

PUBLIC LECTURE
THE POLITICS OF POPULISM

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The notion of a Populist Government:

The crux of all criticism towards a Populist Government is their lack of emphasis upon policies. They are damned everywhere because of their lack of economic wisdom. They are considered wasteful, unmindful of budgetary constraints, they spend beyond means and have no inkling of prioritization. Critics will comment that they spend lump sum amounts of money on festivals or opening up colleges, they may give more emphasis on the construction of educational buildings, rather than recruiting good teachers. They always seem to be responding to the immediate questions- so they do not have economic wisdom.

Populism in the context of West Bengal:

In West Bengal, when the populist TMC came to power, they followed the old path. They did not allow the forceful acquisition of land for industrialization and they said that the government and state would not act as a private agent in acquiring land under the land acquisition act. Yet, much like the Left Front, they also showed a penchant towards big ticket investments. It took them four years, and roughly by 2015, they realized that the investment they wanted would not come irrespective of land- and that there was a limit to the competition between states in terms of attracting such big ticket investments.

Paradoxically, what was noteworthy was the spectacular progress of agriculture, which in some ways was not just comparable to the left front during the 80s, where productivity, consumption, poverty alleviation takes standard measures of rural advance, from 2013-14, West Bengal began making impressive achievements in the agrarian sector, so much so that now, in segments such as commercial crop, fruit, vegetables, it tops other States in India and is often among the first three.

In a stroke of cleverness, the Trinamool government realized that the poor community of WB is not only self-sufficient, but is actually doing pretty well. Therefore, when pitted against other states, WB's per capita GDP is actually doing pretty well. Where this government differs from the erstwhile left is that it knows what it can leverage, and with the left front, the latter was unaware of how it could leverage and what it could bargain.

In terms of education, what one has to ask not as an economist but as a social scientist and an analyst- is why is it that WB started giving more emphasis on education, and what is this desire for this huge expenditure on education? This is one of the primary heads of budgetary expenditure as well. One of the reasons given is that there is less bureaucracy- so, say when the CM goes on a tour and is on the look-out for what to do, she is informed that there is the need for a school, all that she really has to do is make a phone call. Therefore, while there is a lot of haphazardness, middle men are cancelled out.

In health, the situation is not so good, but those who are accustomed to private health organizations would not realize the massive strides that have been made in the district health infrastructure. At the same time, the populist government, as much as the erstwhile Left Front, is hooked on to the idea of insurance, so that, it has not given more emphasis on public health infrastructure, rather going down the road of universal medical insurance, which is a much more American thing to do rather than the British way which seeks to provide health service. The Trinamool government, in this sense, is a split soul because while in education it

allows private companies to invest and play a role (while keeping it solidified that is the public sector and the government which will spread the motto of literacy), on the other hand, their stance on health is still unclear.

Issues plaguing the populist government of WB:

The government is realizing, if too late, the potential of the migrant population as a resource, and is taking steps to address the question of their social security. The steps are too little too late, and in other states like Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh migrant labourers from districts of WB like Murshidabad, particularly Muslim migrant labourers will be subjected to harassment and discrimination, occasional torture and killings- but if migrants come back, Bengal's semi-agrarian economy will suffer, because it is fuelled by the migrant income. The populist government is not equipped mentally, administratively, or policy-wise, to handle this crisis. They are attempting to bring them back to safety, but that is not enough- and it is only realizing now that it needs to have relationships with other states in terms of institutions like Special Offices of Labour Bureau, and steps for the protection of Bengali Labourers. The Left Front had taken a good step a while back when they found that huge numbers of Bengalis would go to Chennai for eye operations, and they took the opportunity to open new windows in Kolkata.

Another issue is that the root to infrastructure has been a root to fuelling illegal rental income, or quasi-rental income. The proceeds coming from the sale and rent of land, its leasing out, and construction (and because the construction industry is one of the biggest recruits of informal labour in WB, and is one of the biggest sources of income for the WB economy), while fuelling the economy indirectly, is also a source of political endangerment to the State's stability. Eventually, it may also become a threat to the economy if investors begin to perceive it as one.

The third big problem is what to do with sunset industries and not having sunrise industries. But here, Banerjee's TMC is equipped in a certain sense. The Populists have learnt the notions of debt and credit much more than the industrial bourgeois or the left which mirrors the industrial bourgeois. Regarding the lack of fear of debt, Prof. Samaddar uses the reference of Piketty. Piketty's insight is that independent sovereign countries like England or Great Britain during the time of the Napoleonic wars, the national debt acquired took over a century to clear. Piketty argues that rarely such big bills, through which the country prospers, it will rarely be cleared by fifty or sixty years. On the other hand, taking the example of the US- the most indebted country on Earth- does it matter?

If one tries to calculate how much WB would get from the Centre, and one can say that we have been deprived of so and so for so many years- the truth is that there is no end to this. And on the other hand, others may argue as to why is it that if creditors are so invested in giving WB debt, and WB is standing on a piece of cloth that if taken away at any moment will cause the collapse of the state- why is this not happening? The idea here is to transfer debt into an asset.

Populists' understanding of the Economy: The populace attitude towards the economy is modelled on an understanding of an x and y relationship- people, not economic forces. Any effort to answer this big historical question in real life practices through governmental exercise will be damned as adversarial to economic growth. This is because it moves away from an economy of competition and elimination to one of relations and co-existence. This will need a fundamentally different form of social policy, upstaging the neoliberal model of growth, and reversing it in the sense of placing it upside-down. Such a government will not be a counterpoint to the flexible forms of labour and economic activity, but will be an active

agent in managing flexibility in popular interest. Upgrading the fabric and the depth of popular occupation will perhaps, in future, be seen as the way to cancel the logo of homo-economic interests. We are therefore arguing that the other scene of the economy, as is presented by WB, suggests a reconciliation between two divergent frameworks; the modern, flexible and logistical, and the rural, small and the dispersed.

In such a society, the civil society of these states play very little roles in the interplay of relations between people, power, transfer of resources, and in further development of governmental mood.

An old concept which is coming back, is that of *wisdom*. This will mean governance in accordance with acknowledgement of multiple reference points in the economy. It will mean emphasizing 'protection' of the vulnerable as a principle of economic management in place of the principle of wealth, or amassment of riches and profit, or even the principle of welfare. It also emphasizes on delivery within the bracket of goods and services to the poorer classes whose income rises as delivery increases, as important as the principal of Promise by which Credit functions.

Finally, economic management by the populists is representative of the society that they want to create, the conditions of realization of its own dream of a popular economy where people survive and somewhat better their conditions under odd and precarious situations.