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From smartphones to Wi-Fi, it's raining sops like never before in poll season

By [Malini Goyal](#), ET Bureau | Feb 05, 2017, 12.18 AM IST

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Sale season just got over. But ahead of the state elections, deals are only getting more exciting. And everyone is invited — the rich and the poor, the young and the old, men and women — in the five states in poll mode.

“Buy one get one free” sounds tame here. It's vote for us and get a lot free. In [Goa](#), the [Congress](#) promises, among other things, petrol; the [Bharatiya Janata Party](#) (BJP) offers 1 GB data; and the [Aam Aadmi Party](#) (AAP) health checkups for women and old people — all for a vote.

In the Hindi heartland of Uttar Pradesh, where political stakes are high, on offer are laptops and cellphones, bicycles and pressure cookers and even houses and cheap farm loans.

For the sheer spread of freebies, head to Punjab, which was in the middle of a triangular



The diversity of freebies reveals an India that is changing rapidly. Women, youth and farmers seem to be everybody's favourite.

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GOA

BJP



Cash for women ahead of marriage, and doles for unemployed men

Free 1 GB data and 100 minutes of talk time to youth

Free Wi-Fi to be made available on all college campuses

Congress



5 litres of free petrol per month to each college student

Wheat at a subsidised **rate of ₹2 per kg**

Free water and electricity to the poor

AAP



Free health check-ups for women and senior citizens

₹2,500 monthly **training allowance for women**

Free sanitary pads for schoolgirls

contest between the Congress, the BJP-Shiromani Akali Dal and AAP. Despite widespread voter scepticism, parties made mega promises, from **cheap atta**, dal, **ghee** and sugar to land and houses, free power and water, farm loan waivers and many 21st century 'needs' like 4G-enabled smart phones, free data, laptops and **Wi-Fi**.

The diversity of freebies reveals an India that is changing rapidly. Women, youth and farmers seem to be everybody's favourite. For a nation of 1.3 billion with 30% of its people poor and 50% employed in agriculture, offers of free water, electricity, subsidised atta-dal-sugar and farm loan waiver are understandable. Also, a young nation where 65% Indians are under 35 years explains freebies like cellphones, laptops, data cards and Wi-Fi.

In Goa, a party like the AAP had different manifestos for different categories like farmers, youth, Dalits, the differently abled and industry. “There is a fatigue around age-old promises like bijli, paani and sadak. Issues like surgical strikes and demonetisation seem too remote and have a low people connect.

So political parties are wooing voters with new innovative offers (which promise instant gratification),” says Sanjay Kumar, director, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS).

Early this week, the buzz around poll handouts reached the [Delhi High Court](#), thanks to a public interest litigation (PIL). This is the second time that the courts have been invoked. In 2013, the [Supreme Court](#) (SC) had directed the [Election Commission](#) (EC) to frame guidelines on election manifestos and misuse of freebies. The latest PIL alleges non-compliance of the SC's 2013 guidelines by the poll panel.

“Legally, EC cannot stop them (freebies) if they are part of a party's manifesto. SC too was wary of interfering in a direct way,” says N Gopalaswami, a former chief election commissioner of India. The

SC had said in its 2013 verdict that, legally, the promises in the election manifesto cannot be construed as “corrupt practice” under Section

123 of Representation of People's Act but the reality cannot be ruled out that distribution of freebies of any kind influences people. Election watchers like CSDS' Kumar and Gopalaswami expect the freebie trend to only gain momentum in future. "Freebies have a definite impact on voters," says Kumar.

Old Tradition

Politics of patronage is hardly a new phenomenon. Partly, it has to do with the construct of the Indian democracy. With over 800 million voters, a national election every five years, with 36 state and Union territory elections thrown in between, parties need to master the art of patronage politics to woo voters.

Partly, it has to do with how India as a democracy has sequentially evolved. The poor and populous nation discovered democracy before it discovered capitalism in 1991. Its people first learnt about their rights before learning about their duties. Also, in an aspirational young nation where national rhythm often gets shaped by floods and droughts, starvation deaths and farmer suicides, there is headroom for political parties to experiment with a range of inducements.

Two things stand out about the freebie wave. One, it is far more pronounced in [assembly polls](#) than in general elections perhaps because of the cost and the logistical complexity, says Kumar. Two, what began as a sheepish move by wily politicians in the 1980s seems to have gained all-round currency and some legitimacy today.

UTTAR PRADESH

Samajwadi Party

Cheap ghee, milk powder
to poor students, free bicycles for
girl students

Free **pressure cookers, and**
50% discount on state
roadways bus for women

To continue with the scheme of
free laptops for students
and doles to unemployed
youth



Free laptops, Wi-Fi in
universities and 1 GB Internet
data a month to college students

Crop loan waiver and zero
interest loans for marginal farmers

Free education till Class 12 for
boys, and till graduation for girls

Typically, "parties engage in two types of electoral handouts," says Milan Vaishnav, senior fellow, South Asia programme, Carnegie Endowment for [International Peace](#).

Some are distributed pre-election and others are handed out only if the politician or party is elected and comes to power. Unofficially, cash and liquor have remained an all-time favourite.

But officially the flavours of handouts changed with the times. Journalist Vaasanthi, who wrote J Jayalalithaa's biography *Amma*, recalls how MG Ramachandran (MGR) distributed raincoats in the 1970s even before he became the chief minister. In 2008, in the runup to the 2009 general election, the UPA government announced a Rs 65,318 crore farm-loan waiver which helped them get reelected. But many promises — from laptops in UP to TVs in [Tamil Nadu](#) — were to be fulfilled post elections.

South Leads the North

The trend began in Tamil Nadu almost as a benevolent step in the 1980s, with MGR's Rs 100 crore midday meal for children. In 1984, Janardhan Poojary, a Congress minister at the Centre, launched a loan mela where banks were forced to lend to people, often party supporters, without surety and security.

In the late 1980s, the trend continued with Devi Lal's poll promise with a slogan that went like "sign my name on the dotted line and you will be gifted a debt-free future"; with that he promised to write off cooperative loans of under Rs 20,000 in Haryana. The strategy worked but the promises failed.

However, no state has "bribed for votes" like Tamil Nadu has. Both the AIADMK and DMK governments used liquor revenues to finance their poll promises, including free TVs, mixer-grinders, mobile phones, sewing machines, cash and gold. Media reports estimate that they would have doled out goodies worth Rs 15,000 crore over the last decade. Nilanjan Banik, professor, Bennett University, says if all the poll promises made in the 2016 elections were kept, it would have cost the state Rs 10,000 crore annually.

While Tamil Nadu led the wave, it was hardly alone. In Punjab, free power and water has convoluted the entire economy with disastrous outcomes. JNU professor Badri Narayan says the freebie wave hit UP when Akhilesh Yadav took charge as chief minister in 2012. Patna-based social scientist Shaibal Gupta says Bihar does not have much of a freebie culture; that may partly be because its resources are tiny compared with economically well-off states like Tamil Nadu.

Empty Promises?

While the freebie wave has gained strength, there have been phases of highs and lows. For example, in the 1990s, post liberalisation, as capitalist forces shook things up, the freebie trend moderated or even abated. The 2014 election too marked a kind of reset when the NDA won with Narendra Modi's development-led manifesto.

These are interesting times globally, with democracies from the UK to the US under pressure as the idea of a welfare state gains currency.

PUNJAB**BJP**

Cheap atta, dal, ghee and sugar to blue card holders

A house for every poor family and land to Dalits and backward classes

A job for at least one member from each family

Free education for girls till PhD

₹5 lakh for families affected by militancy

SAD

Farmers to get 10-hour **free power, interest-free loans and waiver of farm loans**

A one-stop shop to give **cheap atta, dal, sugar, ghee and medicines**

Kuchha houses to be made pucca and **jobs for homeless**

Shagun scheme (money for unmarried women) to be raised from ₹15,000 to ₹51,000

Congress

Farm loan waiver of ₹67,000 crore

A job to each of the 55 lakh households

Unemployment bonus of ₹2,500 per month to youth

50 lakh 4G-enabled smartphones for the youth with free data and calls for a year

AAP

Compensation of ₹10,000 to farm labourers for every month of loss of work

Laptops, smartphones and data cards to jobless youth and students

Free Wi-Fi in villages, **monthly pension of ₹2,500** for the old, the disabled and widows

25 lakh jobs, free health check-up facilities, subsidised meals, atta-dal

Old socialist ideas like Universal Basic Income today resonate with hardcore capitalists like Y-Combinator's Sam Altman who has rolled out a pilot study in the US.

Back in Punjab, despite Rs 1.25 lakh crore of debt and no money to pay even its pensioners, parties promised the moon. Voters, though, appear to be wiser. "Sabko maloom hai yeh nahi hona. Sarkar ke paas paise hi nahin hai," says Sukhdev Singh Gill, a surgeon from Roomi village in Ludhiana. But then again, empty coffers and empty promises are par for the course in poll season.

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