



Freebies Culture in India

Prelims: [Public distribution system \(PDS\)](#), [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act \(MGNREGA\)](#), [Mid-day meal scheme](#), [NITI Aayog](#), [Election Commission of India](#)

Mains: Freebies in Elections – Their advantages, disadvantages and Way Forward

Source: [LM](#)

Why in News?

Freebies in electoral campaigns continue to be a divisive issue in Indian politics. A recent survey conducted across multiple cities in India reveals mixed attitudes among urban Indians toward freebies, especially in the context of rising debates on fiscal responsibility.

- Prime Minister's criticism of "revdi culture" in 2022 intensified discussions on the sustainability and ethical implications of election-driven freebies.
- Freebies are short-term handouts aimed at voter appeal, often lacking sustainable impact unlike welfare policies that promote lasting economic and social well-being.

Note:

- In the survey, Over half (56%) of respondents viewed freebies as unnecessary, with 78% labelling them as vote-seeking tactics and 61% expressing concern about their impact on national finances.
- Wealthier respondents (84%) largely see freebies as economically harmful, while only 46% of lower-income respondents share this view. Lower-income groups see subsidies on essentials, particularly healthcare, as justified, contrasting with wealthier respondents' views.

What is the Difference between Freebies and Welfare Policies?

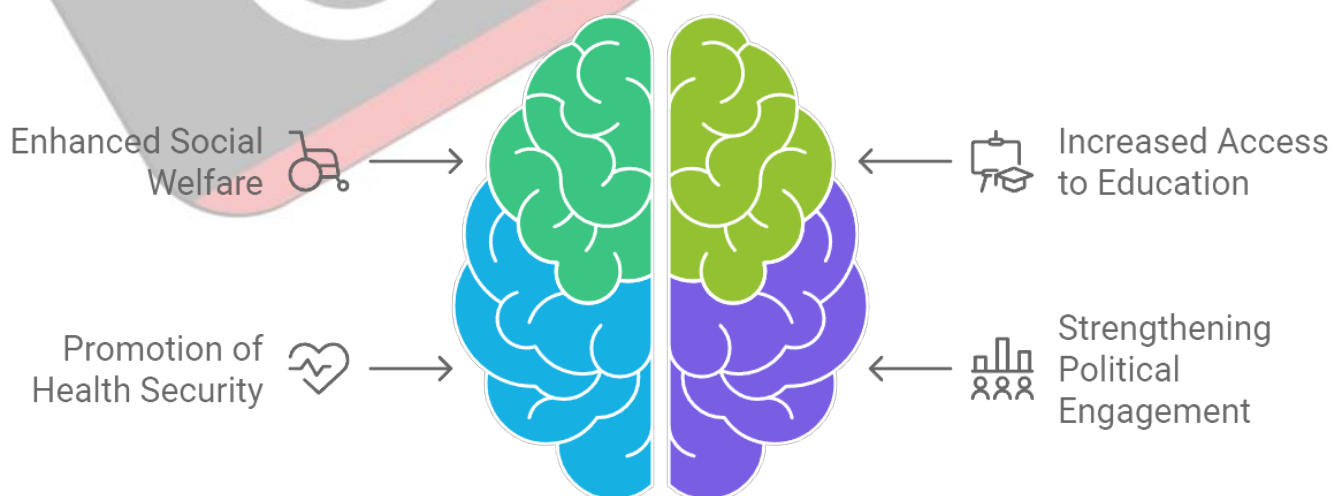
Freebies	Welfare Policies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ RBI in its 2022 report, defined "freebies" as "public welfare measures provided free of charge."▪ Freebies often focus on short-term relief.▪ Typically include items such as free laptops, TVs, bicycles, electricity, and water, often used as electoral incentives.▪ Frequently criticised for potentially encouraging dependency rather than promoting sustainable development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Welfare schemes are comprehensive initiatives aimed at uplifting target populations by enhancing their living standards and resource access.▪ Rooted in the DPSPs, aligned with the goals of social justice and equity and aim for positive societal impact and long-term human development.▪ Examples: Public Distribution System (PDS), MGNREGA, and Mid-Day Meal (MDM) programs.

What are the Positive Aspects Related to Freebies?

- **Uplifting the Lower Class:** In states with relatively lower levels of development and higher [poverty](#) rates, such freebies become particularly valuable in supporting and uplifting the lower strata of society.
- **Foundation for Welfare Schemes:** Freebies not only include pre-election promises but also a number of services that the government provides to meet its constitutional obligations ([Directive Principles of State Policy](#)) towards citizens.
 - The [Mid-Day Meal Scheme](#) was first introduced in 1956 by Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister K. Kamaraj and was later adopted nationally a decade after.
 - **NT Rama Rao's Rs. 2/kg rice scheme** in Andhra Pradesh laid the foundation for today's [National Food Security Program](#).
 - Telangana's **Rythu Bandhu** and Odisha's **KALIA** schemes served as precursors to the [Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi \(PM-KISAN\)](#) for farmer support.
- **Boost Industries:** States like Tamil Nadu and Bihar provide women with sewing machines, saris, and cycles, boosting the sales of these industries, which can be considered a **productive investment** rather than a wasteful expenditure due to the corresponding production.
- **Enhanced Social Welfare:** Freebies support vulnerable and low-income populations by providing essential services and goods such as food, healthcare, and education.
 - Freebies like **bus passes for women** can encourage women to join the workforce, which can lead to economically stable families and Women empowerment.
- **Increased Access to Education and Skill Development:** By distributing items like bicycles and laptops, governments **improve educational accessibility, especially in rural areas**.
 - For example, freebies like **distributing laptops among students** (as done by the Uttar Pradesh government) can increase their productivity, knowledge, and skills.
 - A report by the [NITI Aayog](#) stated that the distribution of bicycles to schoolgirls in Bihar and West Bengal has significantly reduced dropout rates, enhanced attendance, and improved learning outcomes.
- **Strengthening Political Engagement and Public Trust:** Freebies can foster political awareness and public trust by demonstrating government accountability and responsiveness to citizens' needs.
 - According to a study by the Centre for Policy Research, in states like Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, freebies improved public satisfaction with governance, raised political engagement, and enhanced voter turnout.

//

Impact of Government Freebies



What are the Negative Aspects Related to Freebies?

- **Burden on Public Finances:** Freebie distribution significantly strains public finances, with costs ranging from 0.1% to 2.7% of **gross state domestic product (GSDP)** across various states. Some states, like Andhra Pradesh and Punjab, allocate over 10% of their revenue to subsidies.
- **Against Free and Fair Election:** The promise of irrational freebies from public funds before elections unduly influences the voters, disturbs the level playing field and vitiates the purity of the poll process.
 - It amounts to an unethical practice that is similar to giving bribes to the electorate.
- **Distortion in Resource Allocation:** Freebies can misallocate resources by diverting funds from productive sectors, hindering economic growth and essential infrastructure development. **NITI Aayog** criticised subsidies like laptops in Uttar Pradesh for overshadowing urgent needs in education.
- **Dependency Culture:** Freebies may foster a culture of dependency, discouraging self-reliance and entrepreneurship, which are vital for sustainable economic growth.
- **Reduced Accountability:** They can diminish accountability in governance, as political parties may use freebies to distract from systemic issues and failures in public service delivery.
- **Environmental Impact:** Freebies can lead to the overuse of natural resources, such as water and electricity, reducing incentives for conservation and increasing pollution. For example, free electricity for farmers in Punjab has resulted in resource overuse and decreased service quality from the power utility.

What is the Ethical Perspective on Freebies?

- **Government:**
 - **Moral Responsibility:** The government has an **ethical obligation to uplift marginalised** sections of society. Providing welfare measures can be seen as **fulfilling this duty**, especially in addressing **poverty** and **inequality**.
 - However, there is a fine line between genuine welfare and populism aimed at garnering votes.
 - **Accountability and Transparency:** The Governments must ensure that such schemes are **transparent, targeted, and sustainable, avoiding misuse** of public funds for political gain.
 - **Distortion of Incentives:** Freebies may **distort market dynamics, creating disincentives for work and productivity**.
 - Ethical governance should promote **self-sufficiency** rather than dependency, encouraging citizens to engage in productive economic activities.
- **Citizens Perspective:**
 - **Responsibility of Citizens:** While citizens may benefit from freebies, there is an expectation for them to **engage in responsible behaviour**, such as managing finances wisely and seeking productive means to improve their circumstances.
 - Dependency on government aid can hinder personal and communal growth.
 - **Equity and Justice:** The allocation of **freebies** should be analysed from the **perspective of equity**.
 - Ethical considerations include evaluating whether these measures favour specific groups over others and whether they effectively tackle the underlying causes of poverty.
 - **Public Perception and Social Values:** The culture of freebies can **influence societal values**, potentially fostering a **mindset of entitlement** rather than responsibility.
 - This raises **concerns about the long-term implications** for civic engagement and community welfare.

Way Forward

- **Strengthening Democratic Institutions:** There should be focus on strengthening the autonomy of **Election Commission (ECI)** not just on papers but in essence as well which can ensure effective monitoring and regulation of freebies during elections.
- **Enhancing Voter Awareness:** Promoting **voter education and awareness initiatives** can

empower voters to make informed decisions based on the long-term development agendas of **political parties** rather than being influenced by short-term incentives.

- **Shifting Policy Focus:** Encouraging political parties to **prioritise sustainable, long-term policy planning and development** over populist promises can shift public discourse towards meaningful development objectives rather than immediate but temporary benefits.
- **Ensuring Transparent Governance:** Emphasising **transparency and accountability** in welfare scheme implementation can reduce **corruption** and ensure that intended beneficiaries receive the support, enhancing public trust in government programs.
- **Strengthening Social Security Systems:** Instead of an over-reliance on freebies, the government should focus on strengthening social security mechanisms, such as quality healthcare, robust education systems, job creation, and comprehensive **poverty alleviation programs** to address the root causes of socio-economic inequality effectively.

Conclusion

The complex attitudes toward freebies among urban Indians underscore the tension between electoral promises and fiscal responsibility. While voters demand a balance in welfare provisions, political parties face the challenge of aligning their campaigns with sustainable economic objectives. As India's democratic fabric evolves, the ongoing debate on freebies could shape welfare and fiscal policies in the coming state and national elections.

Drishti Mains Question:

What are the ethical and governance implications of political parties using freebies as a means to gain electoral advantage?

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims

Q. Consider the following statements: (2017)

1. The Election Commission of India is a five-member body.
2. The Union Ministry of Home Affairs decides the election schedule for the conduct of both general elections and bye-elections.
3. Election Commission resolves the disputes relating to splits/mergers of recognised political parties.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 3 only

Ans: (d)

Mains

Q. Discuss the role of the Election Commission of India in the light of the evolution of the Model Code of Conduct. (2022)

