

Populism as Political Practice: Interrogating Caste and Social Justice in Hindi Heartland¹

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The fact that the term populism is generally defined as ‘ordinary people’s opposition to elites’, it is assumed that populism in a democracy is intended to give ordinary people a chance to counter elites through representative politics. However, populism has a complicated relationship with democracy and could also be ambiguous because of certain political propositions. The premise that populism thrives by attacking ‘the elite’ and defending the interests of ‘the ordinary people’ needs closer and more in-depth scrutiny. The trajectory of the Indian political system and functioning of electoral politics informs us that populism has been a political practice for several decades. Vreese et al. (2018)³ emphasizes that populism might increase representation and give a voice to groups of citizens that do not feel heard by the current political elite and it might expand the attention for issues that are not in the mainstream discourse. They further articulate that populism might improve the responsiveness of the political system by making actors and parties align their policies more with the “wishes of the people.” The way populism evolved and influenced the polity in different parts of the globe, it needs to be examined, on the one hand, with an element of threat and risk to minority rights, curbs on civil discourse, etc. and, on the other, with a scope and hope for expanding democratic reach to hitherto left out or on the margins. The discourse on populism is rooted in the idea of popular will and is comfortable aligning itself to any ideology that could be broadly appealing to a majority. I shall return to the conceptual and historical trajectory of populism and its practices.

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³ Claes H. de Vreese, Frank Esser, Toril Aalberg, Carsten Reinemann, and James Stanyer. Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style: A New Perspective. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 2018, Vol. 23(4) 423–438.

In the present paper, I am proposing to examine populism as political practice; the practice that invokes the idea of social justice through instrumentalities of caste. The ideal of the Indian constitution and demands of liberal democracy that shaped post-colonial Indian politics witnessed the evolution of populism in dynamic yet diverse form. The subtleties could be observed, ascertained and assessed in different federal units in very many ways. The ideological underpinning of populism engages with its idioms and phrases, rhetoric, institutional formations, mobilizing techniques, impact etc.

In this paper, however, I am looking at populism at play in the hindi heartland in general and in the state of Bihar in particular. Apart from what do we mean by populism and how do we construe the practice of politics in the realm of populism, the paper primarily engages with the idea of '*samajik nyaya*' (social Justice) that dominated the tapestry of populism in the states under discussion. What has been the articulation and manifestation of social justice and where does caste enter in this practice of politics? Conceptually and strategically, it is non-elitist and attempts to bring together masses. Is it that in the process of caste arithmetic, the practice of inclusion and exclusion complicates the process? If one takes Ambedkarite idea of dealing with caste question and therefore responding to justice in classical terms, it would have meant annihilation of caste. But did the social justice articulation in the hindi heartland at any point in time attempted that. The answer is emphatic 'no'. Instead, it reconfigured the caste groupings for mobilization and electoral assertion and thereby turning caste social into caste political. Has this been a careful and conscious decision and informed by the pragmatism that populism seems to value. The language, tone, tenor, idiom, phrases and slogans used since the time of articulation for social justice in general and quota politics in particular by leading socialist leaders in late 1960s, the route that practice of populism took in hindi heartland navigated through tumultuous phases. How are we to appreciate this practice of politics through management of caste? How are we to comprehend the ideas, strategies and outcome of such populism? To grasp the inception and trajectory of the contours of populism in hindi heartland, it is prudent to restrict one's engagement within a specific timeframe. Yet, the present paper would take a risk to traverse from the past to the contemporary so as to understand the politics and shifts in a nuanced manner.

The history of Bihar is replete with innumerable instances of caste alliances, networks and mobilisations. In the past, the state and the government tried to manage and administer caste in a manner whereby the ruling elite can gain legitimacy of its rule and enjoy the support of majority sections of the society. Challenging this elitist management strategy of Congress, in the middle of 1960s, the socialist group invoked the possibility for politics by masses and thus brought populism of a particular kind in the political frame. Caste has brought to use for claiming a share in socio-political and economic resources, particularly by the underprivileged and the marginalized. Should populism in such context be assumed to function according to the logic of resentment, with a sense of envy or injustice? Is populism provides assurances for redemption through the jurisdiction of governmental action? However, the consolidation of the social processes and the struggle for hegemony of the backward and dalit castes of Bihar, which have become sufficiently organised and assertive since the mid-1960s, had limited electoral success. The socialist ideology forcefully articulated by Lohia and others made anti-Congressism as a creed. The caste coalition with OBCs and the dalits gave rise to the first non-Congress formation that comprised the Communists, on the one hand, the Socialists, and the Bhartiya Jan Sangha, on the other. How did this coalition of extremes taken forward, and how did the idea of social justice played out in the decades to come? The inability of the erstwhile socialist party to carry on populist politics beyond the reservation and the decline of Congress party has witnessed the right-wing populism making inroads in many field and arena of politics. The political development of the contemporary decade demands closer scrutiny of right-wing populism. How the caste political engages with right-wing populism and therefore builds a broader electoral base. From a socialist influenced populism to the invocation of caste and social justice by right-wing populism provides scope to engage with realpolitik in the contemporary.

Describing the political interplay in the hindi heartland, the paper examines whether populism is first and foremost a set of ideas as has been articulated through 'Ideational approach'. Contemporary populism in Western Europe is defined as 'an ideology, which pits a virtuous and homogenous people against a set of elites and dangerous "others" who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice'

(Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008: 3)⁴. Are the masses in our context homogenous and their issues, concerns and expectation in sync with each other? How has the differentiation been playing out? What has been the nature of inclusion and exclusion characterized by populism in the hindi heartland? Drawing from Filc's (2010: 128-38)⁵ work on the political right in Israel, I shall engage with the material, political and symbolic dimensions of exclusion and inclusion in populist politics at different phases. Material dimension refers to the distribution of state resources to specific groups; specifically targets certain groups to increase their participation and representation, and symbolic dimension sets the boundary 'of the people into the 'we' or 'us' instead of the 'them' and 'they'.⁶

Besides, these dimensions, one realizes that at the very core of populism is the idea of a people and their apparent unmediated relationship with a leader. Kurt Weyland (2001: 14)⁷ argues that populism 'is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalist leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers'. How do we understand nature, persona and strategies of such leaders and how such regimes deploy the category of people. Does the process of mediation between the leader and people disappear or it takes newer forms and processes? The politics that followed since 1990 is mostly the politics of reassertion and reaffirmation of caste cleavages, deepened further to capture political power: turning caste from its dominant social domain to make it caste political. The field of politics informs us how leaders often utilize resentment as logic of social and political action in populist politics. The contour of populism that identifies "the will of the people with justice and morality" (Shils 1956: 98)⁸ is occupying the contemporary approach of populism, where both justice and morality are interpreted and deployed strategically. The paper shall probe about the practice of

⁴ Albertazzi D, McDonnell D. Twenty-First Century Populism. London: Palgrave Macmillan; 2008.

⁵ Filc, D. (2010), The Political Right in Israel: Different Faces of Jewish Populism (London: Routledge).

⁶ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America. *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (April 2013), pp. 147-174.

⁷ Weyland, K. (2001), 'Clarifying a Contested Concept. Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics', *Comparative Politics*, 34(1): 1-22

⁸ Shils, Edward. (1956). *The Torment of Secrecy*. Melbourne: Heinemann.

this strategy by select populist leaders. I will also explore more about 'the people' in populist politics. Typically, populists have two answers to this question. If the poor or the underprivileged are said to be "the people", populism hitches on to the left, and income redistribution and welfare-oriented policies follow. Contrariwise, if a religious, ethnic or racial majority constitutes "the people", we get populism that aligns with the right. Can this be interpreted so neatly, or do we need to examine this minutely and analytically?

This takes us to another crucial aspect of populism, i.e. role of political communication. Populist ideas must be communicated discursively to realize the anticipated purposes. What are the tone, tenor and content of language employed in the process? We shall engage with the textual and visual sources, namely speeches, slogans, manifestos, policies, demeanour and other aspects of the performativity of the leader to grasp the promise for a better future. We shall also examine how leaders use 'politics of faith' (Canovan 1999)⁹ and exploit the gap between promise and performance.

The paper thus interrogates the scope of social justice and the location of caste in the political field. While appreciating that populism hinges upon charismatic leaders having direct, unmediated access to the masses, we shall investigate how the leadership trait and communication strategies in different variants of populism are often intense and puzzling. However, the approach is to keep oneself cautious about making a normative judgment about populism. At a broader constituency that has mass appeal in the contemporary hindi heartland, the case in point will be the figure of Narendra Modi. As a leader, he has sidelined the party organization, appealed directly to the Indian public through sophisticated use of communication and technology and nurtured a state of enduring political mobilization that seeks to bypass intermediaries. And at state-specific context from the past, our case in point will be the figure of Lalu Prasad Yadav who had a vernacular style to extraordinary connect with people that bypassed intermediaries. Referring Ostiguy, Jaffrelot¹⁰

⁹ Canovan, Margaret. Trust the People! Populism and the Two faces of Democracy. *Political Studies* (1999), XLVII, 2- 16

¹⁰ Christophe Jaffrelot and Louise Tillin. Populism in India. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* Edited by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy. Online publication 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.7

highlights that populism shares the deployment of a "plebeian grammar" by a leader who projects themselves simultaneously as one of the people and as their protector. They project themselves against an alien, degenerate, or exploitative "other" although their identification of both the people and their other differs considerably across the variants of populism.

The conceptual and empirical focus of the paper is to explain that populism is not only a political practice, but it is also a social and discursive phenomenon. We shall explain how leaders manage to claim to speak in the name of the people, and their politics reveals the performative reference of 'the people' that appeals to social mobilization. How populist leaders manage to scapegoat minority and 'illegal' migrants and appeal for vengeance against 'elites'? How micro management of caste that craft a new social equation is made to project beyond caste/class/identity and identified as an aspirational group? The new turn in populist politics in hindi heartland has redefined the politics of caste coalition and meaning of social justice, and the paper engages with this change. How people in hindi belt comprehend the persona of an individual leader as embodiment of the nation and questioning that persona is deemed illegitimate? And the appeal of such persona allows reconfiguration of caste and social justice politics in a manner where it is believed to have flattened identity politics? Do we really identify with a saturation of power of caste or the idea of *samajik nyaya* is emerging in a new *avatar* under contemporary populist politics? Besides, populist leaders also exhibit limits of convention and civility as burden of bourgeois liberalism; and they indicate the prospect of making politics of unreal, real. The paper thus traverses from past to present to make sense of populist politics in the hindi heartland.