

## Freebie Model of Governance: RSTV – Big Picture

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### Context:

- Political parties providing or promising **freebies** to prospective voters is neither very old nor a very new phenomenon. But, in the **past ten years**, the practice is found to be expanding.
- Freebies that are usually distributed include **goods** like bicycles, smart phones, TVs, Laptops and **waivers** on bills (water, electricity, etc.).

### Freebies are distributed by the parties in power and promised by the opposition parties:

#### 1. Freebies given by the parties in power:

- They announce freebies in the form of **government schemes**.
- In the elections, they project the schemes as their
- Further, they include freebies in their **election manifesto** to **retain power**.

#### 2. Poll promises by the opposition parties:

- They announce freebies in their **manifestos** released prior to elections.
- **If they are elected** to power, they will have to implement their promises
- The **Election Commission** has found a marked phenomenon of freebies being promised in the **election manifestos** released by various political parties before the **2019 general election**.

### How Extensive is the Freebie Model of Governance in India?

- The practice is used more by **state governments** as a political tool for state assembly elections.
- The state of **Tamil Nadu** is infamous for introducing and being the lead player in freebie culture.
- The practice has now spread to **northern states** as well. Recently the **Delhi** government announced a power and water free of charge and free bus pass for women. The announcements were made around 6 months before elections.
- The culture of freebies have been observed in other states such as **Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan**, etc.

### What is the Rationale behind the Freebie Model?

- Political parties resort to freebies culture in order to **secure a victory** in the upcoming
- **Politics of plenty:** Even in states like **Tamil Nadu**, where the overall government is comparatively better, parties go for freebies because they are out of any other ideas to attract votes. They are confused regarding what else is to be provided over and above the development work already done with respect to water, electricity, roads and subsidies.
- Even if a lot of commitments have been fulfilled in the social welfare sector, some **political and parties** feel it's insufficient.
  - : in **Delhi**, the government has performed well in the sectors like **health and education**. But the party in power chose to make extra efforts fearing that development in only two sectors won't help them in the upcoming election.
- If **both competing parties are equally promising freebies**, there will be less guarantee on who will

win. However, it will **mobilise a small share of votes** which is crucial in winning an election.

### How Justified or Sustainable is the Freebie Model?

- The model is **neither sustainable nor economically viable**.
- India is a **vibrant democracy** which is looked upon by the entire world, especially in developing countries as a **role model** of democracy. Practices such as freebies **underestimate** the **electoral judgement** of the voter, the **election process**, the **political system** and **parliamentary democracy**.
- It's an unhealthy practice which takes up the **taxpayer's money** which is not appreciated by many voters. But still parties continue the practice.
- In Delhi, **free ride passes for women in the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC)** alone would cost around Rs. 300 Cr. per year. It will make the passengers, who can afford the fare, **irresponsible**. **It may not help the poor**
- Since the money used for providing freebies need to be **funded from the overall budget**, **other important schemes will suffer**.
- If the government opts for freebies just before election, it indicates that the party in power is **not sure whether they have identified and fulfilled people's needs**.
- The parties in the **opposition have often criticised** the announcement of freebies by the parties in power but there are exceptions.
  - In Delhi even the opposition parties are promoting freebies in their manifestos.

### What are some other Challenges Posed by the Model?

- The **powers of EC is limited** in regulating the freebie culture if introduced by party in power
- There is **no legality** to these promises made by political parties. The promises made in the election manifesto **cannot be construed as 'corrupt practice'** under Section 123 of the **Representation of Peoples Act**.
- **Freebies and poll promises are different** in many aspects. **Subsidies** are required for the proper functioning of a government to fulfil peoples' needs. However, it is sometimes confused with freebies. **Opposition parties** can at the most **question the source of funds** but **can't legally stop government functioning**.

### Does the Model Always Work?

- Sometimes **both the major parties** will offer freebies or poll promises, but in a Democracy only one of them will win. Ex.: in Tamil Nadu.
- In the **2019 general election**, the winning party got a massive mandate **even without distributing or promising freebies**. Even though the opposition party offered Rs. 60000 per year to farmers against the Rs.6000 offered by the ruling party, they lost the election.
- Winning in elections depend on **multiple factors**. Ex.: In **Chhattisgarh** state assembly election, the **loan waivers** promised by opposition parties were believed to have helped them win the election. But they lost in the Lok Sabha election. Hence it was observed that an **anti-incumbency** factor may have led to the victory in state assembly election rather than the loan waiver promise.
- Subsidies in a **particular sector for only a certain section** of voters may not assure victory in election. Ex.: Security and safety are more important for women than free ride passes.
- If the people are **confident** about the government taking care of their needs, they wouldn't need freebies at all.
- It is also believed that the culture is **just a passing phase**. As governments come under performance pressure, the culture will recede and other **constructive programmes** will take over its place.

### Judicial Intervention against the Freebie Culture:

- In 2013, the existence of freebie culture in Tamil Nadu have been challenged in the Supreme Court (

**Subramaniam Balaji vs. Govt. of Tamil Nadu).**

- The apex court identified that the case falls in the domain of the **Election Commission (EC)** and gave certain guidelines to the EC to revise the **model Code of Conduct** to check the corrupt practices.
- The SC also observed that the unhealthy practice is bringing a **bad name to Indian democracy**.
- The **new model code of conduct** has included **clear guidelines** to ensure that political parties do not make such promises in their manifestos.
- It states that distribution of freebies of any kind undoubtedly **influence the people** and it shakes the root of **free and fair elections** to a large degree.

**How to Stop the Model of Freebies?**

- The onus of eliminating the practice lies with the **EC, the courts, the political parties and ultimately the voters**.
- All over the **world**, elections are fought based on the **performance of the government or the lack of it**.
- **Political parties in power** need to concentrate on **constructive activities** during their five year term in office. If the government succeeds in passing on the fruit of development to the voters, freebies will not work. Ex.: Chief Minister of **Bihar** Nitish Kumar has said that there won't be any need of freebies if three institutions work properly; i.e., the '**daroga**' (Station House Officer, Police), the **ticket examiner** of trains, and the **bank officer**.
- If the **voters** are **wise and educated** enough, they won't fall for such tricks. Even after accepting freebies, they can choose to vote according to the performance of the government or the lack of it. If they **reject freebies and promises**, political parties will forward for more constructive programmes. The rejection should start with Panchayat raj and state assembly elections.
- **The Election Commission** can look at the prospect of revising the election code of conduct by **making the political parties legally bound** in fulfilling the promises. If the promises are not fulfilled, the voters should at least have the right to question it.
- **Parliamentary Democracy** depends on the strength of **political parties** in power as well as in opposition. They must become more responsible while drafting their schemes and manifestos respectively.
- **Political parties** need to analyse whether their strategy has worked or not in the previous elections. If they focus more on main issues of the time, i.e., food, jobs, national security, etc. half the battle is won even before the election.
- **Promises** need to be **more specific** rather than generic. Ex.: promises for the welfare of a certain section of needy people.

**Conclusion:**

- Freebies model of governance is **neither sustainable nor a guaranteed** election winning formula.
- Onus of eliminating this very serious issue lies with **both political parties and voters**. Political parties need to provide **informed policies and promises** and voters should ask **informed questions** to the political parties regarding the same.