

Populist Policies and Freebie Culture in Telangana: A Comparative Analysis of YSR, TDP, TRS and Congress Welfare Regimes

Mettipally Navya Sri

Assistant Professor (Guest), Department of Political Science, Indira Priyadarshini Govt Degree College for Women, Nampally.

1. Introduction

Democracy in India is a notion where various different sources have come together in building a consciousness among public. The government by the people, for the people, of the people. Have emerged to be new normal in larger democracies like that of India. In order to provide transparency and accountability in democracy, the electoral system, voting rights, political parties have become key instruments. But over a period Populism has emerged as a powerful strategy in Indian electoral politics, particularly in states marked by agrarian distress, socio-economic inequality, and regional identity movements. This has become main election strategy implied by political parties. It can be seen in entitled forms such as free bus, free electricity, free water etc. The policies which should rather be implied towards building infrastructure, alienating poverty, developing economy, rather focused on attracting voter base for winning elections. It is used as a medium to come to power by attracting voter base

Telangana presents a unique case where welfare politics intersects with the politics of statehood, identity, and developmental aspirations. Since the early 2000s, political parties operating in the Telangana region have increasingly framed welfare schemes as instruments of social justice and political legitimacy

The notion of “freebie culture” refers to the competitive distribution of subsidies, cash transfers, and in-kind benefits to voters, often announced during elections. But earlier evidences prove that this freebie culture hasn't changed the economic status of people living poverty as these policies are short term attractive rather than addressing long term development. While proponents argue that such measures address immediate needs of marginalized communities, critics contend that they undermine fiscal discipline and distort developmental priorities.

This paper analyses how welfare populism evolved under YSR's Congress regime, TDP's development-oriented populism, TRS's post-statehood welfare expansion, and the contemporary Congress government in Telangana.

2. Conceptual Framework: Populism and Welfare Politics

Populism in public policy is characterized by elements such as direct appeal to the people, attracting with fancy freebies in expanding state sponsored welfare schemes. It also seen as a benefit right rather than discretionary support. It increases dependency culture. It leads to leader worship. It can increase burden on state spending.

In the Telangana state, populism can be seen through elements such as schemes which are universal in nature like free electricity, pensions. Schemes targeting certain groups communities such as dalit bandhu, farmers support. Identity based politics around the regional pride.

With Supreme Court observations on competitive populism, freebie cultural debate has reached nation wide discussion. The political parties promise unsustainable benefits without clearly stating fiscal sources and it in turns leads to rigorous fiscal sustainability analysis.

For example, Free bus scheme launched in 2023 has created a significant burden on state government. It is said to have costed around Rs. 13 crore everyday. Similarly, during YSR, fee reimbursement scheme has caused severe strain on educational institutions about Rs. 4500 crore. It led to sustainability issues with growing burden on state. During the tenure of KCR as chief minister, it inflicted around burden of Rs. 20,000 crore annually for rythu bandhu scheme, which provides investment support for farmers.

3. Welfare Regimes

3.1 Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy (Congress)

YSR's tenure marked a shift towards pro-poor populism in the united Andhra Pradesh, with significant impact in Telangana districts. They are implemented through welfare model known as navaratnalu. These are politically known popular programmes. Arogyasri, Fee Reimbursement of financial support for SC/ST/BC/Minority students. Indiramma Housing scheme which provides subsidized housing for the poor. Pavala Vaddi through which low-interest loans for women self help groups.

YSR personalized his welfare schemes through mass outreach programmes such as padayatra, projecting himself as a "people's leader." Welfare delivery became closely associated with his leadership image. A large share of the state budget was directed towards social sector spending, especially health, education, and rural development. Although these schemes improved access to services, they significantly increased revenue expenditure.

3.2 Telugu Desam Party (TDP)

TDP's welfare approach combined developmental populism with subsidies such subsidized rice distribution, women SHG empowerment (DWCRA groups), Infrastructure-linked welfare (housing, rural roads)

TDP emphasized governance efficiency, technology-driven delivery, and development narratives, while still relying on welfare promises during elections. TDP's schemes had uneven reach in Telangana, contributing to the perception that the region was neglected—an important factor fueling the Telangana movement.

3.3. TRS After Statehood

The formation of Telangana in 2014 transformed welfare politics. TRS framed welfare as a moral right of the people of Telangana, linking schemes to regional dignity. The schemes include rythu bandhu, means direct income support to farmers. It provided Insurance for farmers for rathu bima. Social security pensions for elderly, disabled, widows through asara pension. Dalit Bandhu, which provides capital assistance to SC families Free Electricity for agriculture and households. by providing Maternal and child welfare through KCR Kits.

TRS institutionalized welfare as part of Telangana identity. Schemes were branded and personalized around leadership, reinforcing emotional bonds between the government and beneficiaries. Welfare announcements were strategically timed before elections, strengthening electoral consolidation.

A substantial portion of Telangana's annual budget has been allocated to welfare schemes such as agriculture support constitutes a major share of revenue expenditure. Pension schemes and electricity subsidies significantly increase recurring costs. Dalit Bandhu, though transformative, involves heavy one-time fiscal commitments

While Telangana initially benefited from higher revenues and central transfers, growing welfare commitments have led to increased public debt and fiscal stress. Capital expenditure on infrastructure and employment generation has often lagged behind welfare spending.

4.4. Congress Welfare Regime in Telangana (Post-2023)

The return of the Congress government in Telangana revived welfare populism with new schemes and expanded guarantees, mahalakshmi Scheme such as free bus travel for women, Gruha Jyothi for free electricity up to a certain limit. Indiramma Housing Revival, enhanced pension promises.

Congress framed welfare as "guarantees," borrowing from national-level strategies. The rhetoric emphasized social justice, inclusive, and relief from price rise. The expansion of subsidies has raised questions regarding revenue generation, fiscal deficit, and long-term sustainability, especially in a context of rising debt liabilities inherited from previous regimes.

Dimension	YSR (Congress)	TDP	TRS	Congress (Telangana)
Focus	Health, education	Development + subsidies	Direct transfers, identity-based welfare	Universal welfare guarantees
Fiscal Strategy	Social sector expansion	Infrastructure + welfare mix	High revenue expenditure	Expanded subsidies
Political Goal	Pro-poor image	Development legitimacy	Telangana identity consolidation	Electoral revival
Long-term Risk	Rising revenue burden	Regional imbalance	Debt and fiscal stress	Sustainability concerns

TABLE 1: It shows a comparative analysis of all the four regimes

5. Developmental Outcomes and Challenges

It helped improved access to healthcare and education. It helped in reduction in extreme poverty and vulnerability. It increased enhanced social security for marginalized groups by strengthening state-society relationship.

But it also disrupts fiscal sustainability in lieu of growing revenue expenditure limits funds for infrastructure and job creation. Sometimes benefits meant for certain groups leak to non-deserving groups. It creates long-term reliance on state support through dependency syndrome. It reduces investment in productive sectors like industry, skill development and building capital infrastructure.

6. Prospects of Populist Policies in Telangana

The future of welfare politics in Telangana will depend on the state's ability to integrate welfare with employment generation, a shift from consumption based subsidies to asset creation. To improve institutional accountability and monitoring. To balance revenue and capital expenditure

Populism, if linked with productive investment, can function as a developmental tool rather than a fiscal burden.

7. S. Subramaniam Balaji vs State of Tamil Nadu (2013)

This is a landmark judgement of S. Subramaniam Balaji v. State of Tamil Nadu (2013) is a landmark Supreme Court judgment on the legality of freebie promises made during election campaigns by political parties.

The case reached the Supreme Court from welfare politics of Tamil Nadu, where political parties such as the DMK and AIADMK promised goods like televisions, mixer-grinders, laptops, livestock and marriage assistance if the public voted for them. Later after winning elections these materials were distributed to the public.

It was argued in court that such promises should be treated as vote buying, violation of Article 14 as state resources are arbitrarily distributed to fulfill election promises. It leads to misuse of public funds and constitutes corrupt practices under the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (RPA).

The broader argument was whether such electoral populism practices fulfilled by using public money undermines the fairness of elections, fiscal burden on state and constitutional governance.

This case raised an important question of can political parties use the promise of material goods during elections and lure public into voting for them. In this judgement, Supreme court observed that electoral practices cannot be curtailed as illegal and courts cannot interfere after the legislature has made a policy.

The courts have expressed serious concern over this freebie culture during electoral promises. As it is luring public in the name of material good, it distorts free and fair elections. It can cause fiscal burden on state finances. It may undermine long term development of the state. The court has suggested election commission to make necessary guidelines in framing manifesto guidelines for political parties.

The freebies debate requires moving beyond judicial warnings to institutional and legislative reform that balances welfare objectives with fiscal responsibility and electoral fairness.

First, Parliament should consider amending the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and increase transparency for election manifesto without criminalising welfare promises and by mandating pre-poll manifestos.

Political parties are to be made legally required to give the estimated cost of major material promises they made and funding sources through they going to fulfill. This in a way enables voters to judge the promises made.

This in a way doesn't corrupt democratic choices of the voters while improving accountability.

Election Commission of India should strengthen and operationalise manifesto guidelines for every poll contesting political party. These guidelines should be made enforceable and promissory note for large promises, develop standard procedure for cost incurring, post-election reporting on implementation and outcomes. ECI can create a transparency in order to discourage false, reckless promises that were to be made in order to reduce asymmetry for voters. Model Code of Conduct should also be extended toward responsible competition among political parties.

India needs a policy distinction between capabilities welfare and consumption oriented freebies. Governments, guided by NITI Aayog, Finance Commissions, and state finance departments, should

adopt outcome-based budgeting and social return on investment (SROI) frameworks to prioritise schemes that build human capital (health, nutrition, education, skills, mobility) over short-term consumption transfers with weak development impact. Periodic independent evaluations (CAG, state auditors, academic institutions) should assess whether schemes improve capabilities, labour participation, and long-term productivity, thereby grounding welfare politics in evidence rather than optics.

By strengthening fiscal federalism and discipline is essential. States should adhere to transparent off-budget reporting, cap contingent liabilities linked to populist schemes, and align promises with Medium-Term Fiscal Policy Statements. The Finance Commission could incentivise responsible welfare design through performance linked grants tied to outcomes in health, education, and poverty reduction. Complemented by civic literacy initiatives that help voters scrutinise fiscal claims, these reforms can preserve the legitimacy of welfare politics while curbing the excesses of freebie-driven populism honouring the Supreme Court's institutional restraint in Balaji and giving democratic accountability real teeth.

8. Conclusion

Populist welfare policies in Telangana have played a significant role in shaping electoral outcomes, governance styles, and citizen expectations. From YSR's pro-poor interventions to TRS's regionally rooted welfare model and the Congress government's renewed freebie politics, welfare has become central to political competition. While these policies have contributed to social inclusion and political stability, they also pose challenges to fiscal health and long-term development. The Telangana experience demonstrates that welfare populism is neither inherently detrimental nor universally beneficial; its impact depends on policy design, fiscal prudence, and integration with broader developmental strategies. A sustainable welfare model must therefore move beyond short-term electoral gains towards long-term human capital formation and economic productivity.

This study set out to examine the nature, evolution, and implications of populist welfare policies and the growing discourse on "freebie culture" in the Telangana region, situating these developments within a comparative framework that includes the welfare regimes of Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, the Telugu Desam Party, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (now BRS), and the Congress. The findings suggest that welfare populism in Telangana is neither an accidental by product of electoral politics nor a purely opportunistic strategy adopted by political parties. Rather, it reflects a historically rooted mode of governance shaped by social inequalities, agrarian vulnerabilities, uneven development, and the political necessity of addressing mass deprivation in a democratic setting. Populist welfare policies have thus become an enduring feature of the region's political economy, influencing both the structure of state intervention and the expectations of citizens from government.

A key conclusion of the analysis is that welfare populism has performed an important redistributive and protective function in a context marked by persistent socio-economic disparities. The expansion of direct benefit schemes, income support programmes, pensions, housing assistance, and educational support has provided immediate relief to vulnerable households and contributed to improving basic living conditions for sections of the population that remain outside the benefits of rapid economic growth. In Telangana, schemes targeting farmers, women, Dalits, minorities, the elderly, and students have helped mitigate risks associated with agrarian distress, unemployment, health shocks, and educational exclusion. These measures have strengthened the perception of the

state as a provider of social security, thereby reinforcing democratic legitimacy and political participation among marginalized groups who historically experienced neglect and exclusion from formal development processes.

However, the study also underscores that the political logic of competitive populism has gradually altered the priorities and functioning of governance in the state. Welfare commitments increasingly operate within a framework of electoral competition, where political parties seek to differentiate themselves through promises of expanded benefits and new entitlements. This dynamic has fostered a culture in which policy innovation is often driven by short-term political calculations rather than by long-term developmental planning. As a result, the boundary between rights based social protection and discretionary populist giveaways becomes blurred. While citizens benefit materially from welfare schemes, the institutionalization of welfare as a tool of political mobilization risks transforming social policy into an arena of symbolic politics, where announcements and expansions of schemes assume greater importance than the quality, efficiency, and sustainability of their implementation.

The fiscal implications of this welfare trajectory constitute another significant conclusion of the study. The growing expenditure on subsidies and direct transfers places considerable pressure on state finances, particularly in a context where revenue generation capacities remain constrained and development demands are expanding. Although welfare spending can stimulate local economies and provide short-term economic relief, its long-term sustainability depends on parallel investments in productive sectors such as agriculture modernization, skill development, industrial growth, and infrastructure expansion. In the absence of a coherent strategy that links welfare provisioning with economic transformation, populist spending risks becoming fiscally burdensome and developmentally sub-optimal. The challenge for Telangana, therefore, lies not in abandoning welfare commitments but in embedding them within a broader framework of sustainable development that enhances state capacity and economic productivity.

The comparative analysis of different political regimes further reveals that populist welfare policies have evolved in form and scope over time, reflecting changes in political context, leadership styles, and institutional priorities. While earlier welfare interventions emphasized targeted poverty alleviation and social protection, more recent initiatives have expanded in scale and ambition, often incorporating universalistic elements and high visibility transfers. This expansion has deepened citizens' reliance on state support while simultaneously raising expectations for continuous policy innovation. Such expectations create a political environment in which retreating from welfare commitments becomes electorally costly, thereby locking governments into a cycle of escalating promises and fiscal commitments. The persistence of this cycle highlights the structural nature of populism in Telangana's political system, where welfare politics has become embedded in the competitive logic of party politics rather than remaining an episodic electoral tactic.

Another important conclusion is that the discourse on "freebies" tends to oversimplify the complex realities of welfare politics in a developing society. The normative framing of welfare schemes as irrational giveaways often overlooks the structural conditions that make such interventions socially and politically necessary. In contexts characterized by informal employment, agrarian precarity, limited access to credit, and inadequate public services, state supported welfare functions as a crucial buffer against socio economic vulnerability. At the same time, an uncritical endorsement of populist welfare risks normalizing dependency and weakening demands for

institutional reforms, service delivery improvements, and accountability mechanisms. A balanced assessment must therefore move beyond binary evaluations of welfare as either virtuous redistribution or irresponsible populism and instead recognize the dual character of these policies as both socially protective and politically instrumental.

In broader theoretical terms, the Telangana experience contributes to the understanding of populism in the Global South, where welfare politics often occupies a central place in democratic competition. Unlike classical populist movements that rely primarily on rhetorical mobilization against elites, welfare populism in Telangana operates through material redistribution and targeted inclusion. This suggests that populism in regional Indian politics is best understood as a mode of governance that combines redistributive practices with electoral mobilization, rather than as a purely ideological phenomenon. Such a perspective allows for a more nuanced evaluation of the democratic implications of populist policies, recognizing their potential to enhance social inclusion while also acknowledging the risks they pose to institutional autonomy, fiscal prudence, and long-term development planning.

The study finally concludes that the future of welfare politics in Telangana will depend on the ability of political leadership and state institutions to recalibrate the relationship between social protection and development. There is a need to move towards an integrated policy framework that aligns welfare provisioning with investments in human capital, productive employment, and institutional capacity-building. Strengthening transparency, improving targeting mechanisms, reducing leakages, and enhancing monitoring and evaluation systems can improve the effectiveness of welfare schemes without compromising fiscal responsibility. Equally important is the cultivation of a public discourse that frames welfare not merely as electoral largesse but as part of a rights-based developmental strategy aimed at expanding citizens' capabilities and opportunities.

In sum, populist welfare policies in Telangana represent both a response to real socio-economic needs and a reflection of the competitive dynamics of democratic politics. Their continued prominence underscores the centrality of welfare in shaping political legitimacy and voter preferences in the region. Yet, the long-term viability of this model depends on whether welfare populism can be transformed from a primarily electoral instrument into a sustainable and development oriented governance strategy. The challenge for policymakers lies in navigating this transition, ensuring that the pursuit of electoral success does not undermine fiscal stability, institutional integrity, and the broader developmental aspirations of the state.

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