

Mainstream, VOL 61 No 4, January 14, 2023

## **Psychology of Freebies and Lessons from Lakshadweep | K Gireesan**

*Saturday 14 January 2023*



by K. Gireesan \*

'Freebie' refers to a thing that is provided or given free of charge. It is one of the most sought-after things in the political system, especially when the country or its sub-regional units go for elections. Here is a modest attempt to examine the 'psychology' of Freebies rather than analysing the 'economics' or 'politics' behind it, by sharing an interesting experience noted from Lakshadweep.

I wish to deliberate upon certain basic aspects, before going to the specifics. To a basic question as to 'Why freebies is appealing?', the simple answer could be the very thought of 'getting something for no cost'. In business, it motivates the people to spend more money to get the free gift, just because one gets more than what s/he 'actually paid for'. Ariely (2010) comments that people change their behavioural patterns and are more than willing to comply, when something come on their way 'at free of cost'. According to him, 'free' is not an indicator of price, but it is an 'emotional trigger' that is often irresistible to ignore. Especially in business, giving away free products is expected to improve the consumers' overall perception about the business itself, in addition to serve as a better way to add to the existing band of customers.

Though no attempt has been made here to look into the details about the 'culture of freebies', it is significant to realise that it can have a positive and negative impact on the economic growth of a nation. If not properly planned, channelised, executed and monitored, freebies may result in a huge barrier to economic growth. However, no attempt has been made here to analyse the 'politics' behind the series of promises made (and honoured) by political parties as well as political leaders by providing free electricity, free water, free transport, etc. as part of election manifesto or agenda or political strategy.

In this context, the responses made by Raghav Chadha, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) representing Punjab and belonging to Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), during a Television interview shown during the Assembly Election campaigns of Gujarat shall be analysed. To the question posed to him about the assurances made by AAP on promotion of 'Arvind Kejriwal Model of Governance' or 'Delhi Model of Governance' during election campaigns in Gujarat, he mentioned that the legislators across the country enjoy the privileges of free telephone calls, free transport passes, free fuel coupons, free/ subsidised food coupons, etc. which also could be considered as 'Freebies'. His query was that when the legislators as a 'special class' continue to receive the 'freebies', why are they apprehensive about the benefits assured to the 'ordinary citizens'. Significantly, one cannot ignore the assurances made by different political parties across the country as part of their election campaign for 'waiver / writing off loans' which also could be considered as 'freebies'.

The primary objective of this blog is to analyse the psychology of freebies in the context of an interesting anecdote documented by Ramunny (1972). However, before going to analyse the 'Lessons from Lakshadweep' on freebies, it is significant to glance through the life and work of Murkot Ramunny.

Murkot Ramunny served in diverse capacities and unique assignments. He served as a fighter pilot in the Royal Indian Air Force (renamed later as Indian Air Force) for about 15 years and rose to the rank of Wing Commander. During his service with the Indian Air Force (IAF), he served for a short tenure at the Cabinet Secretariat in an administrative capacity. Later, he assumed the charge of Commanding Officer of the Air Force Record Office, New Delhi and further served as the Chief Instructor at the National Defence Academy, Khadakvasla. Towards the end of his tenure in the IAF, he served at the Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India. After retirement from IAF, he continued to perform at the Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India. He served as the advisor to the Governors/ Lieutenant Governors of Manipur, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura. And he was handpicked by the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to the post of Administrator of Lakshadweep, where he made number of significant initiatives and interventions to contribute towards the growth and development of the Islands, with his

indomitable administrative style and personal touch with the tribal community.

"In 1962–63, we found that Tuna fishing was very poor. During one of our frequent visits to the islands, we saw that the people had started selling their household goods. This was a sign that they were really badly off. We got a sanction for gratuitous relief and announced that free rice would be issued to the needy. The Moopan or the headman of all the villages formed themselves in to a committee and produced a list of the people to whom rice should be given free, another list of those to whom it should be sold at half price, and a third list of those who would pay quarter of the price. As soon as the situation eased, the leaders came to us and asked us to stop the issue of gratuitous relief. We could not spend all the money sanctioned by the Government " (Ramunny, 1972).

This highlights the practice of distribution of 'freebies' among the community, by application of a formula / rationale in the selection of 'beneficiaries' for freebies, with the active inputs from native leadership. Instead of application of a 'general principle' to all, the community leaders came up with with the rationale of 'equity' rather than 'equality', depending upon the degree of poverty or dependency level of each family living in the islands. Another significant aspect was the proposal made by the community leaders to stop the relief when the situation became normal. Such a move could be analysed as the manifestation of 'rational approach' in decision making, the policy of 'self-reliance' as well as their emphasis on 'self-respect' rather than dependency. Lessons from Lakshadweep documented by Murkot Ramunny with the active involvement of the Moopans or community leaders, is quite significant while one analyses the 'psychology' of Freebies.

(Acknowledgements: Author acknowledges Dr. Jos Chathukulam, Director, Centre for Rural Management, Kottayam, Kerala for sharing inputs from his diary about the field work carried out in Minicoy island during 13–23 Dec 2022).

References:

Ariely, D. (2010). Predictably Irrational : The hidden forces that shape our decisions, Harper Collins, pp.304.

Ramunny, M. (1972). Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi Islands, New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, pp. 69.

*\* (Author: Dr. K. Gireesan, Director, MIT School of Government, MIT World Peace University, Pune, Maharashtra)*