

SC ON FREEBIES

- A general concern over ‘freebies’ pushing the economy to ruin or unviable pre-election promises adversely affecting informed decision-making by voters seems reasonable.
- However, few will disagree that what constitutes ‘freebies’ and what are legitimate welfare measures to protect the vulnerable sections.



- In this backdrop, the Supreme Court’s decision to form a body of stakeholders to examine the issue raises the question whether the legislature can be bypassed on such a far-reaching exercise.
- The Chief Justice of India, N.V. Ramana, heading a Bench hearing a petition filed in public interest against the distribution or promise of ‘freebies’ ahead of elections, has made it clear that the Court is not going to issue guidelines, but only ensure that suggestions are taken from stakeholders such as the NITI

Aayog, Finance Commission, Law Commission, RBI, and political parties.



- All these institutions, he has said, can submit a report to the Election Commission of India (ECI) and Government.
- A suggestion that Parliament could discuss this issue was met with scepticism by the Bench, which felt that no party would want a debate on this, as all of them support such sops.
- These distorted the voter’s informed decision-making; and that unregulated populism may lead to an economic disaster.
- The Supreme Court, in *S. Subramaniam Balaji vs Government of Tamil Nadu (2013)* addressed these questions and took the position that these concerned law and policy.
- Further, it upheld the distribution of television sets or consumer goods on the ground that schemes targeted at women, farmers and the poorer sections were in furtherance of Directive Principles; and as long as

public funds were spent based on appropriations cleared by the legislature, they could neither be declared illegal, nor the promise of such items be termed a 'corrupt practice'.

- It had, however, directed the ECI to frame guidelines to regulate the content of manifestos.
- The ECI subsequently included in its Model Code of Conduct a stipulation that parties should avoid promises "that vitiate the purity of the election process or exert undue influence on the voters".
- It added that only promises which were possible to be fulfilled should be made and that manifestos should contain the rationale for a promised welfare measure and indicate the means of funding it.
- Any further step, such as distinguishing welfare measures from populist sops and pre-election inducements, or adding to the obligations of fiscal responsibility and fiscal prudence ought to come from the legislature.

THE HINDU

PROTEST IN HASDEO ARANYA REGION

The story so far:

- The Hasdeo Aranya forests are called the lungs of Chhattisgarh.
- Over the past one year, protests against mining in this region have erupted several times and some still continue to sit-in demanding a complete stop to mining.
- On July 26, the Chhattisgarh Legislative Assembly unanimously passed a private member resolution urging the Centre to cancel allocation of all coal mining blocks in the ecologically sensitive area.

What is a private member resolution?

- According to Chakshu Roy, who heads the legislative and civic engagement initiatives at PRS Legislative Research, an MLA who is not a Minister whether she happens to be from the ruling party or not is a private member?
- A private member resolution can be brought in by a private member and if passed, it becomes an expression of what the House thinks.
- This is different from a private member bill which would become law in case of approval.

What is the importance of the Hasdeo-Aranya region?

- The Hasdeo Aranya (Aranya means forest) lies in the catchment area of the Hasdeo river and is spread across 1,878 sq km in North-Central Chhattisgarh.
- The Hasdeo River is a tributary of the Mahanadi River which originates in Chhattisgarh and flows through Odisha into the Bay of Bengal.
- The Hasdeo forests are also the catchment area for the Hasdeo Bango Dam built across the Hasdeo River which irrigates six lakh acres of land, crucial to a State with paddy as its main crop.
- Besides, the forests are ecologically sensitive due to the rich biodiversity they offer and due to the presence of a large migratory corridor for elephants.

When did the controversy surrounding coal mining start?

- Underneath the Hasdeo Aranya is a coalfield that comprises of 22 coal blocks.
- In 2010, the Centre categorised Hasdeo Aranya to be a “no-go” zone for mining.
- It ruled out mining in any of these blocks. However, only a year later, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF) granted

clearance for the mining for one coal block.

- At present, of the 22 blocks, seven blocks have been allotted to different companies, says the resolution.
- Of these, two the Parsa East Kete Basan (PEKB) and Chotia (I and II) are operational.
- The PEBK Phase I has been completely mined while there has been local opposition to mining and deforestation in Parsa, PEBK Phase II and Kete Extension all three allotted to the Rajasthan Rajya Vidyut Utpadan Nigam Ltd (RRVUNL).
- After the gram sabhas opposed mining in the Madanpur South and Gidmudi Paturia blocks that were allotted to the Andhra Pradesh Mineral Development Company (APMDC) and Chhattisgarh State Power Generation Company (CSPGC) respectively, clearances were withdrawn.
- The resolution isn't expected to change the status quo.
- While the Congress says the onus is on the Centre to stop mining, the BJP has been asking the State government to withdraw the clearances it has issued to mine developers and operators.

THE HINDU

KANSAS WIN

- In a referendum on August 2, voters in the conservative state of Kansas in the U.S. decided to protect rights to abortion.
- The ‘Kansas No State Constitutional Right to Abortion and Legislative Power to Regulate Abortion Amendment’ was defeated.
- It would have allowed elected representatives to pass laws regarding abortion.
- The amendment’s failure will boost Democrats’ hopes that the abortion rights issue will lead voters to the party in the November 8 elections.
- This was the first electoral test in any state after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe vs Wade in June, ending the constitutional right to abortion guaranteed by a 1973 judgment.

What did the amendment propose?

- The amendment, which was to be inserted in Section 22 of the Kansas Bill of Rights, proposed to change the constitution to provide that the state “does not require government funding of abortion and does not create or secure a right to abortion.”
- It would have allowed elected state representatives and state senators to “pass laws regarding abortion,

including, but not limited to, laws that account for circumstance of pregnancy resulting from rape or incest, or circumstances of necessity to save the life of the mother.

THE HINDU

Lachit Borphukan

- 17th century military strategist’s 400th birth anniversary.
- “Lachit Borphukan’s valorous leadership led to the decisive defeat of the Mughals at the Battle of Saraighat in 1671, registering for him a unique space in the annals of Assam history.
- Lachit Borphukan (24 November 1622 - 25 April 1672) was a commander and Borphukan, in the Ahom kingdom, located in present-day Assam, India, known for his leadership in the 1671 Battle of Saraighat that thwarted a drawn-out attempt by Mughal forces under the command of Ramsingh I to take over Ahom kingdom.
- He died about a year later due to illness
- Borphukan was one of the five patra mantris (councillors) in the Ahom kingdom, a position that was created by the Ahom king Prataap Singha.

- The position included both executive and judicial powers, with the jurisdiction of the Ahom kingdom west of the Kaliabor river.
- The headquarters of Borphukan was based in Kaliabor and after the Battle of Itakhuli in 1681 in Itakhuli in Guwahati.
- This position was particularly important and powerful because of its distance from the Ahom capital, giving it a semblance of independence.

THE HINDU

GES
REPORTER