
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED LEGAL RESEARCH

FREEBIE CULTURE IN INDIA- Nitya Shukla¹***Abstract***

It is quite evident that political parties spend large amount of money during elections with the intent to get votes and win elections. For this, they make promises to the public to provide them free services like electricity, water, transportation, etc. However, offering and providing excessive subsidies not only pose risk to the financial stability of a state but also result in significant opportunity costs, which diverts the money from being used in providing freebies rather than being used for social welfare policies which is beneficial not only for the individuals but also for the country. This paper talks about the emergence of freebie culture in India. Further, this paper analyses the economic, political, and social implications of freebie culture in India. Despite the fact that freebies are frequently viewed as a means of redressing socioeconomic disparities and gaining the voters, the freebie culture has started to evoke debate on their long-term viability and governance influence. This paper contrasts welfare measures in industrialized and developing nations with the freebie culture of India and explains the risks associated with encouraging dependency, distorting market forces, and fuelling fiscal deficits. It also looks at other political implications of such actions: the erosion of democratic processes and the focus on short-term populism at the cost of long-term progress. It concludes with suggestions to alter the freebie culture of India by seeking focused, open welfare measures that promote self-reliance and sustainable growth. Therefore, this paper promotes a shift from handouts that are merely temporary to policies that empower people in ways that mark the fulfilment of India's broader goals of social equity and economic development.

Keywords: freebies, welfare policies, fiscal responsibility, electoral politics, populism

¹ Student at Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Patiala, Punjab

For general queries or to submit your research for publication, kindly email us at ijalr.editorial@gmail.com

<https://www.ijalr.in/>

I. INTRODUCTION

“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

Freebies or revdiculture is one of the debatable topics in today’s political and economic conversation in India. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in its 2022 report has defined freebies as “a public welfare measure that is provided free of charge”.² It also states that freebies are different from the public welfare services such as healthcare and education which have long-term benefits to the masses. This tactic of offering free goods and services is frequently used by the political parties during the election campaigns to get votes and win the election. This includes promises of free cash transfers, smartphones, water, electricity, and other amenities. The supporters of the freebies contend that such policies benefit the underprivileged sections of the society and address the imbalances occurred in the socioeconomic landscape of the country. The critics, on the other hand, contend that its long-term effects on budgetary stability, governance, and developmental priorities are not sustainable. However, if we look at the sociopolitical environment of India, it can be observed that it is characterized by extreme economic disparities. Hence, the political parties in order to win votes of the poor frequently offer freebies by calling them as welfare initiatives and portraying themselves as the supporter of the poor people.

However, since many states are facing problems because of fiscal deficits and growing debts, freebies raise serious concerns regarding the viability of state finances. The Election Commission and the Supreme Court of India has raised concerns about the effect of freebies on democratic procedures and moral governance.³ The freebie culture not just affects the economy but it has a wider effect in the society. It encourages the dependency of people on free goods and services by the political parties, which could weaken the will of the people to look for sustainable solutions to inequality and poverty. Furthermore, this cycle of short-term appeasement of the people rather than long-term growth takes away the attention from the significant developments like infrastructure and policy reforms like education policies.

²Freebie: A Double-Edged Sword, Drishtiiias, *available at*: <https://www.drishtiiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-editorials/freebies-a-double-edged-sword> (last visited January 23, 2025).

³ Freebies in Electoral Democracy and Welfare State (2024), *available at*: <https://www.scobserver.in/cases/freebies-in-electoral-democracy-and-welfare-state/> (last visited on January 23, 2025).

For general queries or to submit your research for publication, kindly email us at ijalr.editorial@gmail.com

<https://www.ijalr.in/>

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The roots of freebie culture in India can be found in the early years of independence, when the newly formed government introduced policies to alleviate socioeconomic disparities and pervasive poverty. The welfare policies and subsidies become an important part of the development agenda of the country with initiatives such as policies to alleviate hunger, advancement in healthcare and increase access to education. Programmes like Public Distribution System (PDS), land reforms, and rural development plans were introduced with the objective to create a welfare state and uplift the underprivileged sections of the society. However, it was during the 1990s when this practice of offering and giving freebies by the political parties gained traction. Political parties started using populist policies for votes as the economic reforms introduced during that time increased the economic disparity and widened the gap between rich and poor. The first state to start the freebie culture is Tamil Nadu. Politicians like M.G. Ramachandran and J. Jayalithaa popularised the freebie culture by distributing colour television, free rice, kitchen equipment, etc among the voters.⁴ It is a sad reality that freebies were originally intended to solve actual socioeconomic needs, but they evolved into the tactics of vote-bank politics.

At the national level, policies like free electricity in rural areas and exempting loans to farmers became the standard. All the political parties started promising a variety of free goods and services, which further led to increase in the competitive character of the Indian elections. States like Punjab and Andhra Pradesh suffered financial constraints as a result of freebies and subsidies which led to the trend of offering freebies being questioned. Many economists and even the courts questioned the viability of freebies and its effects on governance making it a debatable issue throughout the time.

III. RATIONALE

The underlying cause of the freebie culture in India is quite closely related to electoral strategy, socio-economic reasons, and political dynamics. The political parties rely on freebies to attract voters; they bank upon the immediate gratification of giving material benefits in order to obtain electoral support. The first major reason for the rise of freebies is the tactical move of political parties in order to secure votes. In competitive Indian politics,

⁴“Freebies” and Welfare Schemes: Setting a Framework (2023), *available at*: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/-freebies-and-welfare-schemes-setting-a-framework-for-the-debate-in-india> last visited on January 23, 2025).

For general queries or to submit your research for publication, kindly email us at ijalr.editorial@gmail.com

<https://www.ijalr.in/>

there are numerous promises of cash transfers, subsidized electricity, and free healthcare in an electoral manifesto by parties. These promises are made to create more direct access with electorates, primarily the poor households living in constituencies where access to important services can have a widely impacting influence on elections.

The other belief underpinning the rationale is the intent to improve social welfare and fight poverty. Through promises of handouts or freebies, political parties hope to project themselves as champions of the poor and needy population. This strategy is based on the assumption that welfare measures improve the living standards of poor groups by reducing their immediate level of hardship. Therefore, parties are inspired to provide goods that can make the life of voters better even if it might be in a short-term process.

Distribution of freebies is also considered an act to interact with voters and build a relationship with them. Political parties want to generate a desire among the electorates for their offered benefits so that political participation and voting become high. The electorates, especially those with scarce resources, are likely to favour those parties who can provide apparent and tangible benefits to them. This further sets a picture on the politician, which is likened to supplying essential goods and services.

Indian politics is inherently competitive, and this fuels the freebie culture because parties feel they have to match or exceed the offerings of their rivals. With both parties competing hard to capture the electorate, the process often involves an ever-increasing offer of lavish promises that culminate in an open-ended escalation in freebie offerings. The competitiveness is thus a convenient rationale for maintaining the freebie culture because parties are desperate to top each other out in electoral promises.

IV. ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Freebie culture has serious economic effects since in India it often strains the public exchequer and undermines the viability of developmental plans. Such measures are often rationalized as welfare programs to check or reduce poverty and inequality but they frequently lead to long-term budgetary costs that are far outweighed by the immediate gains. One of its major implications is on budget of the central and the state government. Many state governments in India spend a large amount of their income on freebies which leads to increase in fiscal deficit and debt. States like Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and Tamil Nadu, for example, have taken huge debts due to the excessive expenditure on populist policies. This results in drainage of resources that could have been utilised in important

For general queries or to submit your research for publication, kindly email us at ijalr.editorial@gmail.com

<https://www.ijalr.in/>

sectors such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Moreover, it limits the ability of the government to make investments in long-term economic projects. Subsidies and freebies also alter the market dynamics. Furthermore, providing free electricity and water often leads to the wastage and overutilisation of the energy leading to reduced willingness to conserve.

Similarly, though farm loan exemptions provide temporary relief to the poor farmer, they undermine credit discipline and exacerbate the risk to the financial health of lending institutions. The opportunity cost of freebie culture is high, too. Public funds channelled into unviable giveaways could be much better invested in building strong social welfare nets, upgrading infrastructure, and spurring the growth of jobs. Unfortunately, free products may lead recipients to lose interest in working towards long-term economic goals. Freebies are supposed to ease extreme socioeconomic disparities and stimulate demand for low-income people, if targeted correctly, say proponents. The problem is distinguishing between welfare programs that are actually useful and political handouts that burden people without improving long-term prosperity. It is because freebies may have short-term electoral benefits and relief to some particular segments, but its unregulated proliferation has brought some serious hazards to India's economic health.⁵ It further raises a question for immediate reforms and fiscal accountability. The political parties distribute freebies at the time of elections to win the votes of the public. They are even successful at the time of winning elections as people get attracted to such freebies. These freebies are beneficial for them. They are not good for the health of Indian economy. So, the people need to understand the difference between the welfare policies and freebies. While the welfare policies include subsidies, healthcare, education, etc, the freebies include cash, free electricity, free laptops, etc which hampers the economic growth of the country. It also generates dependence on the government that further slows down the country's economic growth and development.

V. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Freebie culture is highly prevalent in India, which has severe social implications and more often than not makes the receivers feel dependent on others. While the direct needs of the economically weaker sections are supposed to be fulfilled through such policies, they may ultimately be eroding self-reliance. Freebies can trap communities in long-term dependency

⁵ SCI. (2024), Analysis of Government Freebies in India, *available at*: https://www.medcindia.com/article-detail.php?page=1&ele_id=NOR_6387325dd21b73.01019208 (last visited on January 23, 2025).

For general queries or to submit your research for publication, kindly email us at ijalr.editorial@gmail.com

circles, as they focus all their attention on short-term relief and do not empower the individual by education, skills, or job opportunities. This affects long-term efforts to build an economically independent and productive community. There also are issues with unequal benefit distribution. Most freebies fail to adequately touch the most-needy because there are problems in implementation, bureaucratic corruption, or even bias. This tends to increase social friction and feelings of injustice by giving some people a sense of exclusion. While giveaways attract much attention, money is also diverted from infrastructure, healthcare, and education-things that are critical to human advancement. Lacking attention only aggravates long-term opportunities for social mobility while keeping rather than eradication of disparities existing.

Freebie culture has replaced political competition by a race of who can promise the most outrageous, more often than not at the expense of meaningful discussion of policy matters. The appeals of instant freebies are taking over voters' assessments of the candidates as material advantages increasingly drive election campaigns. This trend is shifting the focus from effective governance to appeasement, negating the concept of accountability of the elected officials to the people they serve. Furthermore, by promoting vote-bank politics, the focus on giveaways skews political processes. With customized freebies, political parties usually target particular areas or populations, fostering divisiveness and promoting identity-based politics.⁶ This method of operation eats away at the inclusiveness of democracy while also fragmenting the voters. Governance is another casualty of freebie culture. Long-term development plans are often sacrificed at the altar of populist policies by governments, and public infrastructure and the quality of basic services become at risk.

VI. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The freebie culture is not exclusive to India, and it's everywhere around the world in one shape or form. A comparative study reveals how other nations address welfare and populist policies, information regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the freebie policies of India. Welfare policies are actually not 'freebies' at all but systematic social safety nets for more developed economies like Scandinavia. For example, Sweden and Norway have provided hefty compensation for unemployment, universal health care, and quality education

⁶Freebies Frenzy: Indian politics grapples with electoral promises (2023), *available at*: <https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/freebies-frenzy-indian-politics-grapples-with-electoral-promises-amid-economic-concerns/articleshow/106238055.cms> (last visited on January 23, 2025).

For general queries or to submit your research for publication, kindly email us at ijalr.editorial@gmail.com

all due to open government and high taxes. Different from giving the citizens short-term relief, these policies are broad-based, sustainable, and intended to empower the citizenry by attacking the root of inequality. Such systems seem to pay more attention towards long-range economic stability and human capital development than free-for-all modes usually promulgated by such busybodies in India.

India is closer to comparison with developing countries. It was only the other day that Brazil initiated a system of conditional cash transfers called Bolsa Família, in which payments are tied to conditions, such as children being vaccinated or receiving schooling.⁷ This way, help avoids pushing poverty around without condemning it to long-term eradication at some point. India's giveaways, on the other hand, usually do not have such checks and balances, which limits their effectiveness in bringing about structural change. States like Delhi and Tamil Nadu are miniature representations of the controversy raging within India. Tamil Nadu and election promises dominated by free computer, household appliances, and rice programs had the freebie culture ingrain into the political scene. The state's exchequer is being taxed due to these acts, though these have short-term benefits. Delhi, on the other hand, invested in health and education besides adopting targeted subsidies through free water and electricity for poor homes. This merging of government reform with populism is viewed by some as a more balanced approach.

The United States is still a more diverse case, in which political rhetoric about fiscal responsibility and individual incentives often accompanies aid initiatives like food stamps and unemployment insurance. In contrast to India's often politically driven freebies, U.S. programs are all part of a larger package of economic policy and are designed to be efficient and as least resource-intensive as possible. These international comparisons demonstrate the need for India to change from a freebie-centric paradigm to organized welfare measures that empower residents while exercising fiscal restraint.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

While freebie culture can be seen as a positive step towards the welfare of the needy sections of the society, it is important to keep in mind that these are short-term benefits that is not sustainable in the long term for the individuals getting those benefits as well as for the

⁷Freebies: The row over handouts and welfare schemes in India - BBC. (2022), *available at*: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-62722592> (last visited on January 23, 2025).

For general queries or to submit your research for publication, kindly email us at ijalr.editorial@gmail.com

country. Hence, it is very important to spread awareness among the voters and educate them on how freebies can negatively affect them as well as how it is not in the national interest in the long run. In this way, they will also be able to make informed choices when it comes to vote in elections. They will not then just vote by getting lured by the political parties offering freebies but will also think about the larger interest of the country. But this is just one thing amongst others that should be done.

There is also a need to ensure transparency as well as accountability in the implementation of the welfare policies and schemes. This will keep a check on corruption and will also ensure that the target beneficiaries get the support. Further, the political parties should disclose about the sources of their funding and how freebies would be financed by them to the voters. The Election Commission of India should be empowered to monitor and regulate the freebies offered by the political parties. This will also ensure that political parties do not violate the model code of conduct. Political parties should include sustainable policies in their manifesto instead of offering freebies to lure voters. The Supreme Court of India has also suggested to set up an expert committee to delve upon the impact of freebies on the economy and democracy.⁸ The members of committee would consist of members from the Niti Aayog, the Finance Commission, the RBI and other stakeholders.⁹

VIII. CONCLUSION

The freebie culture of India can be described as a complex combination of political as well as socio-economic factors. Undoubtedly, it provides the underprivileged sections of the country with some incentives that give them instant comfort and is also a weapon for mobilization of politics frequently. However, its implications in the long term poses significant questions in relation to social advancement, governance and budgetary sustainability. This practice of offering freebies for short-term populism creates the risks of developing a dependency attitude among the people, taking away of funds from the urgent developmental needs and also of compromising democracy. On the other hand, the fact that the welfare policies can help in significantly reducing socioeconomic disparities if well planned and executed. Hence, it is important to draw a distinction between the politically motivated freebies and welfare policies actually meant for the benefit and empowerment of the public.

⁸ Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay v. Union of India WP no 43 of 2022.

⁹ Freebie Culture in India, Drishtias, *available at*:<https://www.drishtias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-editorials/freebies-a-double-edged-sword>(last visited January 23, 2025).

For general queries or to submit your research for publication, kindly email us at ijalr.editorial@gmail.com

Lessons drawn from international best practices and effective domestic initiatives emphasize the importance of targeted, conditional, and transparent welfare programs which inculcate independence and human development. India needs to take a holistic approach moving forward and deal with the problems caused by the freebie culture. This would include encouraging financial restraint, strong governance structures, and prioritizing long-term investments in infrastructure, health, and education. Public knowledge and well-informed voting decisions can also greatly help in shifting the focus from populism to sustainable development. The ultimate goal should be to build a culture where welfare programs make people self-sufficient and help the country progress without compromising its democratic and financial integrity. India may head toward inclusive growth that benefits all sections of society by aligning social programs with long-term development goals.



For general queries or to submit your research for publication, kindly email us at ijalr.editorial@gmail.com

<https://www.ijalr.in/>