

O HERALDO

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The politics of populism

Election season in India has become synonymous with a flurry of promises and the announcement of free welfare schemes. Be it Assembly elections or the Lok Sabha polls, political parties of every stripe are engaging in a competitive race to outdo one another with grandiose commitments in their manifestos. The Delhi Assembly elections, scheduled for February 5, are no exception. AAP, BJP, and Congress are all deploying promises of free benefits as a central strategy to woo voters. However, this trend raises critical questions about its feasibility and long-term implications.

Welfare schemes have long been a cornerstone of governance in India, addressing poverty, unemployment, and other socio-economic challenges. From free rations to pension plans for widows and the elderly, such programmes serve as lifelines for millions. They stem from the recognition of deep-seated poverty across the nation. Yet, the political landscape has shifted from addressing systemic issues to leveraging welfare as a short-term electoral strategy.

The recent promises in Delhi's elections underline this shift. For example, AAP's pledge of Rs 2,100 monthly to women is met with BJP's counter of Rs 2,500. AAP's 200 units of free electricity is matched by Congress' promise to increase the limit to 300 units. Congress has further expanded its manifesto with promises like the 'Pyari Didi Yojana' for women and 'Jeevan Raksha Yojana' for healthcare. On the surface, such schemes appear to cater to the needs of citizens, but they come at a steep cost.

Governments, both at the State and Central level, often lack the financial bandwidth to fulfill these promises without plunging into debt. Experts estimate that fulfilling the current slate of promises in Delhi could push the city's traditionally surplus budget into a deficit. The expected expenditure may exceed Rs 6,000 crore, jeopardising long-term fiscal stability. The precedent in other States like Punjab is instructive, where AAP failed to deliver on its financial commitments to women after coming to power.

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In Maharashtra, the BJP-led alliance deployed a similar strategy with the 'Laadli Bahin' scheme, which promised Rs 1,500 per month to women. While this helped the alliance secure a victory, its implementation faltered post-election. Beneficiaries have faced delays and scrutiny, eroding trust and exposing the pitfalls of promises made without adequate planning.

AAP's dominance in Delhi politics owes much to its free welfare initiatives. In its maiden tenure in 2013, the party introduced free electricity and water schemes, which were instrumental in its resounding victories in 2015 and 2020. This strategy has forced rivals BJP and Congress to follow suit. For instance, BJP's manifesto now includes a promise to provide Rs 21,000 and six nutrition kits to every pregnant woman, subsidised LPG cylinders, and increased pensions for senior citizens. These populist measures might sway voters, but they also signal a worrying trend of financial imprudence.

The issue of free schemes has not escaped judicial scrutiny. Advocate Ashwini Upadhyay's petition in the Supreme Court argues for the need to differentiate between essential welfare measures and gratuitous freebies. He advocates for a standardised format for election manifestos that includes financial disclosures on debt levels and repayment plans. This transparency, Upadhyay contends, is crucial to curbing the burgeoning debt crisis. When he first filed the petition in 2022, India's debt stood at Rs 150 lakh crore. It has since escalated to Rs 225 lakh crore, with Delhi's debt rising from Rs 55,000 crore to Rs 1 lakh crore.

A report by 'Moneycontrol' highlights the financial strain posed by Delhi's existing schemes. Subsidies for electricity (Rs 3,600 crore), water (Rs 200 crore), and bus fares (Rs 70 crore) already weigh heavily on the budget. If AAP's promise of Rs 2,100 per month to women is implemented, an additional Rs 10,000 crore would be required by 2026. These figures underscore the unsustainable nature of such promises.

Freebies resonate with voters, particularly in a country where poverty persists despite decades of economic growth. However, this reliance on short-term handouts diverts focus from structural reforms and investments in employment generation, healthcare, and education. Over time, this can erode public trust when promises are not fulfilled, leading to political and social unrest.

Twitter World

Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri @vivekagnihotri

India is known as a land of seekers, but when it comes to DeepSeek, China has surpassed us. Innovation was India's only hope to stand out in the

modern world, but our lack of investment in R&D has held us back. Without serious efforts in technology, no nation can claim superpower status. In today's world, tech is the real power and we're far far behind.

comment



PETER FERNANDES

The government of the day fills their coffers by applying a percentage to every project with a minimum of 15 percent, and this percentage varies but never less. Road quality is a crucial part of the infrastructure of any country, not only for the growth of the economy but also for the safety of human life



Gram Sadak Yojana envisages a grand plan to ensure that more remote areas gain vital road access, thereby fostering economic growth and improving the quality of life for rural populations.

Although an ancient civilisation, India is a fairly young democracy, and to its credit, India has the second-largest road network in the world, after the United States of America, with just under 4 million miles (6.4 million kilometres) of roads. What a remarkable accomplishment! Yes indeed, but it comes with a rider. The cost of con-

structing a highway in India is 5 times that in the USA, and this is despite cheaper labour. Besides, American roads are generally of good quality, but Indian roads are mostly of poor quality, many times unmotorable. In the United States, the road infrastructure is characterised by well-maintained highways and roads that connect cities, towns, and rural areas.

The quality of roads is generally high, with smooth surfaces, proper signage, and well-marked lanes. The American road network is known for its efficiency and safety. The quality of Indian roads often varies, with some national highways being world-class while others struggle with potholes and inadequate maintenance. And the rural roads are mostly in pathetic condition. The million-dollar question, which the nation wants to know, is why is the government constructing poor-quality roads despite spending more money and having cheap labour? What is the missing link, and where is it? Without a doubt, corruption and more corruption are the missing link.

The government of the day fills their coffers by applying a percentage to every project with a minimum of 15 percent, and this percentage varies but never less. Road quality is a crucial part of the infrastructure of any country, not only for the growth of the economy but also for the safety of human life. Sadly, the focus of the Indian government is more on their own well-being, which is the reason for the loss of thousands of lives on roads every year. There is an idiom, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

The highest number of road accidents and fatalities in India is due to the deep-seated corruption that has led to ill-planned and disastrous roads. Who is responsible? And, will someone take the responsibility? In 2023, India saw a record high number of road accident deaths, with an estimated 1.73 lakh people killed. This is equivalent to an average of 474 deaths per day. The number of injuries also increased, with nearly 4.63 lakh people injured in 2023. If people should demand justice, the whole of government machinery would be behind bars serving life sentences. But a corrupt judiciary is also of no help, and so the horror story continues.

Check this out: The 'Bharatmala' project, where the cost of construction has doubled from 15.37 crore per kilometre to over 32 crore per km. The Dwarka motorway construction cost went up from Rs 18 crore per km to Rs 250 crore per km to construct 2 km of the Dwar-

ka Motorway. Rs 500 crore is what it took a 'Mangalyaan' to go. The NHAI has looted common citizens of this country to the tune of Rs 132 crore, only when 5 toll plazas were audited. Imagine if every toll plaza in this country was audited; what would the tune of this scam be? On account of corruption, those lakhs of people who succumbed on roads every year can't say, "Take me home, country roads." Besides, those million others who die of hunger and live below the poverty line because of this malice. And yet, the politicians and those responsible for X-number of deaths on the road are unmindful and sleep without any remorse.

Who will remind humanity that once and only once we pass this way, for this world is not our permanent destination? Make it better. Yes indeed, we are just passing through, and roads are a record of those who have gone before. The tragedy of roads in India is that they cry out of corruption and destruction, with bad engineering and unscientific design. "Black spots" and "potholes" are major problems on Indian roads, causing accidents, traffic jams, and vehicle damage. In 2022, potholes were responsible for 4,446 accidents, killing 1,856 people and injuring 3,734 others.

In 2016, the Union Minister for Road Transportation and Highways, Nitin Gadkari, slammed the authorities for the unscientific construction of roads; however, it's déjà vu even in 2025. The song, "Road to Hell", by Chris Rea, the British songwriter, inspired by the frustration of London motorway rush-hour traffic, resonates in India today more than ever before. Is this the legacy we want to pass on to the next generation? On the other hand, the Railways in India are part of the legacy of the British Empire. Nowhere other than India is the railway so indelibly connected with the image of the nation. The British East India Company and the colonial British government developed railways in India. The Indian railway network carries around 24 million passengers daily. Just as there is no single country on earth that has such a broad cultural, ethnic, and racial mix as India, there is also no railway system that has played and, crucially, continues to play such a fundamental role. The slogan, "India Shiny" by BJP is a fake legacy. We have to remember, roads were made for journeys, not destinations. Although roads are paved with good intention, can the travellers in India therefore say, "Take Me Home, Country Roads?" Or, Chris Rea will say, this is a road to hell.

(The author is a priest based at Pilar, Goa)

tragedy. Such actions reinforced the principle of moral responsibility in public life. Today, the erosion of these values undermines public trust and democratic integrity. To preserve governance's sanctity, leaders must prioritise ethics, ensuring public office serves the people, not personal or partisan interests.

Gopalaswamy J Chennai

President's partisan speech

President Droupadi Murmu spoke about the need to uphold the values enshrined in the Constitution and praised the Drafting Committee of the Constitution headed by Dr B R Ambedkar for giving us such a document of flawless eminence.

It is unfortunate that, to show loyalty to the ruling dispensation which helped her move into the Rashtrapati Bhavan, she advocated the controversial proposal for simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies as a means to define good governance. This, she has done, being fully aware of it that the draft bill on simultaneous elections, introduced by the Modi government is under review by a joint committee of Parliament.

The First Citizen has allowed herself to be drawn into a partisan political debate. She has acted in such a partisan manner in favour of the BJP government at the Centre.

Tharcus S Fernando, Chennai

Remembering T N Seshan among the noise and din of election campaigning in Delhi with a sense of déjà vu when he cleaned up the streets of graffiti particularly in cities like Kolkata and put restrictions on loudspeakers to limit noise pollution and came down heavily on the offer of freebies to the electorate.

Nowadays, we find excessive offers from politicians and parties like giving youth doles of upto Rs 18,000 per month. The Supreme Court guidelines to limit sops to voters are being disregarded by the political parties or they are finding new ways to beat the system. Time to stop the indiscriminate distribution of public wealth.

Srinivas Kamat, Mysore

Change in school academic year

It is learnt that the All Goa Secondary School Teachers' Association (AGSSTA) has opposed changes to the academic calendar which include starting the academic year in April instead of June.

The association has warned that these changes will negatively impact the overall education system in Goa. While the start of the new academic year from April 1 will affect the working schedule of the teachers, thought should also be given to the trauma students will have to undergo. After burning the midnight oil during the examination as students try to excel at the exams, they look forward to a well-deserved vacation along with family members.

In fact the task of vacation plans, travel booking and hotel accommodation is accomplished well in advance. Imagine the student's plight if the vacation plans have to be shelved as the new academic year commences immediately. Students will not be mentally prepared to go to the next class.

Imagine having vacation in May, just after one month of the school reopening. After the vacation will the students be able to remember the topics completed in April or will they have to start afresh? More than the high temperatures and humidity in April, which will cause discomfort, dehydration and reduced focus in the classrooms, the change in the ac-

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ademic year will have a huge psychological impact on the students. However, the students cannot raise their voice. Hence it is for the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) in every school to voice their concern.

Adelmo Fernandes, Vasco

GBS patients need to be counselled

Increasing number of Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS) patients in Pune has been reported. Since GBS is described as a "rare autoimmune" disorder, caused by a bacteria and transmitted by a virus, experts are puzzled. In plenty of patients, the exact cause cannot be documented.

Respiratory and gastrointestinal infections may trigger the nervous system. Importance of appropriate food, water and personal hygiene cannot be lost on anyone. Weeks later, however, a person may develop weakness and numbness in the lower limbs spreading to arms, and leading to a possible paralysis.

Pricking, and pins and needles in the hands and feet, is a typical description of GBS. As everywhere, the bacteria Campylobacter jejuni is said to be responsible for the Pune cases of GBS, and norovirus seems to have facilitat-

ed the infection. A person's own autoimmune system attacks its peripheral nerves.

It is said that there is no cure for GBS. That said, timely plasma exchange, prompt intravenous immunoglobulin and excellent physiotherapy are known to give succour to the patients. Patients need to be counselled that recovery will be sure though slow.

Ganapathi Bhat, Akola

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Moral crisis in public life

Recent developments highlight a stark moral crisis in global and Indian politics. In the United States, President Donald Trump, convicted in a hush money scandal, assumed office after his sentence was suspended.

Shortly after, he issued presidential pardons for Capitol rioters linked to his party. Simultaneously, outgoing president Joe Biden granted a presidential pardon to his son facing felony charges, raising questions about ethical governance.

In India, similar lapses in moral responsibility are evident. Tamil Nadu ministers convicted by lower courts continue in office despite adverse judicial observations. Political parties, both national and State-level, openly accept donations from corporates facing investigations, some with direct commercial interests in government projects. This disregard for ethical norms reflects a worrying trend of self-preservation over public accountability.

Historical precedents stand in stark contrast. The then US President Richard Nixon resigned during Watergate, and Lal Bahadur Shastri stepped down as Railway Minister after a train

people'sedit

THE RENOVATION

KSS PILLAI

Manufacturers worldwide have been moving with time to survive. Those who refused to do so, though enjoying a good market share, had to shut their shops. I know many tile factories downing their shutters as customers patronised others when they did not change their product. That has been the case with those who produce mobile phones and many such things. Even the humble bicycle, the poor man's transport, now appears quite different with several new features that have taken it beyond his reach.

With age creeping upon me, I am happy when other family members, like my son or grandson, perform chores like going to the bank to do transactions on my behalf or withdraw money from the ATM.

Sometimes, they purchase dresses for me that are not to my liking, or the womenfolk prepare dishes I dislike. Though I felt sidelined initially when decisions, some concerning me, were made without consulting me, I didn't mind later. I know that widowers like me should be more cautious and make adjustments to suit the changed circumstances. Adhering to the dos and don'ts of various sources to the aged, I don't criticise, and life goes on without tussle. What is important is to live the rest of my life peacefully.

Our house was more than 20 years old, with most of the materials used gone out of fashion. When my son told me it was time we renovated the house, I had no hesitation in nodding as I knew he had already decided to do so and was asking my opinion only as a formality.

The renovation meant almost a reconstruction that took more than three months. The things replaced were many: tiles, ceiling fans, television sets, windows, furniture, cots, bathroom fittings, switchboards, air conditioners with remote controls, doors with their frames, devices in the kitchen, and even water bottles. Most of them were functioning well but had disappeared from the market as the manufacturers had switched to new models. Some of the changes like replacing the bulky television sets with sleek models with several features like better picture quality, had my support. So were the old curtains replaced with blinds with beautiful pictures.

The whole building was repainted, giving it a modern look. Some rooms were painted with multiple colours. The changes were not confined to the interior of the house. The lawn was renovated with new tiles and potted plants. The grass in the lawn was changed to green plastic ones that did not require constant attention. The partly rusted water pipes were also replaced.

All the old things had disappeared, but I didn't want to know how they were disposed of. I had suspicions, but as my old ways of thinking were well-known, I didn't expect any honest answer.

I knew the changes were costly and wondered how much they might have cost, but I refrained from seeking any explanation as I knew the new generation didn't like to be questioned.

The changes were breathtaking, but if it were up to me, I would have had the non-functioning fittings repaired, postponing their replacement to the last, but I would never have done so in one go.