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From fuel to tea, it's freebies season in states going to polls

Quite a few of the election freebies on offer in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Goa appear tailored for specific voter groups like women and youth

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Nikita Doval



From free petrol to free smartphones, voters across Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Goa are being promised all kinds of gifts if they vote particular parties to power. Photo: Deepak Gupta/HT

New Delhi: It's election time and that means it's freebie season. From free petrol to pressure cookers, smartphones to cycles, voters across Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Goa are being promised all kinds of gifts if they vote particular parties to power.

In Punjab, the government has added tea and sugar to a current subsidized scheme that already includes rice and pulses—all it needs is milk to make a cuppa.

Such patronage politics can take many forms. "Some (electoral handouts) are distributed pre-election and others are handed out only if the politician or party comes to power. The former involves all manner of sweeteners, ranging from cash to liquor and mobile phone top-ups," said Milan Vaishnav, senior fellow, South Asia Programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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Tamil Nadu has been setting the bar for freebies very high. In 2006, then chief minister M. Karunanidhi fulfilled a major poll promise by launching a Rs2 a kg rice scheme. Several other states followed suit. In the 2016 elections, J. Jayalalithaa's All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) party promised free mobile phones, maternity schemes, free power and a breakfast scheme for primary school students—in addition to existing Amma canteens and Amma bottled water.

"There needs to be legal accountability if parties make a promise," said Sanjay Kumar of Centre for Study of Developing Societies.

In 2013 the Supreme Court told the Election Commission to frame guidelines for election manifestos, saying, "...distribution of freebies of any kind undoubtedly influences people. It shakes the root of free and fair elections to a large degree." The state in this case, Tamil Nadu, argued that it wanted to give TV sets to people—not for recreation but to spread general knowledge.

"There needs to be legal accountability if parties make a promise"

- Sanjay Kumar, Centre for Study of Developing Societies

Economist Nilanjan Banik in a piece written for *The Wire* last year calculated that all the schemes and handouts promised by the DMK and AIADMK will cost Tamil Nadu an additional Rs10,000 crore every year, whereas the state's public debt was more than Rs2 trillion in 2015-16. The data was sourced from *mynet.info.com*. "It needs to be made mandatory on the part of political parties to declare where the money for these schemes will come from," said Kumar who feels a blanket ban on freebies will be impossible to enforce.

This time around, quite a few of the freebies appear tailored for specific voter groups like women and youth. Nevertheless, people tend to vote for parties whose schemes they have benefited from—and these are usually welfare related. When it comes to casting their valuable vote, the Indian voter is perhaps swayed less by the promise of a free laptop and other goodies, than the hope of secure jobs, uninterrupted electricity supply and development.

[Nikita Doval](#)

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