

Why look at the Kanyashree scheme?

Studying a government scheme or a program necessarily entails that we study schemes as a mode of governance, or as an aspect of governmentality; a scheme as something through which a people is identified and defined and a mode through which a state establishes a relationship with the people; in the process it produces subjects of governance. The study of a government scheme is then necessarily about a particular form of governance. In that very sense, the Kanyashree scheme, introduced by the Trinamool government in West Bengal presents itself as an interesting study; one, because it has been running for a long time (almost six years); it has evolved in its modes of address over the years; it has widened its scope in terms of who it includes as its beneficiary; because of the ways in which it is deeply integrated in to the government education system in Bengal; its wide networks of dissemination, particularly in urban spaces; its spectacular presence and visibility on the internet, on print media and on television. The scheme as a point of intersection between governance and let's say the 'will of the people' has also produced peculiar, in the sense, but also in the sense of strange, narratives of people's participation and therefore to see the scheme as a socio-cultural phenomenon alongside it being one that has a cumbersome bureaucratic life of itself. Of particular importance of course is the implications of gender that is linked with the Kanyashree scheme.

In this presentation, I first give a brief overview of the Kanyashree Prakalpa or scheme, and its modes of implementation. I then look at the broader social and cultural terrain that is produced not only through governmental initiatives but also that involves the people's participation, and functions as a means of the self-expression of people. In the third part, I present the findings of my field work at two schools in Birbhum and Murshidabad districts. In the final part, I attempt to understand the ways in which a scheme such as the Kanyashree maybe theorized as a populist scheme or in other words as a strategy integral to a populist politics and government.

The Kanyashree scheme is an initiative taken by the Mamata Banerjee government and implemented by the Department of Women Development and Social Welfare, for the economic and educational upliftment of girl children. Started in the year 2013, the Kanyashree Scheme or Prakalpa, is a conditional cash transfer scheme designed towards the prevention of girl child marriage and school drop-outs. A larger implication of the Kanyashree scheme has also been to intervene in child trafficking in the name of marriage. While the initial intention of the scheme was to encourage girl children, specifically from economically backward families, who due to financial constraint and the simultaneous social pressure of marriage, are unable to continue their

studies, in the last one year, the scheme has been extended to *all* girl children, irrespective of their financial background. The scheme currently functions under two components:

1. The first is K1, an annual scholarship of Rs. 1000/- to be paid annually to girls from 13 to 18 years of age group for every year that they remain in education, on condition that they remain unmarried and fulfil a minimum quota of attendance.
2. The second is K2, a one-time grant of Rs. 25000/- to be paid as an incentive to girls when they turn 18, given that they are engaged in education, occupation or remain unmarried.

The West Bengal government has widely promoted the Kanyashree scheme through billboards, installations, wall paintings, area-wise public and cultural programmes, advertisements on newspapers, television, radio and social media, through school text book curriculum etc. August 14th is designated as the Kanyashree Day. On this day, in addition to a main event organised by the WB government, where Mamata Banerjee and other dignitaries hand out awards in recognition of Kanyashree recipients who have excelled in both academics and extra-curricular activities, programmes are organised by BDOs, where school children participate in various kinds of cultural activities. The Mamata Banerjee government also laid the foundation of the Kanyashree university in the month of January of this month. In addition to these, the scheme has involved the formation of autonomous bodies, such as the Kanyashree Sangha or the Kanyashree Committees, where members hold the title of Kanyashree Joddha or Warriors. Warriors organise cultural activities and awareness programs in their respective localities and communities. These programmes are carried out with the help of teachers and other senior authorities of the school and involve dissuading parents from discontinuing their daughters' education, from underage marriage etc. There are recorded incidents of Kanyashree committees successfully intervening in individual incidents of child marriage and rehabilitation of the girls involved. In addition to the fact that an entire repertoire of state-sponsored visual culture has emerged around Kanyashree (also that an album of songs, written by Mamata Banerjee, has been released as part of the Kanyashree 'awareness' exercise,) it is important to note that social media is also full of seemingly autonomous and independent endeavours related to creating awareness about Kanyashree. Apart from individual district sponsored songs (baul songs on Kanyashree and women's empowerment), individuals have uploaded commentaries and tutorials on filling out the scheme form. Each video contains thousands of comments on the efficacy and the failure of the scheme. There are also videos on how students can respond to Kanyashree related to questions in the board exams etc. What is also interesting is that prior to the general elections of

2019, Kanyashree beneficiaries were involved in campaigning for TMC, the current ruling party in West Bengal. The campaign included wall painting of the Kanyashree logo in conjunction with that of TMC and its electoral slogan. Anandabazar Patrika regularly carries stories related to the Kanyashree scheme, and the activities of the Kanyashree Sanghas and Yoddhas. Beginning from the schools to the localities to wider public spaces, the Kanyashree scheme is therefore deeply integrated in to the urban and semi-urban public life of Bengal. The significance of this remains in that that the scheme, as much as it functions as a welfare scheme, with a constitutional basis, for the empowerment of girl children and its visual cultural presence and visibility as a widespread awareness strategy, the scheme is also part of TMC and Mamata Banerjee's self-promotion strategies.

As far as the process of enrolment of Kanyashree beneficiaries is considered, the BDOs and the individual schools function as nodal agencies. The schools where I have undertaken fieldwork have appointed teachers and clerks dedicated solely to the work of enlisting students to the program, which includes an arduous process of having the forms filled correctly (and this is a significant task because most parents in rural areas are uneducated and therefore ill-equipped to deal with such bureaucratic nuances), of uploading the forms to the BDO server (the rare number of schools where internet services are available, the work of uploading documents happens on the school premises itself); in most other cases, these documents have to be uploaded from the BDO office. Apart from usual documents of identification, each student is expected to provide a government certification of their status as unmarried, a core element of eligibility for the Kanyashree scheme. The two schools that I had visited treated this issue differently; the first, enrolled girls in to the Kanyashree scheme, irrespective of whether they were married or single, or if they did not have adequate attendance. The principal argued that it was more important for her to ensure that all options for girls to return to school and avenues to continue their studies were kept open. The second school however, was more strict on implementing all the rules. There was quite a difference between the social and economic configuration of the girl students in the respective schools; although both are located in rural contexts; and which is substantially reflected in the impact that Kanyashree has had on the girl students. Most of the middle to upper middle-class students left the money to accumulate in their bank accounts. Some said they used it to buy textbooks, while the lower class students gave the annual 1000/- to their families, especially the Muslim girl students whose male siblings had dropped out off school and were away as migrant labourers to Mumbai, Chennai, Gulf etc. While both school authorities claimed that the Kanyashree has led to higher girl student retention in their schools, there is a qualitative difference in their educational achievements and

aspirations. Schools in remoter areas, with a higher demography of students from economically and socially backward family backgrounds have not been able to ensure a diversity of higher education beyond the school. Most girls who do not get married after school either take nursing lessons or become school teachers. In the other school however, not only has the rate of drop to reduced, but more number of girls have taken admission in colleges and universities in various humanities and sciences disciplines. The success of the Kanyashree scheme also needs to be seen in conjunction with other schemes that have been implemented for school students, for instance, the Sabuj Sathi where cycles are given out to students, and the mid-day meal scheme, and the recently announced Rupashree scheme, a marriage assistance scheme for girls, which entails an amount of Rs 25000/- to be given to young women for their marriage. Many of the students were asked what they would do with the 25000/- that they received as part of the K2 scheme; they said they would combine it with the 25000/-, they received as part of Rupashree to be able to pay for marriage costs. Both school principals argued that the Rupashree scheme, announced in 2018, somehow defeats the original purpose of the Kanyashree scheme, ie to encourage women and their families to choose higher studies over marriage and trafficking. On the other hand, some of the girls claimed that they continued their studies after marriage as well, therefore not being in a position where they would have to choose one over the other. However, both schools, and the TMC claim that the scheme and the simultaneous awareness programs have had a positive impact on the drop-out rates (the incentive of 25000/- given to 18 yo girls has been a big factor in that); however, that has not necessarily meant that girls from the lower classes were able to choose better educational opportunities after school. For instance, in the case of the Labhpur HSS school, most girls choosing to study were either enrolling in to BEd to become school teachers or enrolling in to private nursing schools. According to the principal, this was primarily because the girls were not exposed to the various possibilities in terms of higher education and occupation, and therefore had limited aspirations. The point therefore is that the scheme has not had a uniform application nor reception amongst its beneficiaries. Various other social factors need to be taken in to account to understand the unevenness of its application. For instance, the implementation of the scheme across classes, castes and regions, is reflected in the fact that the Kanyashree committees are not active everywhere. In fact, according to Manisha Bandopadhyay, districts such as Murshidabad have been more successful in setting up and running Kanyashree committees with Muslim girls because Muslims have a stronger social and economic position in the said district. The empowerment of girl children is also directly related to their pre-existing social conditions, and Kanyashree functions as an added element in their mobility.

The question here is why are we focusing on the ‘success’ of the scheme; in the sense that we are looking for a line of consistency between what the scheme wants to achieve and what it has claimed to achieve. This becomes an important distinguishing factor between what constitutes an effective scheme and what is generally understood as a populist scheme. To identify something as a populist scheme generally entails that something exists only in terms of an empty promise or as Laclau puts it, as an ‘empty signifier’; generally, a populist scheme is then defined negatively, as something that does not work, or never really had the intention to work. It then stands in not for the thing or the function that it is meant for but something else. As a populist strategy, it locates and addresses the ‘people’ but in the actual it stands to repeatedly refer to something else; it serves to make visible something else. The Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Andolan initiated by the Modi government in 2014 for instance has spent more than 56 % of its funds on ‘media & advocacy’ while less than 25 % of its designated funds have been disbursed to the districts and states. According to available data, 19 % of the funds have not been used at all. Such data therefore refers to the administrative efficacy of a scheme, its failure, its nominal existence and therefore its definition as a populist scheme. Although complaints about failure or corruption in the process of fund disbursement are not reported in the Kanyashree scheme, the failure of realizing intention or meeting expectations is something that is widely present in popular discourse. According to a report in Telegraph in January 2019, “Good intentions cannot, by themselves, solve pressing problems; they must be accompanied by clear thinking and effective execution. This gap between righteous thought and execution seems to be plaguing the Kanyashree Prakalpa, the conditional cash transfer scheme aimed at ensuring underprivileged girls stay in school, thereby delaying their nuptials till they are 18 years old. The goals of the scheme—it has nearly 57 lakh beneficiaries according to the West Bengal government—are undoubtedly noble. But there are credible concerns about its ability to curb trafficking.” The article then goes on to talk about whether the annual scholarship of 750/-/1000- is enough for the girls and the general lack of advocacy about women’s autonomy, safety, empowerment etc., which prevents the scheme from being effective. The constituent efficacy of a scheme that identified the people, and in this case, women and children, as a category of redressal and mobility then emerges as a factor to determine whether a scheme is populist or not. By constituent efficacy, I also mean its ideological content in the sense, whether it upholds certain ideas of justice, democracy, empowerment etc. that have to do with feminist ideals, and whether discursively and in practice these are realised through the scheme. Laclau, however, rejects analysis of populism that focuses on ideological content. For the problem of populism is that it encompasses a range of diverse and often contradictory political beliefs. While the vagueness, slipperiness and superficiality characteristic of the discourse of populist leaders, politics and

strategies is often dismissed as anti-political, Laclau however wants to revindicate populism , seeing it as “the very essence of the political”, and the “construction of a people”. The distinctiveness of populism is that it gathers together disparate ideological positions or political demands, and stresses their equivalence in terms of shared antagonism to a given instance of political power or authority. In other words, populism should be defined by its form rather than its content: it tends to divide and simplify the social field in to two distinct camps, upholding the people over what Laclau variously terms the “dominant ideology”, the “dominant bloc”, “the institutional system”, an “institutionalised other” or even “power” itself. The disparate and heterogeneous demands that constitute any given populist movement are unified and stabilised , not merely by their opposition to the status quo, but also by the emergence of an empty signifier, a concept or name that loses its own specificity as it stands in for the other specific demands to which it is seen as equivalent. Populism therefore follows a logic of equivalence and antagonism, whereby a part (or part object) comes to stand in for the whole. A particular signifier from the populist movement represents the people as a whole, retrospectively unifying their disparate demands; second and more generally, the people as an oppressed part of a divided society claim the right to stand in for society as a whole.

In Laclau’s sense, Kanyashree emerges then as the ‘empty signifier’ of Mamata Banerjee’s populist politics. I would then argue that to understand Kanyashree as a populist scheme, one must look at not the content and the administrative efficacy of the scheme but elsewhere i.e. in Kanyashree as a visual cultural presence as a discursive strategy of a populist politics. Laclau in fact rejects any distinction between discursive strategies and institutional arrangements. I quote, “the discursive is not therefore, being conceived as a level nor even as a dimension of the social, but rather as being co-extensive of the social”. What would be important then to study Kanyashree as a populist scheme or a populist strategy would be to look at the ways in which it exists as a discursive element, as a component of our social; to analyse therefore, how in its spectacular presence, especially in urban-public spaces, it attempts to become co-terminous with an ‘idea’ of the people but more so with the image and iconography of Mamata Banerjee, as a particular form of charismatic leadership that is necessarily gendered. Since, the deployment of an affective force is an integral part of populist strategies, this study also looks at how the Kanyashree scheme is driven through a particular affective force, and this particular affective element is even present in the responses given by the Kanyashree beneficiaries, when they were interviewed.

Context:

Sivakami Ammaiyar Memorial girl child protection scheme

—Promote family planning

—Eradicate female infanticide

—Promote the welfare of girl children in poor families and to raise the status of girl children

Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Andolan