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Populism in disguise: Welfare rhetoric and money handouts that are reshaping electoral behaviour of the Indian democracy

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Abstract

The paper begins by linking the idea of populism with the culture of money handouts during elections, showing how such promises are used to build emotional appeal and short-term loyalty among voters. In recent years, political parties have increasingly used promises of free cash transfers, household items, and subsidies as tools to attract voters without any concern for their fiscal viability. To understand this better, this research paper contains case study of three State Assembly elections Madhya Pradesh (2023), Maharashtra (2024), Jharkhand (2024). These case studies help highlight patterns in campaign strategies, in shaping the voter behavior, and the scale of promised benefits. Constitutional provisions and judicial interpretations have been incorporated in the research paper to provide constitutional insight into the legal loopholes and statutory framework that governs the electoral process in India.

Keywords: Populism, welfare schemes, election commission of India, voting behaviour, Representation of People act 1951

Introduction

Populism is a political approach that often manifests as welfare promises, charismatic leadership, and emotional mobilization rather than policy-based governance, led by a charismatic figure who claims to embody the will of the masses. Indian elections have increasingly become arenas where populist narratives thrive, blending emotional appeals with promises of direct benefits like cash transfers, subsidised goods, or symbolic gestures of language and cultural pride. This shift has redefined electoral behaviour, moving it away from ideological commitments and developmental goals towards transactional expectations; this is not a far-fetched claim but a reality in making, during 2024 Lok Sabha election a survey of CSDS-Lokniti had found that 54% of voters prioritize immediate welfare over long-term growth ^[1]. Leaders across party lines now deploy welfare schemes not merely as policy tools but as instruments of political messaging.

Methodology

This research qualifies as a mixed-methods political analysis that combines quantitative techniques (statistical correlation of freebies like money hand-outs and electoral outcomes) with qualitative interpretation and case studies. The research is grounded in the tradition of applied empirical research to analyse real-world electoral outcomes and correlate them with welfare schemes, using observable data from three Indian state elections i.e. Madhya Pradesh (2023), Maharashtra (2024) and Jharkhand (2024). There is also a critical analysis into the ethical, legal, and institutional consequences of welfare populism.

Historical trajectory of welfare policies in India

Assessing a welfare policy in a democracy like India is inherently complex, as it is impossible to distinguish social justice from electoral populism without analysing the policy's outcomes. In the early years of India's independence, the government's welfare policies were shaped by the urgent need to address food security and rural poverty. The 1950s and 60s saw initiatives like the Community Development Programme (1952) and the Green Revolution (mid-1960s), which aimed at boosting agricultural productivity and stabilizing food supply. Land reforms, such as the abolition of zamindari in states like West

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Bengal and Kerala, sought to redistribute resources to marginalized farmers. These foundational measures reflected a vision of welfare rooted in self-reliance and equitable growth, setting the stage for later expansions into targeted subsidies, reservations, and direct cash transfers.

The Indira Gandhi era (1966-1977; 1980-1984) marked a decisive shift in India's welfare politics, transitioning from institutional development to populist redistribution. Her Garibi Hatao (1971) campaign prioritized direct poverty alleviation, introducing schemes like the Integrated Rural Development Programme (1978), which provided subsidized loans to 20 million families by 1989. This period also saw the nationalization of banks (1969) and the 20-Point Programme (1975), blending socialist rhetoric with centralized welfare. The Mandal Commission (1979), which recommended 27% reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), ignited a polarizing national debate. When implemented by Prime Minister V.P. Singh's Janata Dal government in 1990, the policy provoked violent anti-reservation protests but simultaneously consolidated OBCs as a decisive voting bloc. This realignment permanently altered India's electoral arithmetic, with OBC-based parties gaining prominence in northern states.

The post-liberalization era (1990s-2014) saw welfare policies shift from universal programs to targeted identity-based entitlements. The 2000s also marked the rise of direct cash transfers (e.g., National Social Assistance Programme, 1995) and state-level freebies, such as Tamil Nadu's free bicycles distribution Scheme (2001-02) and West Bengal's Scooty distribution schemes for girls (2011). The Sachar Committee Report (2006) highlighted systemic deprivation among Muslims, prompting schemes like the Prime Minister's 15-Point Programme, which allocated scholarships and infrastructure funds for minority-concentrated districts. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), launched in 2005, has significantly impacted rural livelihoods by guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment per household annually. By 2024-25, the scheme employed 37.6 million families, with ₹77,491 crore spent on wages (Ministry of Rural Development, 2024). It has reduced distress migration, in financial year 2024-25 the minimum average notified wage has increased by rate of 7% (Ministry of Rural Development, 2024), and empowered marginalized groups. In 2017, 53.5% of those provided employment through the programme were women while 39.1% belonged to Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) [2]. Studies show MGNREGA boosted financial inclusion, with 87% of wages paid via Aadhaar-linked bank accounts (NCAER, 2021).

The period following 2014 marked a strategic reorientation of India's welfare architecture, prioritizing universal access to basic utilities and health security over fragmented subsidies. This shift, underpinned by digital governance and Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), institutionalized flagship schemes that collectively redefined welfare as holistic infrastructure development rather than monetary aid alone. This utility-first approach redefined welfare as access to services enabling dignity and resilience, moving beyond cash hand-outs to address multidimensional poverty. This transformation is best understood through concrete

illustrations. Five schemes stand out as representative milestones of this welfare evolution:

- Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojna created 55.4 crore bank accounts (as of March 2025, Ministry of Finance), 67% in rural areas. It enabled the JAM Trinity (Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile), channelling DBT subsidies directly to beneficiaries. By 2024, ₹7.8 lakh crore was transferred via DBT (DBT Bharat Portal), reducing leakage by 24% (NITI Aayog, 2019).
- The National Food Security Act (NFSA, 2013) was revitalized through Pradhan Mantri-Gareeb Kalyan Anna Yojna (2020) providing free 5 kg grains/month (previous scheme subsidized ₹2-3/kg, pre-2020) to 81.35 crore people (Department of Food, 2024). During COVID-19, PM-GKAY distributed 1,112 lakh MT grains (2020-2023), doubling pre-2014 annual allocations.
- Under Swachh Bharat Mission over 11 crore household toilets and 2.23 lakh Community Sanitary Complexes were built across all States/UTs by 2019 (Ministry of Jal Shakti), raising rural sanitation from 39% (2014) to 100% (2019). Unlike earlier efforts, Swachh Bharat Mission combined infrastructure with behavioural campaigns, reducing diarrheal deaths by 15% (WHO, 2020).
- India's first universal health insurance scheme offered ₹5 lakh/year hospitalization cover to 55 crore beneficiaries (bottom 40% population). By 2024, it facilitated 6.2 crore hospital admissions (National Health Authority), with 53% empanelled hospitals in private sector. This institutionalized health as a primary welfare objective, contrasting with pre-2014 piecemeal schemes (e.g., Rashtriya Swasth Beema Yojna, covering only BPL families).
- As on 1st of March 2025, the total number of active domestic LPG consumers in India stands at 32.94 crore, including 10.33 crore beneficiaries of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana [3], increasing LPG coverage from 62% (2016) to 99% (2023). Subsidies (₹200/cylinder) were transferred via DBT, saving ₹22,000 crore by eliminating ghost beneficiaries (CAG, 2021). This shifted welfare from firewood/kerosene dependence to utility security.

Women centric welfare schemes as electoral instruments

The strategic deployment of women-centric welfare schemes has emerged as a decisive electoral tool in Indian state politics, with parties explicitly targeting the expanding female voter base. Women now constitute 48.1% of India's electorate (Election Commission of India, 2024), and their turnout has surged from 55.8% (2009 LS polls) to 67.2% (2019). The emergence of welfare schemes targeting women as potent instruments of political mobilization, reshaping the contours of vote-bank politics in India. The 2023-24 state elections in MP, Maharashtra, and Jharkhand crystallize this shift, demonstrating how welfare rhetoric translates into tangible voter mobilization.

Case study: Madhya Pradesh Assembly Election 2023

On 28th of January 2023 the government of Madhya Pradesh introduced the 'Ladli Behna Yojana', giving ₹1,250 monthly (previously ₹1,000) to women aged 21 to 60 from families earning below ₹2.5 lakh per annum.

Table 1: Represents the data in comparison of M.P. Legislative Assembly election results of 2018 and 2023. The data is taken from ECI website and other verifiable sources

Metric	2018 election	2023 election	+/- Change	Scheme correlation
Overall voter turnout	75.05%	77.15%	+2.1%	
Women voter turnout	74.03%	76.06%	+2%	Ladli Behna (March 2023)
BJP vote share	41.60%	48.55%	+6.95%	
INC vote share	41.50%	40.40%	-1.1%	
BJP seats	109	163	+54	
INC seats	114	66	-48	
Election result	INC+BSP+SP+Ind (Coalition Govt. Formed)	BJP		Incumbent victory with women turnout surge

The sheer scale of the scheme is evident from its reach i.e. over 1.27 crore beneficiaries in a state with a total population of 8.87 crore (as of 2024), accounting for approximately 14% of the entire population and nearly 30% of Madhya Pradesh's female population. For context, the Ladli Laxmi Yojna (2007) had around 42.14 lakh beneficiaries. This comparison is significant because the Ladli Behna Yojna is considered as an informal successor to the Ladli Laxmi Yojna, sharing key features such as a female-centric focus and direct benefit transfers. The difference is highlighted in the intent and nature of both the schemes. The Ladli Laxmi Yojna, launched on January 1st, 2007 (a non-election year) was carefully tailored to ensure that beneficiaries fulfilled specific conditions i.e. ₹2000 upon admission to class 6, ₹4000 for class 9, and a lump sum payment upon reaching the age of 21. The aspirations driving the scheme, such as reducing female infanticide, curbing child marriages, and increasing girls' enrolment in schools, were meaningfully addressed. In comparison, the Ladli Behna Yojna lacks a similarly deep-rooted rationale.

Aside from invoking the idea of women's empowerment, it offers a flat ₹1250 without any significant conditional framework. Moreover, the eligibility criteria were widened to maximize the number of beneficiaries. The timing of its rollout during an election year suggests a shift from aspirational intent to electoral strategy.

Case study: Maharashtra Assembly Election 2024

The October 2024 Maharashtra polls saw competing welfare narratives the BJP-led Mahayuti's 'Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana' (₹1,500 per month) pitted against the Maha Vikas Aghadi's counter-offer to raise it to ₹3,000. The appeal seems to have worked as indicated by the Lokniti-CSDS data which show that more than 80% of women had applied to avail the scheme. Similarly, more women than men seem to have preferred the Mahayuti in the election. The support to the ruling alliance is even higher among rural women and those who applied to avail the scheme. As per ECI data, this election also witnessed a large turnout of women voters and bridging of the gender gap ^[4].

Table 2: Represents the data in comparison of Maharashtra Legislative Assembly election results of 2019 and 2024. The data is taken from ECI website and other verifiable sources

Metric	2019 election	2024 election	+/- Change	Scheme correlation
Overall turnout	61.44%	66.30%	+4.86%	
Women turnout	59.26%	65.22%	+5.96%	Majhi Ladki Bahin (Jul 2024)
Gender gap (M%-F%)	+3.50%	+1.50%	-2.00%	
NDA/MahaYuti vote share	42.16%	49.30%	+7.14%	(BJP+SS+NCP)
UPA/MVA vote share	37.16%	35.16%	-2.00%	(INC+SS-UBT+NCP-SP)
NDA/ MahaYuti seats	161	288	+127	
UPA/MVA seats	98	48	-50	
Election result	BJP-SS Coalition	MahaYuti		Women turnout spike correlates with scheme timing

The Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana, significantly influenced Maharashtra's assembly elections 2024 through targeted voter mobilization. By providing ₹1,500 monthly to women aged 21-60, the scheme registered 2.1 million beneficiaries within four months of rollout and the number of beneficiaries are currently stands at 2.25 crore (as of June 2025). This direct cash transfer correlated with a record 5.96% surge in women's turnout (65.22% in 2024 vs 59.26% in 2019), disproportionately higher than the overall 4.86% electorate increase. Crucially, 72% of scheme-dense rural constituencies saw a 7-11% swing toward the incumbent MahaYuti alliance, contributing to its 13.9% vote share growth. Unlike Maharashtra's previous welfare initiatives - such as the 2020 Shiv Bhojan Thali (subsidized meals) and Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Jan Arogya Yojana (health insurance), Majhi Ladki Bahin's impact stemmed from three unique factors immediate cash liquidity, exclusive gender targeting, and proximity to polling (4-month gap). Earlier schemes showed muted electoral

effects; the 2019 election saw women's turnout decline by 1.1% despite ongoing welfare programs, underscoring how policy design and timing dictate electoral outcomes.

Case study: Jharkhand Assembly Election 2024

The Mukhyamantri Maiya Samman Yojana (MMSY), launched in August 2023, emerged as a decisive factor in Jharkhand's 2024 assembly elections by mobilizing women voters amid strong anti-incumbency. Providing ₹1,000 monthly to 5.6 million women from low-income households, MMSY correlated with a historic 6.46% surge in women's turnout (70.46% vs. 64.0% in 2019) - the highest since the state's formation. This scheme is said to have played an important role in the victory of INDIA bloc, which won 56 out of 81 Assembly seats in the State ^[5]. Crucially, this reversed the gender gap (Men-Women voters' percentage) in which the women voter's outnumbered men by 5.40% compared to men's 2.40% lead in previous assembly election.

Table 3: Represents the data in comparison of Jharkhand Legislative Assembly election results of 2019 and 2024. The data is taken from ECI website and other verifiable sources

Metric	2019 election	2024 election	+/- change	Scheme Correlation
Overall turnout	65.38%	67.74%	+2.36%	
Women turnout	64.00%	70.46%	+6.46%	Maiya Samman Yojana (Aug 2023)
Gender gap (M%-F%)	+2.40%	-5.40%	-3.00%	(Women > Men turnout)
UPA/MGB vote share	35.35%	44.33%	+8.98%	(JMM+INC+RJD)
NDA vote share	41.47%	36.72%	+4.75%	(BJP+AJSU)
UPA seats	47	54	+7	
NDA seats	27	24	-3	NDA Seats
Election result	UPA	UPA/India		Incumbent retained despite BJP's national wave

Unlike earlier women centric efforts of Govt. of Jharkhand like opening savings accounts for girls in the Sukanya Yojana or offering maternity help through the Vandana scheme MMSY stood out. Its strength came from giving cash directly, with no strings attached, to eligible woman aged 25 to 50, across the board. MMSY's immediate liquidity created visible economic relief, this translated to electoral dividends UPA retained power with 54 seats (+7) despite BJP's national momentum. Even with Anti-incumbency the UPA's vote share increased to +8.98%, revealing cash transfers' efficacy against governance deficits.

Observational analysis

Across all three states studied, a consistent pattern emerged:

monetary welfare schemes reliably translated into electoral gains. Despite cultural, social, and economic differences among the states, women-focused cash transfer schemes bypassed these divides, entering the political competition as strategic tools. Rather than merely addressing welfare concerns, these schemes transformed conventional politics into a transactional system of reciprocal exchange. The key observations are:

1. Cash-transfer schemes seemed especially appealing in areas with lower incomes and literacy levels, including rural and semi-urban communities. This trend was visible in the 2023 Madhya Pradesh election, where women's voting turnout in highly literate urban areas was noticeably lower than in regions with less female literacy.

Table 4: Represents the data in comparison of female voting percentage in Legislative Assembly election 2023 of different constituencies and their female literacy rate (as per 2011 census) of the respective constituencies of Madhya Pradesh. The data of voting percentage is taken from ECI website

S. No.	Constituency (Female literacy rate is $\geq 75\%$)	Female voting % (2023 election)	Constituency (Female literacy rate is $< 50\%$)	Female voting % (2023 election)
1.	Narela (Bhopal)	64.79	Alirajpur	68.74
2.	Bhopal Dakshina-Pashchim	59.66	Thandla (Jhabua)	86.02
3.	Bhopal Madhya	59.54	Petlawad (Jhabua)	78.48
4.	Indore 2	66.57	Rajpur (Barwani)	81.23
5.	Indore 5	66.07	Pansamal (Barwani)	75.56
6.	Jabalpur Purba	67.20	Vijaypur (Sheopur)	81.15
7.	Jabalpur Cantt.	67.42	Pichhore (Shivpuri)	84.34

2. Voters tend to show greater confidence in the incumbent party, even when opposition parties promise larger cash benefits if elected. In Jharkhand election, the BJP-led NDA believes it is due to its promise of 'Gogo Didi Yojana', a similar scheme promising Rs.2,100/month, if voted to office. Notably, INDIA bloc too has pledged Rs.2,500 from December soon after it is voted back to office [6]. For many voters, receiving money directly into their accounts feels far more reassuring than a distant promise of future benefits, which has helped solidify support for the incumbent party.
3. The electoral efficacy is directly proportional to the duration of scheme, because the longer a welfare scheme runs before the election, the stronger its impact on voter confidence. When people see money coming into their accounts over time, it builds trust in the ruling party and turning benefits into ballots.
4. These kind of short-cut election winning strategies encourage other state governments to start a women centric money hand-out welfare scheme without any worry about the fiscal blunder just to safeguard their government from upcoming elections.

Table 5: Represents approved expenditure on the schemes of respective States in financial year 2025-26. Source: PRS Legislative Research Reports

S. No.	Major state	Scheme	Budget allocated in FY 2025-26 (in crore)
1.	Madhya Pradesh	Ladli Behna	18,669
2.	Maharashtra	Ladki Bahin	36,000
3.	West Bengal	Lakshmi Bhandar	12,000
4.	Karnataka	Grauha Lakshmi	26,700
5.	Jharkhand	Maiya Samman	13,363
7.	Haryana	Lado Lakshmi Yojana	5,000
8.	Delhi	Mahila Samridhi Yojana	5,110
9.	Tamil Nadu	Kalaigarn Magalir Urimai Thogai	13,807
10.	Odisha	Subhadra Yojana	10,145

Constitutional provisions and judicial interpretations

The essence of democracy lies in free and fair elections the ability to make choices not just for oneself, but for the entire nation. The Indian Constitution, through Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 38), mandates the state to strive for the welfare of its people, providing a broad justification for welfare schemes. On the other hand, the

judiciary has faced challenges in delineating genuine welfare measures from unchecked populist giveaways that may undermine the country's economic stability.

The sanctity of elections in India is deeply rooted in the constitutional architecture that upholds democratic integrity and public trust. Part XV of the Indian Constitution, lays

down a comprehensive framework to ensure that elections are conducted in a free, fair, and impartial manner. These provisions not only establish institutional mechanisms like the Election Commission but also enshrine principles such as universal adult suffrage, non-discrimination, and judicial restraint in electoral matters.

Table 6: Represents the constitutional articles (Part XV) related to elections in India

S. No.	Article (Constitution of India)	Description
01.	324	It establishes the ECI as the body responsible for the superintendence, direction, and control of elections to Parliament, state legislatures, and the offices of the President and Vice-President.
02.	325	No person to be ineligible for inclusion in, or to claim to be included in a special, electoral roll on grounds of religion, race, caste or sex.
03.	326	Elections to the House of the People and to the Legislative Assemblies of States to be on the basis of adult suffrage.
04.	327	Power of Parliament to make provision with respect to elections to Legislatures
05.	328	Power of Legislature of a State to make provision with respect to elections to such Legislature.
06.	329	Bar to interference by courts in electoral matters.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) is a constitutional body responsible for conducting elections in the country. It also functions as a watchdog that safeguards the sanctity of the electoral process by curbing malpractices. The ECI is a quasi-Judicial body with the judicial scope limited to dispute resolution, candidate disqualification, enforcing model code of conduct and cancellation of polls. In case of any dispute arising after an election, the appropriate High Court is the first judicial authority to hear the matter. The Election Commission of India (ECI) relies on the Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951 as its legal foundation for conducting free and fair elections.

The Representation of the People Act, 1951, provides the legal framework for conducting elections in India. It is also important to mention that offences under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, are applicable only in the context of elections and do not cover actions outside the electoral process.

Table 7: Represents the Part VII of RPA (1951) corrupt practices and electoral offences

S. No.	Section	Provision	Description
1.	Section 123	Corrupt Practices	Defines bribery, undue influence, and appeal to religion/caste as corrupt practices.
2.	Section 123(1)	Bribery	Offering money, gifts, or gratification to induce voting behavior is illegal.
3.	Section 123(2)	Undue Influence	Threatening or coercing voters to vote or abstain is prohibited.
4.	Section 123(3)	Appeal to Religion/Caste	Soliciting votes based on religion, race, caste, or community is a corrupt practice.
5.	Section 123(4)	False Statements	Publishing false statements about a candidate's character or conduct is punishable.
6.	Section 125	Promoting Enmity	Penalizes attempts to promote hatred between groups during elections.
7.	Section 126	Election Silence Period	Prohibits campaigning 48 hours before polling begins.

Although the Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951 does not explicitly mention the term "freebie," its provisions addressing corrupt practices serve as the Election Commission of India's (ECI) principal regulatory tool. Over

time, the Commission's approach has shifted from a largely hands-off stance to a more interventionist one, influenced by judicial observations. A notable development was the last revision of the Model Code of Conduct in 2014, introduced under the ECI's plenary powers to superintend elections as granted by Article 324 of the Constitution. This revision directed the political parties to not only explain the rationale behind their manifesto promises but also to specify the financial means for implementing them, thereby promoting fiscal accountability. While this directive is not legally enforceable with punitive consequences under the RPA, it functions as a moral and persuasive instrument.

In this matter the Judiciary adopted a cautious stance and i.e. avoiding a blanket ban on welfare promises, while promoting transparency and fiscal accountability in the electoral process, and yet the core democratic dilemma between populist approach of immediate gratification and welfare schemes within the limits of fiscal accountability unresolved. The most cited of such cases are:

- **S. Subramnaim Balaji v Government of Tamil Nadu (2013):** This landmark case raised critical constitutional questions about the legality and ethics of electoral freebies in India. The petitioner challenged the Tamil Nadu government's schemes such as the distribution of free colour televisions, mixers, and laptops were amounted to bribery under Section 123 of the Representation of the People Act and violated Article 14 of the Constitution. The Supreme Court held that promises of political parties do not constitute a corrupt practice, the manifesto of the political party in question promises to achieve a social order removing economic inequalities, attain a social plane and attempts to reduce the degradations existing in our society where only a certain class of people are 3 Page 31 elevated and entitled to economic upliftment. The mandate for social and economic transformation requires that material resources or their ownership and control be so distributed as to subserve the common good. The Schemes under challenge operate within the parameters of public purpose and Article 14 of the Constitution has no role to play ^[7]. The Supreme Court in this judgment had directed the Election Commission of India formulate guidelines concerning the content of election manifestos in consultation with all the recognized

political parties.

- **Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay PIL on Freebies (2022-ongoing):** The petitioner filed a Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court challenging the practice of political parties promising and distributing "irrational freebies" during election campaigns. He argued that such promises distort the democratic process, amount to bribery and undue influence under Sections 171B and 171C of the Indian Penal Code, and violate constitutional provisions related to the responsible use of public funds specifically Articles 14, 162, 266(3), and 282. The petition seeks judicial intervention to curb what Upadhyay calls the "revdi culture," urging the Court to direct the Election Commission of India to amend the Election Symbols Order, 1968, so that parties offering non-essential freebies from public funds before elections face deregistration or symbol seizure. Two crucial questions arise from the case. First, what types of welfare schemes or freebies should be considered as wasteful and unlawful expenditure, and what amounts to expenditure for 'public purpose' allowed under Article 282? Second, can the SC set guidelines on how public funds can be utilised to provide the promised freebies, when it clearly falls under the scope of the legislature to make such laws? ^[8]

Conclusion

Populism is not an ideology. It does not pretend to offer 'complex or comprehensive answers to the political questions that modern societies generate', and so both right-wing and left-wing types of populism are possible ^[9]. Although populism can energize democratic participation, it also risks undermining institutional checks, and reducing complex governance challenges to simplistic binaries that shift the focus from reforms to electoral gimmicks e.g., Old Pension Scheme restoration despite fiscal risks. Just by looking at electoral outcome of respective states assemblies the pattern is quite obvious. The results are very encouraging for the political parties but it is important to quantify the consequences of the generous promises made during the elections-

In case of Madhya Pradesh, expenditure on Ladli Behna Yojana. In 2025-26, Madhya Pradesh has allocated Rs 18,669 crore towards the Mukhya Mantri Ladli Behna Yojana, which is 6.4% of the estimated revenue receipts. In 2023-24, the state has spent Rs 14,734 crore on the scheme ^[10]. It is important to highlight that the state's tax collection has not increased in proportion to its spending, making fiscal sustainability a growing concern. This also increases the reliance of the State on the grants from the Centre.

The case of Maharashtra is not so different than Madhya Pradesh, the Maharashtra Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, 2005 suggests eliminating revenue deficit. In 2024-25, the state launched the Mukhya Mantri Mazi Ladaki Bahin Yojana - a cash transfer scheme under which eligible women receive Rs 1,500 every month. In 2024-25, Rs 33,433 crore is estimated to be spent on the scheme. In 2025-26, it has been allocated Rs 36,000 crore (6% of the state's revenue receipts). The state's revenue expenditure may have grown on account of introduction of the new cash transfer scheme, and rise in committed expenditure. The state has budgeted a revenue deficit till 2027-28 ^[11].

The case of Jharkhand slightly differ from the above two, Jharkhand government cannot explicitly expect the centre government to fund the scheme mainly due to political differences, it was evident in 2024-25, the central grants turned out to be 18% lower than what was originally promised in the budget. The expenditure on Mukhyamantri Maiya Samman Yojana as per the revised estimates of 2024-25, the state is expected to spend Rs 7,238 crore on the scheme, 7% of its revenue receipts ^[12]. This dilemma of Jharkhand Government has increased their dependence on mining sector as 21% of their budget revenue receipt comes from non-tax revenue and on above that 80% of that is constituted by mining sector alone.

These schemes, while framed as empowerment tools, reveal a strategic shift toward gendered clientelism, where direct cash transfers serve as electoral levers rather than long-term welfare commitments. Such political strategies have reduced democratic engagement to a transactional exchange, with parties aiming to secure power at minimal cost. For the electorate, the concern is not only that democratic principles are being sold, but also at an alarmingly low price.

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