

Electoral Democracy and the Nature of State Populism in West Bengal

In the liberal democratic political discourse, populism has often been used pejoratively. However, off late, major scholars in the field of political theory regard populism as a governing principle of democratic political practice and the only substantive strategy of political mobilisation under conditions of representative democracy. Political parties and political movements, irrespective of their ideological persuasions adopt populist rhetoric and articulate populist political agenda to appeal various plebeian and heterogeneous sectors of the population against the antagonistic frontier(s) for popular mobilisation. In this paper, I shall try to theoretically understand populism as a robust analytical concept in the domain of both electoral politics and governmental initiatives, which could throw light on the idea of state populism.

From the recent experiences in Britain, one could argue that Left-wing populists are 'more socio-economically focussed' and 'more inclusionary' than the rightwing populists (March 2017). While agreeing with such an analysis, one could contend that in the current conjuncture, the left populists at least, promises an alternative to neoliberalism while rightwing populists, although on occasions, are critical to select set of neoliberal policies, they do not have a vision of transcending neoliberal capitalism. Moreover, left-wing populism is based on hope with socially progressive policies, particularly, promising redistributive programmes as part of its ideological vocabulary. In contrast, the rightwing populism has been based mainly on fear, a fear of the immigrant with a strong xenophobic character 'and the fact that in all cases immigrants are presented as a threat to the identity of the people, while multiculturalism is perceived as being imposed by the elites against the popular will' (Mouffe 2005: 69).

Besides the academic study of left and right populisms (Mouffe 2018, Bobba and Duncan McDonnell 2016, Mudde 2007, Mény and Surel 2002) there is a marked difference between the recent works of Müller (2016) and Weyland (2013) that treat all kinds of populism as a danger to democracy and those who think that populism might not be necessarily associated with the extreme right (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). In fact, some argue that populism can be only leftwing and may not be the most appropriate category to conceptualise outright nationalist, racist and fascist movements (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014).

Most academic studies tend to overlook the nature of state populism. State populisms are in contrast to the theoretical literature on populism like that of Ernesto Laclau (1977, 2005), which proposes an oppositional politics but at the same time has the mark of Laclau's own normative project for a search of leftist populism. However, how does a populist party sustain its rule by expanding the logic of equivalence while using the state? Various prominent forms of state populisms existed in South Asia like that of the regime of Indira Gandhi in India in the late 1960s and early 1970s and Mujibism in early 1970s in Bangladesh. In the recent past, we could also notice the state populism of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, and the Latin American state

populisms. In this respect, this paper seeks to conceptualise the specific form of state populism in West Bengal by examining the distinct articulatory practices of the All India Trinamool Congress, the ruling party in the Eastern Indian state of West Bengal, led by Mamata Banerjee.

While populism is regarded as the equivalential logic of the people against an antagonistic frontier including the state, the specific form of state populism as it exists today in India's electoral democracy uses the state to challenge a real or perceived enemy. In other words, the logic of anti-establishment populist political challenge is being transformed into using the state apparatuses against an enemy, thus giving a unique dimension to the populist configuration. This paper will assess the Trinamool's peculiar form of state populism, in response to the rightwing populist politics of Modi led Bharatiya Janata Party that combines the xenophobic rhetoric against religious minorities. In contrast to such a righting populist rhetoric, a centre-left populism of Trinamool conglomerates pluralistic approach to politics along with distributive policies of giving massive doles to the poor under conditions of what could be described as neoliberalism with Indian characteristics. In doing such an exercise, the paper will attempt to theorise how state populism besides building the equivalential logics also accommodates democratic demands through a new logic of governance, which although has a parallel to Laclau's logic of difference and yet dissimilar to the differential logic. Thus, while populism in Laclau's works has the dual logic of equivalence and difference, the nature of state populism in West Bengal operates through a triad: the logic of equivalence, difference and governance.

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