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## Unveiling Populist Undertones in the Revdi Controversy: A Critical Examination of the Interplay between Populist Discourse and the Politics of Freebies

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### **Abstract:**

*The issue of freebies is a recurrent theme in India's political landscape, resurfacing last year in the first week of August when the Supreme Court of India suggested forming an expert committee to examine the matter. Currently, there is a dispute between the central government and the states regarding the practice of promising handouts during election periods. The distinction between freebies and other forms of welfare spending, such as free electricity, water, and education, is subtle yet significant. The post-liberalization era in India, characterized by the adoption of the 'trickle-down' economic model, along with imbalanced tax structures and an unsustainable fiscal federal framework, has exacerbated income and wealth inequality. Even successful welfare measures are sometimes criticized dismissively. While business incentives like corporate tax cuts are often seen as positive economic measures, assistance for the poor is viewed as draining public funds. This disparity in perception persists, regardless of whether irrational freebies impose a substantial burden on the public treasury. Implicitly, this situation underscores the prevalence of competitive populism, particularly in an environment where cooperative federalism is impractical and discordant. Populism, in any form, invariably asserts to represent the 'genuine' or 'pure' population – a commonplace spectacle in contemporary India. In this context, populism manifests as a clash between two opposing political narratives. On one side, there are parties that advocate limiting assistance provision, which could yield electoral advantages for their opponents. On the other side, some parties view freebies as affirmative policy measures to improve overall livelihoods. This paper endeavors to examine and analyse how populist politics intersects with the broader public discourse surrounding the dichotomy of freebies versus welfare spending.*

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### Introduction:

After an extended period of absence from the public discourse, the phenomenon of 'gift-giving' or the 'revdi culture' re-emerged almost a year ago, gaining significant attention when Prime Minister Narendra Modi invoked it during his speech in Kaitheri, Jalaun district. This occurred in conjunction with the inauguration of the Bundelkhand Expressway. Addressing the practice of distributing electoral incentives, the Prime Minister remarked, "Today, everything is being done in our country to introduce the culture of collecting votes by distributing gifts" (Mohan, 2022). This sentiment was reiterated in late October when the Prime Minister criticized the 'revdi culture' while commending various government schemes for effectively addressing the aspirations of the populace in a self-affirming manner.

Notably, the discourse surrounding the 'revdi culture' was revitalized during the campaign for the Gujarat Assembly election, as Aam Admi Party Supremo Arvind Kejriwal pledged his party's commitment to providing a monthly stipend of Rs. 1,000 to all women above the age of 18 and offering free electricity up to 3000 units to unemployed youths if his party secured power (Press Trust of India, 2022). The intended target of the Prime Minister's pointed critique then became unmistakable. The matter was subsequently elevated to the Supreme Court, prompted by advocate Ashwini Upadhyay's Public Interest Litigation (PIL) which opposed the practice of promising gifts before elections to gain electoral advantage. Recognizing the PIL, the then Chief Justice NV Ramana opined that an equilibrium must be achieved between public expenditure and welfare initiatives. Consequently, the pivotal question arising from this discourse revolves around the definition of 'freebies' and the criteria for evaluating policy efficacy. During the hearing of the petition, the three-judge bench led by CJI Ramana posed fundamental questions concerning the delineation of 'freebies.' 'Can the promise of free education be classified as a freebie? Can subsidies for electricity or free potable water be similarly categorized?' queried the Chief Justice (Firstpost, 2022). The Supreme Court bench recommended the establishment of an expert panel to examine the phenomenon of 'freebies' announced during electoral campaigns (Ibid). However, this proposal was deferred due to the connection between certain freebies and the directive principles that govern a state's policies (Hindusthan Times, 2022). Despite being nearly a year old, this debate retains significant relevance for continued and thorough examination.

Interestingly, the genesis of this discourse is not novel; rather, instances abound in recent decades where various political parties, including national entities such as the Congress and BJP, have made ostentatious pre-election pledges. Whether those promises have conferred electoral advantages calls for separate investigation. However, it has to be contended that India stands as a testament that underscores the compatibility of economic liberalization alongside populist

politics, showcasing how populism can function as an ideological structure to effectively navigate the political paradoxes stemming from economic transformations (Chakrabarti & Bandopadhyay, 2021). This study, however, eschews such an analysis to instead scrutinize how the politics of populism permeates the broader public discourse, imbuing it with intricate political nuances. Every political party is equally culpable in perpetuating the culture of 'freebies', regardless of its compatibility with the tenets of the welfare economy or its potential to compromise the goals of a capital-intensive modern economic paradigm. This investigation underscores the variegated nature of populist discourse, which may manifest implicitly in policy considerations and their outcomes.

This debate concerning the provision of freebies has intensified the issue of competitive populism in India. Both the central and state governments are resolutely striving to establish their authenticity and rectitude as they challenge each other's claims. This scholarly inquiry thus contributes to the ongoing discourse on populism and its multifaceted manifestations in contemporary political landscapes.

### **Social Welfare or Freebies?**

The bestowal of pre-election freebies by political parties has become less commonplace. The Directive Principles of State Policy, articulated in Article 38 and Article 39, have conferred both an obligation and authority upon the state to foster the well-being and advancement of the populace while upholding the principles of social, economic, and political equity (Chakrabarti & Bandopadhyay, 2021). Consequently, incumbent parties are compelled to align their populist redistributive agendas with the protective umbrella of these constitutional provisions (Ibid). The neoliberal transformation of the Indian economy has led to a substantial paradigmatic shift over recent decades. Particularly notable is the economic realignment initiated during the tenure of the NDA government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This economic restructuring prioritized privatization and liberalization within the public sector, ostensibly aiming to alleviate the government's fiscal burden from excessive expenditures. Consequently, the allocation of funds to various welfare schemes experienced a considerable decline.

This trajectory has translated into a discouragement of spending on welfare schemes with demonstrable outcomes, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which has been implicitly branded as incompatible with the envisioned new model of development. In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi mocked the policy as a 'living memorial' of failure of the Congress led UPA government (Sharma, 2023). But there is no denial of the fact that this same policy became a safety net for the poor during the COVID years (Ibid). Funds have been diverted into high-profile projects aimed at enhancing communication, defence capabilities, and technological advancements, such as defence and industrial corridors. Regrettably, this focus on grand-scale projects has come at the cost of neglecting the provisioning

of basic amenities to the citizenry. The corporate tax cut of 8% (from 30% to 22%) in the 2019–20 economic year bears testimony to this fact<sup>5</sup>. However, these measures can be seen as steps towards making business-friendly atmosphere in the country whereby national and international investment can flow more freely as a result. Apart from the consecutive COVID-laden downfall years, the manufacturing sector has registered a good rate of average growth in the last few years.<sup>6</sup> In response to the Prime Minister's criticism, parties such as the Samajwadi Party and AAP have articulated that it is essential to distinguish between welfare measures and 'freebies'. Dr. Amit Mitra, the former Finance Minister of Bengal, characterized this entire debate as "misplaced" and levelled the accusation that the Modi government stood as the most prolific provider of 'freebies'. Drawing parallels with the Economic Security Act of the United States, wherein families of four members were entitled to \$3400, he asserts that this instance aligns with the Prime Minister's definition of a "complete freebie". However, he contends that this 'freebie' catalyzed the resurgence of the U.S. economy by invigorating demand, a phenomenon reminiscent of the Keynesian multiplier effect during the era of the Great Depression (The Hindu Bureau, 2022).

Under this new regime, the Union government constantly ridicules the state governments whenever any efforts to subsidize public services are being provided to the population, which is not surprising because the government at the centre firmly believes that the state has the mere responsibility to provide the people with opportunities to realise one's strength to achieve the expected outcomes. This new kind of model of governance model gives birth to a 'social discourse' that reckons that the state should withdraw itself from all sorts of policies that are seen to be appealing to the interests of the common people. The populist policy measures over the years have put the government in a poor fiscal position with a high amount of debt ratio to cover that eventually leads to poor performance of governments in terms of service delivery to its citizens. With the introduction of several market-friendly reforms, the union government had come in the form of divesting many loss-making public sector enterprises to get rid of the immense amount of money that was going astray without making any significant change in the socio-economic realm. But this alarming tendency of the withdrawal of the state from many aspects of traditional governance has extended to the withdrawal from basic responsibilities like providing access to basic healthcare, education, etc.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) conducted by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, investments in the manufacturing sector experienced a notable growth of 20.9% during the fiscal year 2019-20 compared to the preceding year. (Source: The New Indian Express)

<sup>6</sup> Manufacturing sector investments grew 20.9% in 2019-20 over the previous fiscal, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation said in its Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) (Suneja, 2022)

Nevertheless, parties apart from the BJP contend that the 'freebies' dispensed to citizens via diverse welfare programs constitute a fundamental component of a nation's progress and advancement. Allocating resources to social welfare initiatives is closely intertwined with elevating the levels of human capital within a state's populace. This phenomenon finds a consistent illustration in the administrative approach of the AAP government in Delhi. By significantly augmenting financial allocations towards education, healthcare, access to potable water, and various other affordable public amenities, Delhi's quality of life witnessed substantial enhancement, accompanied by improved access to fundamental socio-economic prospects. Delhi now ranks much higher in the 'Access Equality Index'<sup>7</sup> compared to many BJP-ruled states, where this welfare-driven governance model is considered inimical to economic growth (Mohan, 2022).

Given the analysis given above, The Rupashree Prakaalpa started by the West Bengal Government can provide important insights in this direction. This policy, initiated by the West Bengal government on January 31, 2018, aims to provide a one-time financial grant of Rs. 25000 to economically disadvantaged families to assist with the expenses related to their adult daughter's marriage (<http://wbcdwds.gov.in/>, n.d.). Over 10 lakh families have benefitted from the scheme thus far, with an additional 2 lakh families in the process (The New Indian Express, 2023). Eligibility criteria include adult females with minimal qualifications and a family income below Rs. 1.5 lakh per annum. While the scheme has aided numerous economically vulnerable families, it falls short in truly propelling women's empowerment and achieving comprehensive social justice. Lacking the classification of a redistributive initiative, the scheme has struggled to yield significant positive impacts on the state's economic growth. It's noteworthy that this scheme was launched just a year before the general election of 2019.

The Congress party secured victory in a State Legislative Election of Karnataka in 2023, altering the national political landscape and infusing renewed optimism within the party for the upcoming 2024 general election. Several contributing factors facilitated this triumph. Notably, their proposed schemes such as Gruha Jyoti, Gruha Lakshmi, Anna Bhagya, and Yuvanidhi (KPCC Assembly Election Manifesto, 2023) have proven effective in capturing the attention and garnering support from the masses. However, these proposed schemes have also faced allegations from the opposition of harbouring populist undertones. A comparable framework finds application in the execution of public policies in states such as TMC-governed West Bengal and LDF-governed Kerala (for instance, the Kanyashree program in West Bengal and the SRESTHA

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<sup>7</sup> For context, in the methodological design of the Access (In) Equality Index (AEI), we measured overall access, using a geometric mean in order to ensure partial compensability, i.e., poor performance in one sub-index is not fully compensated by good performance in another. It also balances the uneven performance in the dimensions and encourages improvements in the weaker dimensions. Other prominent indices like the Human Development Index and Sustainable Society Index use the geometric mean for aggregation as well. (Mohan, 2022)

and Matru Jyoti schemes in Kerala and Odisha). The question pertains to whether social expenditures hold significance in yielding electoral gains. The answer is firmly affirmative. Recent electoral patterns in the aforementioned three states demonstrate that citizens do cast their votes in favour of what are termed as 'populist' public welfare initiatives—a situation that the BJP currently finds concerning.

Hence, the argument loses its footing if the BJP is accusing its political counterparts of excessive freebie distribution, given that centrally sponsored public welfare schemes like PM Kisan Samman Nidhi and the National Assistance Program ought to have been discontinued long ago, as they entail direct cash transfers to beneficiaries. Consequently, the query of who should delineate the demarcation between freebies and welfare programs currently resides within the ambiguous sphere of public discourse.

### **Genuine Concern or Disguised Centralisation?**

The core element of populist political imaginary to a politico-discursive field where conflict between the pure and the corrupt occurs. This relation between social imaginary and political imaginary is not a new phenomenon in Indian politics. Through the evocation of singularity, the chain of equivalence and homogeneity in identity formulation is well designed to divide the political space into two antagonistic camps. This is indeed a characteristic feature of majoritarian politics.

The convergence of the politics of freebies and populism arises from their shared objective of cultivating a positive perception among the voting populace. Populist figures frequently exploit the dispensation of complimentary goods and services to showcase their dedication to promptly resolving the public's pressing requirements. Through the provision of tangible advantages, they enhance their portrayal as champions of citizens' well-being, thereby fostering widespread endorsement. These giveaways can be construed as a tangible embodiment of the populist commitment to fulfilling the populace's necessities. Populist leaders frequently ascend to authority during prolonged periods of economic fragility, harnessing public discontent fuelled by stark wealth disparities (Chakrabarti & Bandopadhyay, 2021). They champion the mission of advocating for the citizenry and assert to epitomize the collective voice, often championing slogans such as “India is Indira and Indira is India”<sup>8</sup> (Ibid). Under the BJP-led NDA government rule, widespread populist activism could be noticed in the last eight years of governance, starting from the solidifying of the rhetoric of ‘Hindu Rashtra based on authentic principles of the authentic Hindu nation to the marginalisation of minority communities. The “pure people” is “the Hindu”, and the “corrupt elite” is the Congress Party, which is not just seen as corrupt but

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<sup>8</sup> Proclaimed by D.K. Barooah, former INC President, in the year of 1974.

also as a vehicle for Muslim power within Indian politics (Leidig & Mudde, 2023). The crucial factor in this form of mobilisation is the creation of a discursive metanarrative to replace a long-existing cultural and political hegemony. Quite evidently, this whole process of re-ordering involves 'replacing the old distinction between left and right, which had shaped Indian politics for a long time, with a new kind of meta-narrative based on the juxtaposition of "us" and "them" (Gudavarthy, 2021).

One of the major reasons for the victory of the BJP in 2014 was its promise to fight corruption at the behest of creating a more transparent institutional structure that would allow proper implementation of different welfare schemes. In this process of critiquing the existing democratic institutions and their malfunction, the BJP vacated the meaning of the so-called 'progressive politics' replacing it with a pro-corporate outlook. Hence, when the Prime Minister criticises the poor implementation of welfare schemes during the Congress rule and how it undermined the economic strength of the country, he actually slides himself into a moral justification of the same acts and practices because the BJP's set of public welfare measures is no way above the previous ones.

The emergence of populism appears intricately intertwined with the rise of neoliberalism. In the context of India, the nation did not actively seek to circumvent the influence of the global capitalist structure or the broader currents of globalization. As a result, the process of corporatization assumes a form that diminishes welfare benefits for the vulnerable segments who rely on the modest 'gifts' provided by the government. Consider, for instance, the substantial sum of 1.84 lakh crores<sup>9</sup> spent on corporate tax concessions. Redirecting this considerable amount towards social security programs could have led to a noteworthy enhancement in the living standards of millions of Indians. Therefore, the debate on freebies largely depends upon how the state visualised its development trajectory. The dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them' serves as a useful analytical framework to elucidate this phenomenon. This particular expression of representative subjectivity is large if not exhaustively, employed by right-wing populist leaders across the world to prove their authentic claim to power. The recalibration of welfare dynamics is adroitly orchestrated by charismatic leaders such as Narendra Modi. His government model consistently reinforces the centralization of power within the Union government to advance his distinctive agenda in the sphere of public policy implementation.

### **Birth of Competitive Populism and its Future Implications:**

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<sup>9</sup> A report from the parliamentary committee on Estimates revealed that as a consequence of the reduction in corporate tax rates, the government incurred a revenue deficit of Rs. 1.84 lakh crore across the fiscal years 2019-20 and 2020-21. In the initial year of implementing the lowered corporate tax rate, namely in 2019-20, the incurred loss amounted to Rs. 86,835 crore, followed by a loss of Rs. 96,400 crore in the subsequent fiscal year of 2020-21. (Source: The New Indian Express)

Within this comprehensive discourse, the arguments unfold along two distinct trajectories. On one side, the central government contends that 'freebies' exert substantial strain on the national treasury. Contrarily, proponents of the opposing viewpoint assert that freebies can serve as crucial lifelines in a profoundly stratified society like India, where wealth continues to accumulate disproportionately in the hands of a few.

While the 'trickle-down' economic model might yield certain positive outcomes, it is criticized for impeding inclusive growth, as it contributes to the widening chasm of inequality, as articulated by prominent economist Joseph E. Stiglitz (2015). Stiglitz emphasizes the need for a symbiotic relationship between the modern capital-intensive, technology-driven sector and the nature-based, labour-intensive sector (Gadgil, 2014).

Amidst this discourse, while the model attracts criticism for hindering capital-intensive growth, instances of freebies like free public transport passes for women in Delhi and Tamil Nadu have effectively encouraged greater female workforce participation, ultimately stabilising numerous family economies. It is imperative to encourage coordinated endeavours aimed at curbing both fiscal and monetary inflation, a measure that would also reinforce the principles of 'cooperative federalism'. However, the transition into this spirit of harmonious vertical coordination necessitates consensus and adaptability concerning decisions pertaining to the allocation of public funds for socially beneficial initiatives.

Regrettably, the realization of constructive outcomes from cooperative federalism appears confined primarily to BJP-governed states. States governed by opposition parties find themselves enmeshed in a vertically skewed dynamic with the central government, leading to the emergence of competitive populism as a consequence. The Indian judiciary, through its various landmark judgments (e.g., BALCO employees Union Vs Union of India<sup>10</sup>) has maintained that issues related to economic policies should be left to the respective state governments only and they are not subject to judicial review. But simultaneously, the Supreme Court by constituting a Central Committee to determine the viability of the issue has ignored the regional diversity and socio-economic inequality. Hence, the conflict doesn't seem to be the end of the tunnel. Eroding the importance of these several government interventions actually, to a large extent 'exposes the elitism in our society, where the poor are seen as being unproductive and dependent on charity.' (Sinha, 2022) Lack of political will from the central government is eventually exacerbating the already existing economic inequality in the country.

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<sup>10</sup> The validity of the decision of the Union of India to disinvest and transfer 51% shares of M/s. Bharat Aluminium Company Limited (hereinafter referred to as 'BALCO') is the primary issue in these cases. BALCO was incorporated in 1965 as a Government of India Undertaking under the Companies Act, 1956.



**Conclusion:**

One of the most difficult aspects of making a social security scheme successful is to minimise the 'inclusion error' (Dreze & Khera, 2017). If any individual is benefitting from the social welfare schemes like PDS even if he/she is placed higher than the poverty line or well-off household, then that would be counted as an inclusion error. Policy universalisation without properly chalking out the set of beneficiaries is an issue that the central government wants to pounce upon to promote its populist agenda. Most of the developed countries (including the US<sup>11</sup>) in the world today have a robust and comprehensive social security system that circumscribes education, health, food, unemployment benefits, etc. To run these public welfare schemes smoothly, higher taxation should be ensured to amply fund these provisions. It is a fact that in India "a comprehensive vision for social policy is yet to enter public debates in a significant manner" (Dreze & Khera, 2017).

It is to be admitted that the coverage of PDS<sup>12</sup> has been extended in the last two decades to about two-thirds of the population, but simultaneously, the same policy has also become a contested political agenda. Many state governments had earlier given food grains to their population for electoral benefits, but that doesn't essentially eliminate the success of the policy in pulling millions of people out of poverty. Many other welfare schemes are reprehended as a 'subsidy burden' on the state's financial resources, but the contribution of these schemes in terms of human development and protection of the basic rights of the people cannot be outright denied. Therefore, the positive outcomes of these policies are to be recognised even if some of these couldn't yield affirmative results and hence can be termed as 'wasteful'.

The country has a constitutional obligation towards its citizen's well-being and for that matter, as many as eight social security schemes are being run in our country (some of them are PMGKAY,

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- Federal Old-Age (Retirement), Survivors, and Disability Insurance, OASDI
  - Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, TANF
  - Health Insurance for Aged and Disabled, Medicare
  - Grants to States for Medical Assistance Programs for low-income citizens, Medicaid
  - State Children's Health Insurance Program for low-income citizens, SCHIP

<sup>12</sup> AAY was a step in the direction of making TPDS aim at reducing hunger among the poorest segments of the BPL population. A National Sample Survey Exercise pointed towards the fact that about 5% of the total population in the country sleeps without two square meals a day. This section of the population could be called as "hungry". In order to make TPDS more focused and targeted towards this category of population, the "Antyodaya Anna Yojana" (AAY) was launched in December, 2000 for one crore poorest of the poor families. (Source: <https://nfsa.gov.in>)

MGNREGA, ICDS, etc.). But the recent fiscal reforms have relatively weakened the Government's policy reach with Union Finance Commission solely being the institution to oversee the matters related to fiscal devolution. The Planning Commission being replaced by NITI Aayog leads to a serious issue related to 'regional and sub-regional inequities.' Some of the policies being converted to legal rights have surely entrenched the accountability and semblance of these policies, meanwhile, creating some sort of rigidity and centralization on the implementation part also.

The central government trying to 'remote control' and 'micro-manage' manifold aspects of these programmes which eventually resulted in a tussle between central and state governments. Given the circumstances outlined above, the populist analytical framework tends to be inherently unsustainable, as it falls short in providing coherent answers to fundamental macroeconomic queries. The Central Government strategically establishes its credibility by discrediting the political 'other', in this context referring to opposition parties not aligned with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Through the provision of 'incentives' to influential 'political entrepreneurs', the government has made concerted efforts to bolster its electoral apparatus, aiming to cultivate enduring partisan loyalties. (Roberts, 2017)

The ability of politicians to fulfil their promises hinges on their electoral triumphs, a feat contingent upon securing public support (Chakrabarti & Bandopadhyay, 2021). It is widely accepted among political factions that providing tangible benefits constitutes the most effective strategy for garnering the allegiance of voters, particularly those in disadvantaged circumstances (Ibid). Consequently, it can be asserted that populist endeavours function as the conduit through which politicians secure the mandate to assume positions of authority. Populism as a political phenomenon cannot be comprehended without accounting for its economic mobilization aspect. The BJP, a quintessential populist party, heavily relies on its social foundation, primarily ingrained in the concept of 'hinduisation of subnationalism' (Jaffrelot, 2016). The paradox lies in the fact that the Prime Minister himself ascended from a background of profound poverty during his formative years. He even reveres the poorest citizens of the country as the true embodiment of democracy, akin to other populist leaders. This alignment with the underprivileged follows a traditional mode of political mobilization that has persisted in post-colonial India for a considerable duration.

This approach counters economic downturn not by heavily depending on technocratic expertise, but by emphasizing a narrative that underscores the opposition parties' failure to embrace its neo-liberal economic model. A noteworthy number of scholars are intrigued by the BJP's ability to advance its nationalist agenda without arousing significant ire among voters influenced by misconceptions. Nevertheless, the culmination of the 'freebie' discourse fails to reconcile the

foundational aspects of how an economy should thrive and how marginalized and vulnerable segments find their voice within this new governance paradigm.

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