

# The need to move away from clientelism

Welfare initiatives embody civil rights, whereas freebies cultivate a patron-client syndrome



C. LAKSHMANAN & VENKATANARAYANAN S.

A neoliberal economy encourages private capital and the market, while forcing the state to withdraw from welfare. The state is limited in taking concrete and constructive efforts to fulfil the aspirations of the people. Even as the poor perceive the state as an arbitrator of their well-being and a facilitator for their mobility in all spheres of life, today's political parties resort to unsolicited freebies to attract them. The line between welfare and populism has blurred.

Welfare initiatives include a targeted Public Distribution System, providing social security for labourers, quality education, fair employment, affordable healthcare, decent housing, and protection from exploitation and violence. Freebies, on the other hand, are provided to attract voters to cast their vote in a particular election. They create limited private benefit for the receiver and do not contribute towards strengthening public goods/facilities.

## A freebie culture

The culture of freebies in Tamil Nadu was started during the 1967 Assembly elections. The then Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) chief C.N. Annadurai offered three measures of rice for ₹1. The practice of providing freebies was followed by subsequent Chief Ministers of both the DMK and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), who promised free TV sets, free laptops to students, free rides for women in buses, free gas cylinders and stoves, a goat and a cow for poor farmers, and so on.

Initially, the government attempted to strengthen the redistribution of resources for all. After the 1990s, Dravidian parties moved towards clientelism, narrowly focussing on electoral gains. A study by Shroff, Kumar and Reich (2015) on the DMK's health insurance scheme demonstrated that the main beneficiaries were the party's core supporters and swing voters who could be influenced easily. Worse, after 2009, fewer people accessed public health



File photo of people taking home free colour TVs in Salem. ■ E. LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

care centres.

In 2021, however, there was a qualitative difference in the manifesto of the DMK, which avoided most of the freebies except tablet devices to students studying in higher secondary schools and colleges. The manifesto reflected more of a programmatic policy intervention towards better public services than narrow private benefits in the form of freebies. But both the DMK and the AIADMK were silent on land distribution and enhancing budgetary allocation for maintenance of public infrastructure like schools, colleges, hostels and hospitals. The GSDP share for health was better under AIADMK rule compared to DMK rule, but both were below 1.5%. Tamil Nadu's 2021-22 Budget shows that it has allocated around 13.3% of its total expenditure for education, which is lower than average allocation for education by all States, which is 15.8%.

## Depoliticising the poor

When Senior Counsel Arvind P. Datar submitted his arguments in *S. Subramaniam Balaji v. Govt. of Tamil Nadu* (2013), which challenged the freebies of both the DMK government in 2006 and AIADMK government in 2011, he emphasised that freebies violate the constitutional mandate of extending benefits for public purpose and instead create private benefits. He asserted that the literacy rate in Tamil Nadu was around 73% and there were 234 habitations across the State with no school access whatsoever, and distribution of free consumer goods to the people having ration cards cannot be justified as "public purpose". Further, distributing laptops does not serve the purpose of increasing the quality of education. According to a

report by 'Ainaivarukkum Kalvi Iyakam' (Sarva Siksha Abhiyan) in 2019, there were 3,003 government schools attended by less than 15 students. Due to lack of proper infrastructure facilities and specialised teachers, parents prefer to move their students to private schools. According to a report in this newspaper in 2019, more than 1,500 hostels for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) were in a dilapidated condition. Hence, freebies will not only depoliticise the poor and marginalised communities but also indirectly deny them their due share of state resources. Freebies drastically widen the gap between the rich and the poor. Populism encourages mediocre political critics and erases critical and rational thinking, which are important to raise pertinent questions to people in power.

Compared to other States, Tamil Nadu has made impressive strides in many development indicators such as education, healthcare (mortality rate and life expectancy) and infrastructure facilities. However, it lags behind in other aspects. According to the Tamil Nadu State Agricultural Department's publication, 'Salient Statistics on Agriculture, 2019', SCs, who constitute nearly 20% of Tamil Nadu's population, accounted for 10% of agricultural landowners and possessed 7.8% of the farmland in the State. Even though the literacy rate is high in Tamil Nadu, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-4 (2015-16), only 32% of women aged 15-49 had completed 12 or more years of schooling, compared with 38% of men. The NFHS-4 showed sharp differences between SCs and Other Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu. The neonatal mortality was 12.3% for OBCs, but 17.4% for

SCs. Infant mortality was 18.4% for OBCs but 23.6% for SCs. And under-five mortality was 24.8% for OBCs and 31% for SCs. The data reflect unequal access to public health infrastructure.

According to a paper by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, 'Explaining the contractualisation of India's workforce' (2019), the share of contract workers in Tamil Nadu increased sharply from 8.3% in 2000-01 to 20.17% in 2013-14, which shows the withdrawal of the state in providing social security, and leaving the workforce at the mercy of neoliberal market forces.

## A dichotomy

Theoretically, there is a qualitative distinction between being subjects in an authoritarian regime and being citizens in a democratic polity. Unsolicited freebies cultivate a patron-client syndrome and encourage personality cults in a democratic polity. Besides, they affect the critical faculties of citizens, particularly the poor and the marginalised. Providing freebies is to treat people like subjects, whereas citizens are entitled to constitutional guarantees. Welfare initiatives are an embodiment of civil rights, whereas unsolicited freebies show benevolence at best and apathy at worst towards the poor by the ruling parties.

There was a positive indication that the DMK is reconsidering unsolicited freebies/populism when it tabled a White Paper on the State's Finances in the Assembly recently. Thereafter, there has been a lot of public discussion on this issue, which may lead to a reorientation of public policy in a healthy direction. Political parties and civil society should consider quality aspects in education, healthcare and employment and ensure fair distribution and redistribution of resources for the marginalised communities. We draw the public's attention and debate to the dichotomy between welfare and unsolicited freebies or populism, so that the constitutional ideal of a secular, egalitarian and democratic India can be realised.

C. Lakshmanan is Associate Professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, and Convenor, Dalit Intellectual Collective, and Venkatanarayanan S. teaches at Christ University, Bengaluru