former Prime Minister Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri, who had served a few years before Gandhi. While the origin of the slogan remains contested, it is a testament to Gandhi and Shastri's shared political legacy in India. More importantly, the political resonance of the phrase can be situated in the broader transformation of Indian politics following the 1967 general election, when political competition increasingly centred on economic grievances and mass expectations of welfare,

prompting leaders to frame their appeals around the provision of basic necessities and poverty alleviation[2].

However, the cultural impact of this phrase extended beyond political speeches and campaign rallies. In 1974, the phrase became the title of a major Bollywood film starring Manoj Kumar. Released on October 18, 1974, "Roti Kapada Aur Makaan" further popularised the slogan and cemented its place in the Indian diaspora. The film explored themes of economic struggle, inflation, and the challenges of securing basic necessities, reflecting the socio-economic conditions of 1970s India. A popular dialogue from the film perfectly captured its significance to the socio-economic struggle of the time: '*Roti, kapda aur makaan, yeh teen cheezein insaan ki zindagi ke buniyaad hoti hain*', which translates to 'food, clothing, and shelter, these three things are the foundation of human life'.

The political and cultural diffusion of the phrase provides a useful point of departure for examining how this idea informed the interactive processes of discourse in public policy. Situating this within the DI framework, the phrase emerged from bottom-up discourse in the political domain, conveying the urgency of unmet basic needs and shaping how these concerns entered the agenda-setting process. It reflected the lived experiences of citizens, who acted as its messengers, validating this interpretation and gaining traction through electoral engagement. The medium of electoral platforms and public speeches structured how the idea was debated, interpreted, and justified within the political domain, while media, especially cinema, sustained its visibility and momentum. It began its journey as a cognitive-philosophical idea rooted in the hardships of newly independent India. Its normative implication- that the state ought to provide for the citizens's basic needs, was present from the outset. Through coordinative discourse in the policy domain, it was gradually internalised by policymakers and made explicit and institutionally embedded.

As the idea made its way into the policy domain, it acknowledged the economic and financial challenges faced by a significant proportion of the population[3]. Eventually, it was disseminated through top-down discourse in the political domain, in the form of nationwide public policy responses such as food subsidies, income support, and housing schemes. While citizens were initially the messengers, politicians and bureauc rats gradually assumed that role, communicating welfare programs through electoral speeches, budget announcements, and government awareness campaigns. The medium of legislative processes and administrative systems structured how these ideas were translated into policy action, while the print and broadcast media amplified and ordered its visibility, sustaining public scrutiny of welfare delivery. In doing so, the initial plea for survival was reframed as a core component of development policy, reflecting the consolidation of power in ideas.

Below, I expand on specific social protection schemes that emerged as a result of public policy processes responding to this idea. As the discussion presented below will show, the codification of food security through the NFSA (as part of *roti*), employment through MGNREGA (as part of *kapda*), and housing through PMAY (as part of *makaan*) embedded the idea of *roti, kapda, makaan*, respectively, within law, administrative systems, and governance structures[4], enabling state actors

[2] Brass (1994) and Guha (2007) document the transformation of Indian politics after the 1967 general elections, where electoral competition increasingly emphasised economic grievances and demanded welfare provision. They show how political appeals began to foreground poverty alleviation and basic needs as core electoral issues.
[3] Kohli (2012) argues that the Indian state's developmental trajectory has been shaped by the need to respond to widespread economic deprivation, with political actors increasingly recognising the centrality of redistribution and welfare in maintaining legitimacy and political support.
[4] Dreze and Sen (2013) demonstrate how India's social protection policy expanded to include welfare programs such as food security, employment guarantees, and housing. They highlight how these policies reflect a shift towards rights-based and entitlement-driven approaches to development.

to exercise power in ideas and express it through top-down discourse in the political domain. Once institutionalised, these ideas no longer merely justified policy action; instead, they defined the scope of state behaviour, shaped citizen expectations, and outlined the normative boundaries of social protection in India.

4.1.1. Roti

The idea of *roti* can be interpreted as a symbol of food security. As a foundational pillar of social protection in India, the idea has undergone significant transformation, driven not only by material necessity but also by evolving discourse around entitlement, dignity, and governance. The message initially constituted an articulation of hunger, scarcity, and vulnerability, shaping how food insecurity entered agenda-setting and guiding its interpretation within public policy.

One of the earliest schemes for food security, the Public Distribution System (PDS) finds its roots in the British colonial era as a wartime rationing measure. It was only in independent India that it began to assume a more pivotal role. As food shortages and famines continued to threaten the lives and livelihoods of millions during the 1960s and 70s, the PDS transformed from a wartime strategy into a routine state mechanism for stabilising grain prices and managing public expectations of food access through coordinative discourse within the policy domain. Here, policymakers and administrators acted as messengers, validating the need for state intervention, while the medium of policy directives and communication both within and across ministries of the government shaped how this message was transmitted and legitimised within the policy domain . By the 1990s, critiques of administrative and fiscal inefficiency redirected the message from universal access to targeted provision of food security[5]. This led to the launch of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) in 1997, which framed food security as a benefit for households below the poverty line. Economists, bureaucrats, and political actors acted as messengers, legitimising this reframing, while expert committee reports served as the medium through which this reframing was routed into the policy domain, with media coverage of fiscal inefficiency amplifying its urgency and ordering it as a priority for discussion.

The enactment of the National Food Security Act in 2013 marked a pivotal shift in the institutional trajectory of *roti*. Anchored in political discourse as a rights-based idea, the message was reframed from welfare provision to legal entitlement. Political actors and state institutions acted as messengers, while the medium of legislative process and statutory declaration structured the pathway through which this message was formalised within a legal institutional framework, with media coverage of food insecurity sustaining its visibility and reinforcing its centrality within public discourse

4.1.2. Kapda

While *kapda* (clothing) is traditionally viewed as a basic material necessity, its symbolic meaning runs deeper. In many cultures, clothing serves as a metaphor for dignity, identity, and inclusion[6]. To be clothed is not merely to be covered but to be acknowledged as an active participant in

[5] Howes & Jha (1992) showed that the average urban dweller gained more from the universal PDS than the average rural dweller. Additionally, Radhakrishna & Subbarao (1997) found that it cost INR 4.27 to transfer INR 1 of income to the poor under PDS.
[6] Davis (1992) discusses clothing as a symbolic system through which individuals negotiate their place in society.

society[7]. Within this interpretation, *kapda* can be understood not just as fabric, but as the means by which one secures it, that is, employment.

This reframing is both intuitive and intentional. At the dawn of independence, a large proportion of India was rural compared to what it is now[8], where the ability to earn a living wage was often what enabled individuals to afford basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter[9]. In this sense, *kapda* becomes shorthand for productive employment. It's the fibre that connects individual dignity to state-led social protection efforts. Understood this way, the evolution of employment guarantees in India, particularly through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), can be seen as the policy embodiment of the idea.

Enacted in 2005, MGNREGA marked a significant philosophical shift in the welfare discourse. Unlike earlier poverty alleviation programs, which often relied on targeted subsidies or skill-based interventions, MGNREGA offered something more radical: the legal right to work. It guaranteed 100 days of wage employment per rural household, thus institutionalising employment as an entitlement rather than a privilege. The program blurred the boundary between welfare and rights-based governance, aligning with the idea that social protection should not only offer relief but also affirm dignity through work. Here, the message was reconstituted as employment as a right, shaping how livelihood security was defined within public policy.

From a DI perspective, the idea of work as welfare emerged from bottom-up discourse, that is, from struggles against rural distress, drought, and unemployment that were articulated through grassroots movements and civil society campaigns. The messengers were local activists, researchers, and affected citizens who validated this interpretation and framed employment as a claim to dignity. The medium of grassroots campaigns and civil society reports structured the pathway through which this message entered the policy domain, while media coverage of rural distress amplified its urgency and ordered it as a priority for political attention.
This idea, which was initially philosophical and grounded in the socio-economic realities of the rural poor, was consequently absorbed into the policymaking apparatus, where it gained programmatic form in MGNREGA. Here, policymakers and legislators acted as messengers, translating the message into legal and institutional terms through the medium of legislative processes and policy directives. The fact that employment was framed as a legal entitlement reinforced the normative implication that citizens are entitled to work as a matter of dignity rather than charity.

Through top-down discourse, politicians and bureaucrats became stewards of the message, branding MGNREGA as a symbol of pro-poor governance and rural empowerment. Media continued to amplify scrutiny of MGNREGA's implementation, enabling ongoing public evaluation. In this way, the discourse surrounding MGNREGA redefined *kapda* not as mere cloth, but as the right to earn, to participate, and to dignity.

4.1.3. Makaan

[7] In his 'capabilities' framing, Sen (1983) argues that adequate clothing constitutes the ability to appear in public without shame. He draws on Adam Smith's observation that a linen shirt was a social necessity in 18th Century England, not for its physical properties, but because without it, a person could not participate in public life on equal terms. So, while 'adequacy' may vary across cultures, the underlying capability, i.e. to participate in society without shame, is universal.
[8] According to Census 1951, approximately 82 percent of India's population was rural.
[9] In Dreze and Sen (1989), the authors argue that the ability to earn is the primary mechanism through which the poor secure access to basic necessities.

The idea of *makaan*, or shelter, as a fundamental component of human security has similarly followed a long arc of institutional evolution, from subsistence housing schemes to aspirational programmes anchored in dignity and ownership. The message initially centred on the lack of adequate housing, shaping its entry into the agenda-setting process as a problem of material deprivation and vulnerability.

It found early recognition with the launch of the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY) in 1985. The program reflected an institutional commitment to provide financial assistance to rural households living in *kutcha* houses, with the goal of enabling *pucca* housing as a metric of development. Here, policymakers and public administrators acted as messengers, validating this interpretation within the policy domain, while the medium of official government orders and administrative directives structured the pathway through which this commitment to rural housing assisstance was formalised and subsequently communicated to implementing agencies both within and outside the government. .

From a DI standpoint, IAY represented a top-down institutional response to a bottom-up articulation of need. The message was primarily cognitive and focused on the material logic of safety, permanence, and improvement in living standards. Coordinative discourse among policymakers, state governments, and bureaucrats drove the implementation process, while print and broadcast media helped sustain visibility and scrutiny of housing provision.

The relaunch of this idea as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) in 2015-16 marked a significant reconfiguration of both the message and the messenger. The goal was 'Housing for All by 2022'. It was not just a promise of shelter but an aspirational rebranding of state-led development as inclusive, efficient, and citizen-centric. The message shifted towards dignity, ownership, and aspiration, while political actors assumed a more central role as messengers. The medium expanded to include not only policy design but also public communication and outreach, shaping how the idea was interpreted and implemented.

In DI terms, this represented a shift in the logic of discourse. The cognitive framing of shelter remained intact, but the normative logic gained prominence. The provision of shelter was no longer a poverty alleviation effort; rather, it was recast as an aspirational good, associated with dignity, stability, and upward mobility. The communicative discourse surrounding PMAY was heavily mediated by the state, with political leaders serving as key messengers. The medium of communication ranged from televised speeches and social media to direct interactions with beneficiaries, each amplifying the message of a 'New India' where development equated to home ownership, while media sustained visibility and reinforced this framing.

The shift from IAY to PMAY illustrates the dynamic nature of discourse in institutionalising public policy ideas. While the underlying philosophical idea of *makaan* as a basic necessity remained constant, its interpretation and legitimisation evolved significantly through the interaction of message, messenger, medium, and media. As a result, what began as a postcolonial welfare response matured into a pillar of aspirational governance, becoming embedded in India's social protection policy institutions.

4.2. Bijli, sadak, paani

The phrase '*bijli, sadak, paani*', referring to 'electricity, roads, and water,' represents the foundational elements of physical infrastructure necessary for overall economic development in the state. Unlike *roti, kapda, makaan,* which emerged from bottom-up articulation of deprivation in the political domain, the idea of *bijli, sadak, paani* originated primarily within the policy domain as a cognitive-

philosophical idea. It reflected an understanding among policymakers, economists, and political actors that infrastructure development was essential for economic growth, productivity, and integration with the global economy.

Unlike *roti, kapda, makaan*, which has reasonable traceability in political speech and cinema, it is difficult to establish a single point of origin for *bijli, sadak, paani*. Instead, this was a condensation of development discourse in the post-liberalisation period of the 1990s to early 2000s, when infrastructure emerged as a central concern of economic policy and political competition[10]. As M. S. Ahluwalia (2002) recounts, this period was characteristic of India's gradualist approach to achieving economic growth. This was done through industrial and trade policy reforms, along with encouragement of private investment in infrastructure. However, these reforms represented policy direction rather than decisive outcomes, as a result of which, the process of change was often criticised as being slow, fitful, and politically opportunistic. Ahluwalia also acknowledges the heterogeneity in the impact of economic reforms across sectors of the Indian economy, especially the power sector. This is a critical insight, since it helps set the background against which the idea of *bijli, sadak, paani* gained prominence.

In its earliest formulation, this idea was cognitive-philosophical, i.e., infrastructure deficit was diagnosed as a technical and economic problem, articulated through expert committees, planning processes, and policy reform. Bureaucrats and political leaders validated this interpretation through coordinative discourse within the policy domain, expressing power through ideas. The medium of expert committees and economic reforms facilitated the articulation of this idea, while media coverage of reforms and infrastructure deficits sustained its visibility.

Over time, this idea was subsequently mobilised into the political domain through top-down communicative discourse, where its articulation remained primarily cognitive. It is at this intersection that the message was reoriented toward universalisation of public access to infrastructure, with an emphasis on last-mile delivery. The new messengers of this idea, primarily politicians, employed electoral campaigns, speeches, and public outreach to communicate the importance of infrastructure development, exercising power over ideas by determining which infrastructure priorities were legitimate and immediate. The media played a critical role in amplifying this message, sustaining public attention on issues of infrastructural access and quality. This marked a deliberate foregrounding of the normative implication already present in the idea: that universal access, while cognitively framed as an economic necessity, normatively implied universal access to infrastructure as an entitlement of citizenship.

Below, I discuss specific public policy programs that reflect how this idea was interpreted, implemented, and transformed over time.

4.2.1. Bijli

The idea of *bijli,* translating as electricity, is often interpreted as a symbol of power. It is a critical component of the industrial production matrix. However, for its citizens, the state's provision of electricity implies access to means of amusement, safety, and communication, as well as something less tangible: the state's arrival in their homes. In this sense, *bijli* is not merely an input to economic activity but also a signal that the nation's promise of development has reached the last mile.

[10] Kohli (2012) argues that 1991 reforms shifted India toward a pro-growth model, where infrastructure bottlenecks became central constraints to economic expansion. As a result, the state increasingly prioritised investment in physical capital to sustain growth.

As a key component of physical infrastructure, the message initially centred on the need to expand generation capacity, improve efficiency, and reform state-controlled electricity systems. This shaped how the problem entered agenda-setting within the policy domain, where electricity was framed primarily as a constraint to economic growth. Early reforms such as the Accelerated Power Development and Reforms Programme and the Electricity Act (2003) reflected this orientation. Policymakers, regulators, and technical experts acted as messengers, validating the need for restructuring the power sector. The medium of legislative instruments and regulatory frameworks structured the pathway through which this message was translated into policy action, while media coverage of power shortages and financial losses in state utilities sustained visibility and public concern.

Over time, as the idea stewed at the intersection of policy and politics, the message evolved from sectoral reform to universal access and last-mile inclusion[11]. The launch of the Saubhagya Yojana in 2017 marked a shift towards universal household electrification, reframing electricity as a basic service rather than solely an input for growth. Political actors became more prominent as messengers, communicating this shift through public campaigns and legislative directives. The former createdpathways for the message to reach citizens and the latter to reach the implementing agencies both within and outside the government. Media continued to sustain visibility by tracking electrification targets and outcomes, reinforcing the importance of electricity access within public expectations.

In DI terms, the trajectory of *bijli* traces thegradual resolution of a foundational tension: between electricity understood as a factor of production and a basic entitlement of citizenship. It is through the sustained actions of message, messenger, medium, and media, that explains how the idea's normative core- electricity as a basic entitlement of citizenship rather than merely an economic input, was embedded within India's social protection institutions.

4.2.2. Sadak

The idea of *sadak* represents road infrastructure as a critical component of both commerce and connectivity. For citizens residing beyond the reach of all-weather roads, it implies something more immediate: a connection to society that would otherwise be outside their grasp[12]. The launch of the three-phased Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) reflected this sentiment.

Phase I of the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), launched in 2000, marked a significant shift in India's approach to rural road infrastructure. Unlike other road development programs, such as the Golden Quadrilateral, which prioritised national highways and urban connectivity, the first phase of PMGSY institutionalised rural connectivity as a core development objective rather than a political afterthought. Policymakers acted as messengers, validating this interpretation through coordinative discourse within the policy domain. Media coverage of rural isolation and infrastructure deficits sustained visibility, signalling the exercise of power through ideas as policymakers were persuaded that universal rural road access was a legitimate and urgent state commitment.

As basic connectivity expanded, so did the underlying message of this idea. PMGSY Phase II, launched in 2013, shifted the focus from first-time access to economic enablement: upgrading existing rural roads and connecting villages to markets, growth centres, and service hubs. Here

[11] Dubash, Kale & Bharvirkar (2019) trace the evolution of India's power sector from early reform efforts focused on efficiency and restructuring to a later emphasis on improving access and service delivery.
[12] Using a natural experiment, Shilpa Aggarwal (2018) find evidence of improved market integration, increased use of agricultural technologies and gains in school enrolment for younger children among rural households.

too, policymakers acted as messengers, exercising power over ideas by determining that road quality and economic integration, rather than sheer connectivity, were the new benchmarks of success.

This was followed by PMGSY Phase III, launched in 2019, which marked a decisive normative reframing. Roads were recast as instruments of citizen access to the full range of social protection entitlements, explicitly connecting villages to agricultural markets, higher secondary schools, and healthcare institutions. Political actors assumed a more prominent role as messengers, communicating this shift through public campaigns and administrative outreach.

In this way, the discourse surrounding PMGSY redefined *sadak* not as mere infrastructure, but as the right to access and to belong[13]. Through this progression, the normative implicated in the idea that citizens are entitled to connectivity and access was made explicit,consolidating power in ideas as rural road connectivity became institutionally embedded within India's social protection institutions as both a governance principle and a citizen entitlement.

4.2.3. Paani

The idea of *paani* represents access to safe and reliable water as a fundamental component of public health. As a key component of physical capital, the message initially centred on scarcity, provision, and governance reform, shaping how water supply entered agenda-setting within the policy domain as a constraint on both economic development and public welfare.

The National Water Policy of 2002 reflected this orientation. Bureaucrats, engineers, and public health officials acted as messengers, validating the need for a coordinated national framework for water resource management through coordinative discourse within the policy domain. The medium of policy planning and administrative systems structured how this message was refined and institutionalised, while media coverage of water scarcity, quality crises, and regional inequalities sustained visibility and public concern. Like *bijli* and *sadak*, the early framing of *paani* was primarily cognitive: water was understood as an independent challenge requiring technical and administrative solutions rather than a universal entitlement.

The launch of the Jal Jeevan Mission in 2019 marked a decisive shift in both the message and the messenger. The mission set an ambitious target of providing functional household tap connections to every rural household by 2024, reframing water not merely as a resource to be managed but as a service to be delivered reliably and equitably at the household level[14]. As a result, the normativeness which was implicit in the idea but burried under its cognitive weight, was brought to the foreground.Political actors assumed a more central role as messengers, communicating this shift through public campaigns, administrative outreach, and direct beneficiary engagement. The medium expanded to incorporate direct beneficiary outreach and government directives, establishing pathways through which the message reached citizens and other participatory implementing agencies. . Media sustained visibility by tracking progress against targets, enabling ongoing public scrutiny and reinforcing water as a core development priority.

In DI terms, the trajectory of *paani* mirrors that of *bijli* and *sadak*: an early phase of coordinative discourse focused on targeted solutions, followed by a decisive political mobilisation toward

[13] Dappe, et al. (2021) present results of an impact evaluation using panel data between 2009 and 2017 and find positive effects of PMGSY on accessibility, access to economic opportunities, and boost in living standards, especially among rural households.
[14] Singh & Naik (2024) find moderate attainment of JJM at early stages of implementation along with reduced burden of drinking water collection on women and children in rural regions.

universalisation and last-mile delivery. The message shifted from resource management to service delivery, the range of messengers expanded from technical officials to political leaders, and the medium shifted from centralised policy directives to decentralised communication and outreach. .

4.3. Shiksha, Swaasthya, Suraksha

The phrase *'shiksha, swaasthya, suraksha'*, translating to *'education, health, and security',* represents the foundational elements of human capital necessary for the long-term development of the nation-state and its populace. Unlike *roti, kapda, makaan,* where social protection was oriented around the provision of basic necessities, and *bijli, sadak, paani,* where it was oriented around the building of physical infrastructure, this idea emerged against the backdrop of a qualitative shift in India's social protection architecture, made possible by the JAM (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, Mobile) trinity.

Here, JAM, as an idea, was itself a culmination of the actions performed by the discursive elements. The message was one of direct, traceable, verifiable, and leakage-free delivery of social protection benefits. Having identified the lack of secure and universal beneficiary identification as a core problem in benefit delivery, the central government set up the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) to implement the vision of a universal biometric identity, bringing together people from India's information and communications technology sector and marrying it to the apparatuses of central and state government institutions[15]. Initiated in 2009, this effort constituted an entirely new set of messengers, including technocrats like Nandan Nilekani, whose authority derived from technological expertise rather than electoral mandate or administrative rank, alongside statutory authorities, private technology providers, and commercial banks. Their participation marked a significant diversification beyond the usual actors who had traditionally dominated the two domains of discourse in public policy. Through this diversification, the exercise of power through ideas manifested: policymakers were persuaded that a unique digital identity situated within a sophisticated digital architecture, rather than administrative reform alone, was the legitimate solution to the problem of efficient and sustainable benefit delivery.

However, what makes JAM analytically distinctive is that its three components, namely, zero-balance banking through the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, biometric identity through Aadhaar, and mobile connectivity underpinned by private telecom infrastructure, were simultaneously policy objectives, delivery mechanisms, and discursive elements in their own right. The result is a highly complex system of institutions where all three powers of ideas converge: power through ideas, as policymakers were persuaded of digital identity's legitimacy as the solution to benefit delivery; power over ideas, as JAM determined the boundaries of what was possible in social protection delivery; and power in ideas, as digital social protection delivery was embedded as a governing principle of India's social protection architecture. In doing so, JAM produced a pivotal shift in how social protection ideas could be expressed, interpreted, and delivered in India: one that set the discursive conditions for the emergence of *shiksha, swaasthya, suraksha* as the third and most ambitious of India's social protection trinities.

The message of *shiksha, swaasthya, suraksha* reflects this complexity. The idea of investing in citizens themselves by investing in their capacity to learn, stay healthy, and protect against risk carried a normative charge from the outset, articulated through expert committees, international development frameworks, and civil society advocacy. Over time, as this idea gained programmatic form through specific schemes and legislative frameworks, education, health, and social security were progressively embedded as entitlements of citizenships rather than merely development

[15] Muralidharan, et al. (2016) evaluate the impact of biometrically authenticated Smartcards on beneficiaries of NREGS and SSP in Andhra Pradesh and find that the system delivered faster, predictable, and less corrupt NREGS processes without negatively impacting access

inputs. Notably, what makes *shiksha, swaasthya, suraksha* analytically distinct from the earlier trinities is that unlike the earlier trinities whose normative implications were progressively foregrounded through discourse over time, all three components of this trinity arrived already framed as entitlements of citizzenship from the outset. What varied however, was the specific discursive pathway through which they did so. The message of *shiksha* emerged from bottom-up articulation of educational deprivation, shaped by civil society organisations whose evidence-based advocacy directly influenced how learning outcomes entered policy conversations. The message of *swaasthya* reflected an alignment between domestic policy consensus and international development frameworks, in which the Millennium Development Goals, and subsequently the Sustainable Development Goals, provided an external normative anchor for India's health policy discourse. Lastly, the message of *suraksha* was initiated top-down, with the state constructing social security as an individual entitlement, channelled through the JAM architecture, and pushing it outward through communicative discourse. The messengers, mediums, and media through which these messages were expressed and interpreted varied accordingly, producing a trinity whose discursive complexity mirrors the ambition of its underlying idea: that social protection must ultimately invest in citizens themselves, equipping them to participate fully and independently in economic and social life.

Below, I trace the evolution of specific public policy programs that reflect how each component of this idea was interpreted, implemented, and transformed over time.

4.3.1. Shiksha

The idea of *shiksha* represents access to education as a foundational investment in human capital. The message initially centred on ensuring universal access to elementary education, i.e., reaching every child, bridging gaps across gender and social categories, and building the basic institutional infrastructure of schooling across the nation-state. In this manner, education as a deprivation entered agenda-setting as both a constitutional obligation and a development imperative.

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA-1), launched in 2001 and backed by the 86th Constitutional Amendment, which made free and compulsory education a fundamental right for children aged six to fourteen, institutionalised elementary education as a rights-based entitlement rather than a welfare provision. Bureaucrats, policymakers, and civil society organisations acted as messengers, validating the need for universal access through coordinative discourse within the policy domain. Civil society's role was particularly significant, with organisations like The Pratham Foundation, through their Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER), introducing evidence of poor learning outcomes into the policy discourse, exercising power through ideas by reframing the conversation from enrolment to quality. The medium of policy directives, community participation, and decentralised planning structured the pathway through which this message was communicated.

As the idea matured, the message evolved from access to quality. The consolidation of SSA into Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA-2) in 2018 marked this shift toward integrating elementary, secondary, and senior secondary education into a single package, signalling that *shiksha* was no longer just about getting children into school but about keeping them there and ensuring they learned. Policymakers and state institutions acted as messengers, exercising power over ideas by determining that learning outcomes, rather than enrolment figures, were the new benchmarks of success. This required the incorporation of school infrastructure standards, teacher training frameworks, and performance monitoring systems.

The launch of Skill India in 2015 and SWAYAM, a platform offering free online courses from school to post-graduate level, marked a further and decisive reframing of shiksha beyond formal

schooling toward lifelong learning and employability. The message was reconstituted as education as a capability and the right to acquire skills that enable full participation in economic and social life. Political actors, technology platforms, and private training partners assumed a more prominent role as messengers, communicating this shift through public campaigns and digital outreach. The medium expanded significantly, incorporating online platforms, industry-linked curricula and digital outreach channels, while media sustained visibility by tracking skilling targets and outcomes.

In doing so, the discourse surrounding *shiksha* made increasingly explicit and institutionally embedded the implied normative that education, skilling, and learning were are not merely deprivations to be addressed but catalysts for enabling citizens to realise their full potential.

4.3.2. Swaasthya

The idea of *swaasthya* represents access to affordable and equitable healthcare as a core component of human capital formation. The message initially centred on supply-side gaps such as inadequate infrastructure, high maternal and infant mortality, and the uneven reach of public health services across a geographically and socially diverse nation state. In other words, health entered agenda-setting in public policy framed as a problem of institutional capacity and geographic equity.

The National Rural Health Mission, launched in 2005 and later subsumed within the National Health Mission (NHM) in 2013 is a direct manifestation of discourse in *Swaasthya*. It sought to provide accessible, affordable, and quality healthcare to rural populations by establishing a decentralised health delivery system and deploying community health workers (Accredited Social Health Activists or ASHAs) as the primary interface between households and the health system. Bureaucrats, public health officials, and international development bodies acted as messengers, with the Millennium Development Goals providing an important external normative anchor that aligned India's domestic health policy discourse with global frameworks. Policy directives and community-based health institutions, including health workers, structured the pathways through which this message was transmitted, while media coverage of maternal mortality and rural health deficits sustained visibility and public concern. In doing so, the early phase exercised power through ideas: persuading policymakers that a community-based, decentralised approach to health delivery was the legitimate response to India's public health challenges.

The launch of Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) in 2018 marked a reframing of the message. Unlike NHM, which was primarily state-led, Ayushman Bharat introduced a demand-side insurance model, providing cashless hospitalisation cover of up to INR 5 lakhs per year to the bottom 40 percent of India's population, and empanelling private hospitals as delivery partners. Political actors and state institutions assumed a more central role as messengers, framing Ayushman Bharat as India's commitment to universal health coverage in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals[16]. The medium expanded to incorporate digital health infrastructure, private sector participation, and direct beneficiary engagement through the JAM architecture, while media sustained visibility by tracking enrolment figures and hospitalisation outcomes. As a result, policymakers exercised power over ideas by determining that an insurance-based model, rather than purely state-delivered healthcare, was the legitimate instrument to achieve universal health coverage. Additionally, the institutionalisation of Ayushman Bharat within India's social protection architecture consolidated power in ideas, embedding universal health coverage as a normative commitment of the state.

[16] Angell, et al. (2017) view AB PMJAY as a suitable policy anchor to tackle long-term and embedded shortcomings in governance of accessible healthcare in India and to accelerate it's progress towards the stated goal of Universal Health Coverage.

In DI terms, the trajectory of *swaasthya* mirrors a shift in the message from supply-side provision to demand-side entitlement, an expansion in the range of messengers from technical officials and international bodies to political actors and private providers, and a transformation in the medium through which ideas where communicated, from centralised policy directives to digital platforms and local community engagement.

4.3.3. Suraksha

The idea of *suraksha* represents protection against economic risk and vulnerability as a foundational component of human security. Unlike *shiksha* and *swaasthya*, this idea was initiated as top-down communicative discourse. The state framed social security as an individual entitlement and pushed it outward through communicative discourse, made possible by the financial architecture of JAM.

The absence of a prior phase in the *suraksha* discourse is itself analytically significant. It reflects not a gap in discourse but a deliberate discursive act: the state exercising power through ideas by persuading policymakers and citizens alike that affordable insurance and pension coverage were not privileges of formal sector employment but human foundations of development. Equally, *suraksha* may be understood as a state-driven accompaniment to financial inclusion, in which the provision of formal finance was itself emerging as a development necessity. The message that every citizen, regardless of income or occupational status, should have access to protection against accidental death, disability, and old age, was therefore both a push towards greater coverage of social security and an assertion of the right to participate in formal financial systems, the latter of which was made possible by the JAM architecture[17].

The Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY), launched in May 2015 as part of the Jan Suraksha initiative alongside the Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY) and the Atal Pension Yojana (APY), embodied this message. Announced in the Union Budget of 2015-16 and framed explicitly as an extension of the Jan Suraksha mission, these schemes offered accidental death and disability cover, life insurance, and pension benefits at nominal annual premiums, made accessible through Aadhaar-linked bank accounts and auto-debit mechanisms. Political actors were the primary messengers, communicating this shift through budget speeches, public launches, and direct outreach campaigns. At the ground level, bank staff and business correspondents acted as critical messengers, explaining scheme benefits, facilitating enrolment, and translating the state's mission of *suraksha* into the everyday language of financial access, especially for populations that have historically excluded from formal systems. Within the formal system, push notifications and aadhar-linked alerts structured the pathway through which the message of *suraksha* reached the citizens. In doing so, the JAM architecture functioned not merely as a delivery mechanism, but as a complex array of discursive elements, simultaneously enabling and asserting the normative ambition that formal social security was a right of every citizen.

In this manner, the state exercised power over ideas by determining that an insurance-based model of social security, delivered through digital financial infrastructure, was a sustainable instrument for universal social protection at scale. Over time, as these schemes became embedded within India's financial inclusion architecture, they consolidated power in ideas, redefining *suraksha* not as a residual concern of welfare policy but as a foundational investment in citizens' capacity to withstand risk, one that linked social protection directly to the JAM ecosystem.

[17] Bhatia & Bhabha (2017) assess Aadhaar's aims to achieve inclusive social protection through personal, civic, functional and entrepreneurial inclusion and acknowledge the state's effort to achieve transnational social protection. However, they admit that it is too early to conclusively evaluate Aadhaar as a transformative contributor to social protection.

5. Discussion

The analysis in Section 4 traces the evolution of three enduring ideas in India's social protection discourse through the lens of Discursive Institutionalism. Each trinity has followed a discursive arc through which the normative within the cognitive idea has been progressively made explicit, institutionally embedded, and programmatically expressed through multiple iterations of what the idea means and how it is interpreted and expressed. These ideas have persisted not only because institutions develop through strategic interaction, possess cultural contexts, and are subject to historical path dependence, but also because the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse have performed their respective functions, ensuring stability and facilitating change in public policy. In other words, institutional stability and change in social protection policy in India are best explained by the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive discursive processes through which ideas are produced, contested, reframed, and institutionalised. The three trinities demonstrate that social protection in India has been shaped by a succession of normatively stable yet programmatically dynamic ideas, whose persistence reflects the power embedded in them.

This section draws on this analysis to make four arguments. Firstly, the three trinities exhibit a degree of normative stability across decades of political and institutional change. Second, this stability coexists with significant discursive change in how these ideas have been expressed and interpreted. Third, the three trinities together represent a progressive reorientation in the conception of social protection, going from basic provision to infrastructure development to human investment. Lastly, this progression has been accompanied by a gradual expansion of actors who participate in social protection discourse, with significant implications for how ideas are produced, legitimised, and embedded in institutions.

5.1 Institutional stability

A key feature of India's social protection discourse is its institutional stability. Across more than 75 years of independence, through multiple governments of vastly different ideological orientations, the foundational commitment to citizen welfare has remained intact. The ideas encapsulated in the three trinities, i.e., citizens need food, shelter, and clothing; that they require electricity, roads, and water; that they must be equipped with education, health, and security, have never been contested in their normative implication. Whatdiscourse has produced over time is not just the normative content of these ideas, which was present from the outset, but the progressive deepening of their implication, moving from persuasive claims to becoming governing principles of India's social protection architecture. Moreover, as the evidence presented in this paper shows, no government has abandoned these commitments, and no electoral mandate has been won by promising anything less.

This normative continuity is what DI identifies as institutional stability: not the stability of specific programs or administrative structures, but the stability of the ideas that justify and sustain them. In Schmidt's framework, stability is produced when ideas become embedded within institutional structures through the interpretation and expression of their explanatory powers. Irrespective of its origin in the political or policy domain, each trinity has, over time, transitioned from a persuasive claim to a governing principle: moving from power through ideas, as actors argued for their legitimacy, to power over ideas, as the state determined which meanings were institutionalised, and finally to power in ideas, as these ideas came to define the normative boundaries of India's social protection landscape.

This stability is also visible in the persistence of the trinities as discursive reference points across the policy and political domains. The language of *roti, kapda, makaan* continues to frame debates about food security, employment, and housing; *bijli, sadak, paani* continues to anchor discussions of infrastructure delivery and last-mile access; and *shiksha, swaasthya, suraksha* continues to organise thinking about human capital investment and social security. The ideas have not been replaced; instead, they have been reinterpreted. It is precisely this capacity for reinterpretation, rather than replacement, that explains institutional stability.

5.2 Institutional change

Institutional stability alone does not capture the full picture. The analysis in Section 4 demonstrates that while the normative orientation of these ideas has remained stable, their meanings and programmatic expressions have undergone significant transformation. Each trinity has followed a discursive arc through which the implication of the normative within the idea has been progressively made explicit and institutionally embedded, moving through successive reframings of what the idea means, who it is for, and how it should be delivered. In DI terms, it is this evolution, produced through the interaction of the message, messenger, medium, and media across the policy and political domains, that constitutes institutional change.

However, the process of change is not uniform across the three trinities. In *roti, kapda, makaan,* change was produced primarily through bottom-up communicative discourse, where citizens articulated deprivation, activists framed demands, and social movements translated lived experiences into policy claims. The message travelled from the political domain into the policy domain, where it was internalised, reframed, and institutionalised through coordinative discourse. In *bijli, sadak, paani,* by contrast, change was produced primarily through top-down coordinative discourse. Policymakers and economists identified infrastructure deficit as a development constraint and communicated this through coordinative discourse within the policy domain. Politicians subsequently mobilised this message into the political domain through communicative discourse, and it is through the sustained interaction of both domains over time that the normative quality of the idea was made explicit and institutionally embedded. Lastly, as noted in *shiksha, swaasthya, suraksha*, change emerged from a mixed discursive origin, reflecting the greater complexity of human capital investment as a category of social protection.

This variation in the direction and origin of discourse is itself theoretically significant. It demonstrates that institutional change in social protection is not produced through a single discursive pathway. It can emerge from top-down or bottom-up discourse, or from the intersection of both discursive domains simultaneously. What remains constant is not the direction of discourse but its function: in each case, the interaction of message, messenger, medium, and media across the two domains produces a progressive deepening of the explanatory powers embedded in the idea, moving it from cognitive acknowledgement to institutional principle.

5.3 Evolving conception of social protection

The three trinities represent a reorientation in the conception of social protection, as well as the role of public policy in delivering it. In *roti, kapda, makaan,* social protection is oriented around provision. Here, the state's primary objective is to ensure that citizens have access to the basic necessities of survival. The citizen is positioned primarily as a recipient, and the measure of success is whether material deprivation has been addressed. The schemes associated with this trinity (PDS, MGNREGA, and PMAY) are designed to 'provide': through subsidised grain, guaranteed employment, and financial assistance for housing.

Looking at, *bijli, sadak, paani,* social protection can be understood as being oriented around building. The state's primary objective shifts from providing for citizens to constructing the physical infrastructure that enables economic and social participation. The citizen is positioned as a user of public infrastructure, and the measure of success is whether connectivity, access, and service delivery have been achieved. The schemes associated with this trinity (Saubhagya Yojana, PMGSY, and Jal Jeevan Mission) are designed to 'build': through electrification networks, rural road connectivity, and household tap water connections.

In the case of *shiksha, swaasthya, suraksha,* social protection is oriented around enabling. The state's primary objective shifts again, from providing necessities and building infrastructure to investing in citizens themselves, by investing in their capacity to learn, stay healthy, and protect against risk. The citizen is no longer merely a recipient or a user but an agent, equipped by the state to participate fully and independently in economic and social life. The schemes associated with this trinity (SSA, NHM, Ayushman Bharat, Skill India, Jan Suraksha) are designed to 'enable': through education, healthcare, skilling, or social security.

Notably, this progression from 'provider' to 'builder' to 'enabler' is non-linear. This is because the normative commitments of all three trinities persist simultaneously, such that each successive trinity adds a new layer to the conception of social protection, deepening and expanding the boundaries of what public policy on social protection can achieve. The result is a cumulative architecture of social protection wherein basic provision, infrastructure, and human investment coexist and reinforce one another, each sustained by the discursive legacy of the trinity that preceded it.

5.4 Pluralisation of actors in discourse

Another pattern that emerges from the analysis is section 4 is the pluralisation of actors who participate in the discourse of public policy surrounding social protection. According to Schmidt's framework, the messenger takes on a critical role in determining whose ideas are taken up, how actions are justified, and which critiques are considered. The messenger's role stands out as the key catalyst of 'moving' public policy discourse across both domains. Moreover, as the analysis shows, the range of messengers in India's social protection discourse has expanded significantly across the three trinities, with important implications for how ideas are produced, legitimised, and institutionalised.

For *roti, kapda, makaan,* the primary messengers were citizens, activists, and politicians. The discourse was driven by lived experience, electoral mobilisation, and grassroots advocacy. The state, through bureaucrats and legislators, assumed the role of messenger primarily in the later phases, translating citizen demands into policy language and institutional form. Therefore, it is evident that the range of actors was relatively narrow, and the discourse surrounding this idea was predominantly shaped by direct engagement between citizens and the state.

From *bijli, sadak, paani* onwards, the range of messengers shifted and expanded. Economists, technical experts, planners, and regulators assumed a more prominent role in the early phases, articulating infrastructure deficit as a development constraint through coordinative discourse within the policy domain. Politicians subsequently assumed the messenger role in the political domain, translating the policy consensus into electoral salience. The discourse was still primarily state-driven, but the composition of state actors had diversified to include a broader range of technical and political voices.

Lastly, in *shiksha, swaasthya, suraksha,* the pluralisation of messengers reached its most advanced expression. Civil society organisations shaped the education discourse through evidence-based advocacy, international development bodies anchored the health discourse through global normative frameworks, and technocrats brought technological expertise and private sector networks into the heart of the policy domain. As a result, private hospitals, insurance companies, technology platforms, and banks became active participants in the delivery and legitimisation of social protection. At the ground level, bank staff and Business Correspondents emerged as a new category of messenger, translating the state's message of *suraksha* into the financial resilience for all. In this way, the JAM trinity marked the tipping point at which the distinction between 'state' and 'non-state actors' in social protection discourse became difficult to draw.

This pluralisation has two implications for the DI framework. First, it suggests that the expansion of the messenger category to include ever newer members is itself a driver of institutional change in social protection. New messengers bring new ideas, new frames, and new logics of legitimacy that reshape what is conceivable and what is possible in the policy domain. Second, it suggests that social protection in India is no longer exclusively a state enterprise. The state remains the primary guarantor of social protection, but the discourse through which social protection ideas are produced, contested, and institutionalised now involves a much wider set of actors.

6 Conclusion

This paper argues that institutional stability and change in social protection policy in India are best explained through the explanatory power of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse. The three trinities, namely, *roti, kapda, makaan; bijli, sadak, paani;* and *shiksha, swaasthya, suraksha,* are not merely slogans or electoral devices. They are discursive institutions in their own right: normatively stable, programmatically dynamic, and embedded within India's social protection architecture through the sustained interaction of message, messenger, medium, and media across the policy and political domains. Their persistence across governments of vastly different ideological orientations is evidence not of institutional inertia but of discursive power- the capacity of ideas, once embedded, to define what is expected, what is legitimate, and what is possible.

For the study of social protection in India, this argument has significant implications. The durability of these ideas means that future reforms will be evaluated against the normative commitments they encode. Schemes that extend food security, improve rural infrastructure, or expand health coverage are not merely policy interventions; they are contributions to a discursive architecture constructed over decades that shapes what citizens expect from the state. Organisations working at the frontier of social protection are knowingly or unknowingly participating in the same discursive processes that this paper has traced. Therefore, understanding the ideational foundations of that architecture is not an academic exercise but a prerequisite for navigating it effectively.

Lastly, in terms of public policy in India, the shift from 'provider' to 'builder' to 'enabler' carries a forward-looking implication that is already apparent. This is especially clear in the labour market, where the growth of the platform economy highlights the gap that a new social protection conversation must address. Platform workers are connected to other citizens and sectors of the national economy but remain largely unprotected. They are enabled by basic services, but not yet fully realised in the promise of social security. Ultimately, whether India's social protection discourse can redefine itself to enable access to social security, and through which combination of message, messenger, medium, and media, is the question that the next generation of public policy, whatever form it takes, will need to answer.

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