

## SWIFT ACTION, STRONG MESSAGE

A private university in Punjab has acted with commendable promptness on a complaint of alleged misbehaviour by none other than its Vice-Chancellor toward students from Jammu and Kashmir. A video that surfaced on social media showed the VC allegedly abusing and threatening students for daring to request the hostel administration to provide them pre-dawn meals. Sehri, during the holy month of Ramzan. The visuals, in which the VC was seen warning students to vacate their rooms, triggered widespread outrage and disbelief.

The university administration has since removed the Vice-Chancellor and instituted an inquiry into the incident. This swift action deserves appreciation. Without delving into the merits of the case, it must be said that a person occupying the highest academic office in an institution—where students and their families pay through their nose for quality education and a safe environment—cannot afford to indulge in threats, intimidation, or language that smacks of intolerance.

India's civilisational strength lies in its pluralism. It is a multi-cultural and multi-religious society where people of all faiths have lived together for centuries. No religion is alien to this land; each is woven into the fabric of the nation's collective identity. Differences may exist, as they do in any diverse society, but mutual respect for religious practices has been the bedrock of social harmony.

Across the country, ordinary citizens often go out of their way to support one another during religious observances. During Ramzan, it is not uncommon to see neighbours, friends, and even strangers arranging Sehri for fasting Muslims—be they travellers, students, or attendants of patients in hospitals. In Kota, for instance, non-Muslim students have reportedly taken up the responsibility of providing Sehri meals to hundreds of Muslim students. Volunteers vie to work in the kitchen, cooking food and distributing it at the doors of their fasting peers. Such gestures reflect the true spirit of India—one of empathy, accommodation, and shared humanity.

Even if the Vice-Chancellor in question felt constrained by administrative or logistical limitations, there was no justification for threatening students or resorting to what many have described as hate speech. Leadership in academia demands restraint, sensitivity, and a deep understanding of the diversity that campuses represent. Universities are meant to be spaces of dialogue and inclusion, not fear and exclusion. By removing the VC and initiating an inquiry, the university has set a healthy precedent. Accountability at the highest level sends a strong message that misconduct and discriminatory behaviour will not be tolerated. One hopes that this action becomes a template for institutions across the country: wherever hate speech is used against any group, and wherever harassment or discrimination rears its head, authorities must respond firmly and without equivocation.

In safeguarding dignity and pluralism on campuses, we safeguard the very idea of India.

## Eating with sense: Old lessons for new times

Vinayak Rajat Bhat

Long before modern nutrition science, Caraka, the great Indian physician, reminded us that life stands on three simple pillars—ahara (food), svapna (sleep), and brahmacharya (self-discipline and the pursuit of knowledge). If any one of these is neglected, balance is lost. Among the three, food holds a special place, because it shapes the body every single day. What we eat, when we eat, and how we eat quietly influence our energy, mood, and long-term health. Interestingly, modern research is beginning to say much the same thing. A recent study by R Davis and others (2022) explains that eating at the wrong times can disturb the body's natural internal clock, affecting the way food is processed and stored. Many such studies now warn us that unhealthy eating practices can slowly disrupt the body from within. Food, therefore, is not merely a daily routine or a source of pleasure—it is a science that deserves care and awareness.

In this article, we turn to the Indian Knowledge tradition to see what it has to say about food, eating habits, and the art of living well.

Healthy eating, according to the Indian Knowledge tradition, depends on *desa* (region), *kala* (time or season), and *prakriti* (one's natural constitution). This means that what suits one person may not suit another. Yet, alongside these individual considerations, there are some simple and universal principles of eating that anyone can follow in daily life. One such principle is beautifully expressed in a verse from Ksemakutuhala of Ksemendra, a 16th-century text: *madhuram adhura-madau madhyata mlaikabhavah katukatakamathante tiktaktikam tathaiva, yadi sukhaparinamam vanchasi tvam hi rajan tyaja khalajanasangam bhojanam ma kadacit*.

Addressing a king, the verse explains that food should be eaten in a certain order—sweet tastes at the beginning, sour in the middle, and pungent and bitter towards the end. The poet draws a striking contrast: the company of a wicked person may begin sweetly but ends in bitterness,



and therefore should be avoided; food, on the other hand, should never be abandoned if it follows this very pattern.

This naturally raises a question—why should sweet foods be eaten first? Ayurveda offers a clear explanation. When a person is hungry, *pitta*, or digestive fire, is already strong. If sour, pungent, or spicy tastes are taken at this stage, *pitta* can become excessive. Sweet taste, however, has a calming effect and helps settle the digestive fire gently. If *pitta* is aggravated repeatedly, it may lead to problems such as acidity or gastritis, and in severe cases, serious health complications.

To avoid this, Ayurveda recommends beginning the meal with something sweet. This is why, in many parts of India, the first item served during a traditional meal is a sweet. Until recently, and even today in several regions, it has been customary to welcome a guest returning from long travel with *jaggery* or a sweet—an everyday practice quietly guided by deep dietary wisdom. Again this is a general norm. It might change based on the region, time/season or compendium of an individual.

When should we eat?

Ayurveda offers a simple yet practical answer: one should eat only when genuinely hungry. Hunger is seen as a sign that the digestive system is ready to receive food. Along with this, Ayurveda also gives clear time-based guidelines to help maintain balance.

A classical verse explains this idea:

*yamamadye na bhoktavyam yamayugmam na langhayet, yamamadye rasodvegumyugmetite balaksayah.*

In simple terms, the text advises that one should not eat again within about three hours of a meal, nor should one re-

main hungry for more than six hours. Eating too soon after a meal disturbs the digestive process, while waiting too long weakens the body and drains energy. For example, if someone eats a full lunch and then snacks again within an hour or two out of habit rather than hunger, the digestion of the earlier meal is interrupted. On the other hand, skipping meals for long hours—such as working through the day without eating until late evening—often leads to fatigue, irritability, and low energy. Interestingly, modern nutrition science supports this balanced approach. Research in the field of chrononutrition shows that meal timing and regular eating intervals play a significant role in metabolism and overall health. Eating in alignment with the body's internal biological clock, rather than grazing frequently or delaying meals for long periods, has been linked to better digestion, improved metabolic function, and healthier weight regulation. In this way, contemporary research quietly echoes Ayurveda's long-standing advice: good health depends not only on what we eat, but also on when and how regularly we eat.

How much should we eat?

Before answering how much to eat, Ayurveda first asks us to understand the nature of food. Broadly, food is classified into two types—*guru* (heavy) and *laghu* (light).

*Guru* foods are those that take longer to digest. They tend to cause a feeling of heaviness, increase bodily waste, but are also nourishing, strengthening, and growth-promoting when taken properly. *Laghu* foods, on the other hand, are light and easy to digest. They help reduce excess weight and even support healing, such as recovery from wounds or illness.

With this understanding, *Vagbhata*, the author of the *Astanga-hrdaya*, gives a clear and practical guideline: *matrasi sarvakalam syat matra hyagneh pravartika, matra dravyanyapeksante gurunyapi laghunyapi*.

In simple words, one should always eat in the right quantity, because proper quantity keeps the digestive fire functioning well. Whether food is heavy or light, it becomes beneficial only when eaten in

moderation. Ayurveda further explains what this moderation looks like in practice. Heavy foods should be eaten only to about half one's capacity, while light foods should not be eaten to the point of complete fullness. Eating too little weakens the body, reduces vitality, and can disturb *vata*, leading to various health problems. On the other hand, eating too much—regardless of the type of food—can aggravate all bodily imbalances and burden digestion. Contemporary studies on portion size and digestion show that consistently overeating, even of "healthy" foods, strains the digestive system and is linked to problems such as obesity, insulin resistance, and chronic inflammation. On the other hand, eating very small portions or skipping meals for long periods can lead to fatigue, nutrient deficiencies, and loss of muscle mass.

Research on mindful and portion-controlled eating also shows better digestion, improved metabolic health, and greater satiety when people stop eating before they feel completely full—remarkably similar to the Ayurvedic advice given centuries ago. Repeated overeating, Ayurveda warns, leads to indigestion, which it considers the root cause of many diseases. The lesson is simple and timeless: good health depends not only on what we eat, but also on how much we eat—and knowing when to stop.

Conclusion

The ideas presented here offer only a small glimpse into the vast and nuanced understanding of food found in the Indian Knowledge Systems tradition.

Ayurveda does not view eating as a mechanical act or a set of rigid rules, but as a thoughtful practice guided by time, place, individual nature, and moderation. From what we eat, to when and how much we eat, these principles quietly emphasise balance, awareness, and respect for the body's natural rhythms. While modern research is now beginning to rediscover many of these insights, centuries-old Ayurvedic wisdom reminds us that healthy living often lies in simple, mindful choices. What has been shared here is only a beginning — an invitation to explore a much larger tradition where food is understood not just as nourishment, but as a foundation of life itself.

## WHEN WELFARE TURNS INTO FREEBIES

ASHA GUPTA

Recently, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu announced ₹5,000 in 1.31 crore women's accounts. In January 2026, the Supreme Court of India drew a clear line of demarcation for the first time between political freebies and welfare provisions. Speaking in response to a petition by Ashwini Kumar Upadhyaya, Chief Justice Surya Kant held that freebies could not be equated with welfare largesse by the state. The Supreme Court was found shifting its stance from the earlier judgement in the *S Subramaniam Balaji versus Tamil Nadu* case in 2013, which held that electoral promises in the form of freebies did not amount to bribery under Section 123 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

In this petition, the question before the Court was whether untenable electoral promises made by various political parties during elections to lure voters amounted to bribery or not. Could these be allowed for being related to the Directive Principles of State Policy and falling under the category of 'public purpose'? This issue was further reviewed in a PIL in support of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remark on 'revadi culture'. Fiscal prudence demands responsible management of government finances, ensuring sustainability

and avoidance of excessive deficits. Earlier, in advanced economies, social development was seen as an end in itself and the state was viewed as an agent of social responsibility. The focus was on resource inputs as a symbol of progress and commitment, often to the neglect of outputs. Modern states in developing countries are required to promote equity, fairness and justice on the one hand, and maintain high standards of efficiency, accountability and democracy on the other. This has led to pulls in opposite directions.

In fact, we find convergence of welfare goals in both the Global North and Global South. Despite different ideologies and worldviews, rulers are willing to assist the elderly and needy. Nobody wants to alienate vast majorities in order to retain power. Consequently, there has been a shift in paradigm from 'social security' to 'social insurance, social assistance and social protection' worldwide. In India, many freebies and welfare benefits are announced just before elections by both central and state governments, often without protection or accountability. Most schemes are eulogised and personalised to reap votes without mentioning the source from which such expenditure would be met. The term 'freebie' is used in electoral politics in the name of welfare benefits because a very thin line exists between the two. Whereas

freebies are seen as one-time assistance to gain immediate electoral support, welfare measures aim at equitable and sustainable development through properly designed socio-economic policy.

Freebies are viewed as politically motivated interventions to reap immediate benefits in terms of votes without addressing the underlying causes of socio-economic distress. These are not sustainable due to the financial burden, resulting in a rise in the fiscal deficit in the long run. Unlike welfare benefits that seek to lift recipients out of poverty, freebies are likely to inculcate a dependency culture. Most recipients are unaware that expenditure on free electricity, free bus rides for women, subsidised food, cycles or laptops is met from their own tax money.

Unlike welfare measures, freebies do not aim at long-term socio-economic development of marginalised sections of society. While the public sees freebies as a quick fix for immediate problems, welfare policies aim at structural changes rather than short-term gratification. Welfare provisions require adequate funding, whereas freebies are often pre-election promises made by political parties in manifestos simply to lure swing voters.

According to the Reserve Bank of India, a freebie is defined as a public welfare measure provided free of charge, such as elec-

tricity, water, public transport, farm loan waivers or subsidies. However, in practice, it remains difficult to differentiate between freebies and welfare measures. All freebies are not welfare measures and vice versa. Welfare expenditure through public funding is justified as appropriate and desirable for uplifting the poor and needy, whereas expenditure on freebies is often considered irrational. Despite a national debt nearing ₹200 lakh crore, many political parties splurged public funds on gold chains, TVs, cash and liquor during elections prior to 2014. In 2023-24, the top 11 states spent about ₹4 lakh crore (1.7 per cent of their GDP) on social welfare, including direct cash transfers and distribution of goods. Ambivalence persists due to the absence of a precise definition.

Today, clientelist politics has given rise to populism, replacing the state-based welfare model with a patronage model. Drastic measures are required to safeguard India's electoral democracy.

The state must prioritise welfare schemes, ensure efficient allocation of resources, strengthen fiscal management, encourage informed decision-making, and engage civil society. This calls for renewed democratic consensus, recognising that the prevalence of freebies reflects failed politics and vulnerable voters rather than genuine welfarism.

## Anganwadis: Need to keep it above votebank politics

Swapna Majumdar

On the morning of February 2, 2026, Kanchan Bai Meghwal arrived early at the anganwadi centre (AWC) in Neemuch district's Ranpur village in Madhya Pradesh. Her self-help group, of which she was president, was in charge of preparing midday meals for the children at the AWC and it was her turn to cook that day.

While working, she saw a swarm of bees heading towards the children. Instinctively, Meghwal rushed out and shielded the children with tarpaulin sheets while positioning herself in front of them and facing the brunt of the attack. While this courageous act saved 20 children, the innumerable bee stings she suffered in the process proved fatal.

Some months prior to this incident, in the neighbouring state of Odisha, the engagement of Sharmistha Sethy, a Dalit woman, as anganwadi helper at the AWC in the state's Nuagaon village in Kendrapada district enraged upper-

caste communities to such an extent that they stopped sending their children there. They did not want their children to eat meals prepared by a Dalit woman. Even pregnant and lactating women, who also visit the anganwadi for their take-home rations, refused to go. Sethy's plight was spotlighted after newspapers reported the reason for the three-month boycott of the anganwadi centre. It required the matter to be raised in Parliament, mediation by state departments, and a minister to eat the meal prepared by Sethy at the anganwadi before matters could be resolved. Last week, the children returned to the AWC.

Incidentally, Meghwal also belonged to the Dalit community. Is this fact important? Yes, because had Meghwal seen herself only as a Dalit and an untouchable, she may have thought twice before sacrificing her life for the children. Had she done so, she would probably have been alive today. Maybe she should have. As the sole breadwinner of the family, her act of selflessness left her



paralysed husband and her young children rudderless.

However, thanks to the media attention Meghwal's case received, the state government announced financial assistance of ₹4 lakh to her kin and an undertaking to bear the expenses of her children's education. Now, it remains to be seen whether all these promises are met once the

media glare fades.

Unfortunately, cases of caste discrimination like the one in Odisha are not the first of their kind. Caste prejudice is entrenched across the length and breadth of India. A 2012 study by the Institute of Human Development found that caste prejudices in Bihar's villages were adversely affecting children in

anganwadis.

Last year, upper-caste families stopped their children from going to the AWC in Bidar, Karnataka, to protest against the appointment of Milana Bai, a Dalit helper. Instead of resolving the issue, the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) asked Milana Bai to look for another job. It was only after district officials intervened that the impasse was somehow resolved. Anganwadi centres are part of the Ministry of Women and Child Development's flagship Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS). There are about 14 lakh AWCs across the country, with the implementation of ICDS, including recruitment of anganwadi workers and helpers, resting with states.

Recognising the important role AWCs play in the cognitive and nutritional development of a child, the central government increased investments to modernise AWCs in the country to become 'Saksham Anganwadis' by incorporating technology to make them 'smart'.

Under the Mission Saksham Anganwadi & Poshan 2.0 initiative, the government has allocated ₹21,960 crore for 2025-26 to make anganwadi centres digitally smart but has not, in parallel, given equal priority to eliminating caste prejudices that undermine the purpose of AWCs. Crucial to combating caste-based injustices is strengthening the implementation of anti-discrimination laws and policies, such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, and ensuring timely justice for victims of caste-based discrimination. But implementation is, more often than not, weak.

Casteism is so inexorably intertwined with all spheres of life, including politics, that it is more rewarding to exploit caste loyalties for electoral gains than to double efforts to end it.

Anganwadis lay the foundation for the physical, psychological and emotional development of the child and must be kept above vote-bank and caste politics.