

Mamata Banerjee's Populist Politics

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Populism in the world

Populist politics is on the rise. In a large number of countries, from global north to global south, the waves of populist politics as regimes/movements are fast gaining ground replacing to a great extent the 'traditional' discourse/practice of politics. South Asia is no exception.

Although the word 'populism' is *not* a rigorous ideology and it means many things (even opposite things) to many people situated in different places and times, it has a core belief that the will of ordinary citizens should prevail over the privileged elite. Thus, by definition, populist politics is anti-elite and, therefore, it seeks to harp on the opposition between the elites and the common people.

In simplifying the complexities of reality, the concept of "the people" is vague and flexible. In employing the concept of "the people", populists can encourage a sense of shared identity among different groups within a society and facilitate their mobilisation toward a common cause. Populism is a thin-ideology which is combined with other, more substantial thick ideologies such as nationalism. Thus, populists can be found at different locations along the left-right political spectrum and there is both left-wing populism and right-wing populism.

At first, populism appears to provide a very idealistic view of society where the interests of the left-out masses are addressed. It is argued by some of its advocates like Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau that populism constitutes the essence of democratic politics, which itself talks of government by the general will of the people and brings fore, the issues affecting a large number of masses. In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau considered the nature of populism in political discourse, the creation of a popular hegemonic bloc such as "the people", and the importance of affect in politics. Building on his earlier work, Laclau argued that the basis of populism lies in the creation of "empty signifiers": words and ideas that express a universal idea of justice, and symbolically structure the political environment. Against those who see populism as a threat to democracy, Laclau argued that it is an essential component of it. However, with a "thin ideology" which is full of "empty signifiers" like "the people", "the elite" or "the outsiders", the populist politics can be anything: left, right, or centrist.

In USA, populist politics rose in the first decade of the 21st century appeared in the first decade of the 21st Century in the form of the Occupy movement. The populist approach of the Occupy movement with its concept of the "people", which it called "the 99%", and the rest 1% as the "elite", it challenged was presented as both the economic and political elites. On the other hand, the 2016 presidential elections saw a wave of populist sentiment in the campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, with both candidates running on anti-establishment platforms in the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively.

In Europe, at the turn of the 21st century, populist rhetoric became increasingly apparent, especially in Western Europe, where it was often employed by opposition parties. By the 21st century, European populism was again associated largely with the political right. The term came to be used in reference both to radical right groups like Jörg Haider's Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National (FN) in France.

Populism in India

India has been the crucible of several types of populism over time. Populist political forces have played significant roles in Indian politics, and have varied in their vision of political community, in the social groups they targeted, in the policies they pursued, and in their impact on democracy. In the 1960s, it saw the rise of peasant populism, an ideology that erased class differentiation to promote a rural people vs. urbanites divide. It went well in the context of the 1965 Indo-Pak war centric war-nationalism with a populist slogan by Shastri (the then Prime Minister): *Jai Jawan! Jai Kisan!*

The Indian National Congress carried forward this populist spirit in a new form in the interwar period after Shastri, especially under Indira Gandhi's leadership from the late 1960s to the late 1970s. Inventing the popular slogan, "Garibi Hatao" (drive away poverty), she nationalised banks and coal, and abolished privy purse, enjoyed by the heirs of former princely states, and thus secured the support of the left after the split in the ruling party. In the mid-1970s, after the proclamation of the controversial National Emergency, she launched a series of targeted pro-poor programmes, popular as the 20-point programme. In fact, she hijacked the issues of socialism by claiming "Indira is India."

Since the 1980s, with the surge of the right-wing Hindu nationalism, under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the RSS-dominated *Sangh Parivar* (different front organisations of the RSS), the majority community are being mobilised against Muslim and Christian minorities. These groups highlight the macro Hindu identity over the caste, linguistic or regional identities of the non-Muslim/non-Christian 'majority' communities. The *parivar* has also achieved the goal of spreading largescale fear among the people belonging to majority Hindu community about the 'illegal' Muslim 'infiltrators' from the neighbouring Bangladesh, and thus, changing the demography of India and also about a possible clash with Pakistan. Narendra Modi, the present PM is the new poster-boy of the Hindu populist nationalism, who besides initiating many populist policies, has also raised the popular slogan: "Sab ka Saath, Sab ka Vikash" (With All, the Development for All).

Besides these national trends, at the state level, populist leaders have also emerged popularizing regional identities against alien or corrupt national elites. The Dravid politics in Tamilnadu is a glaring example. In recent decades, the late Jayalalitha, popular as *Amma* (the Mother), personified the spirit of popular politics in Tamilnadu. During her different tenures as Chief Minister, she had to her credit a whopping 18 populist schemes like the "cradle baby scheme" to prevent female foeticide and gender-based abortions were rampant in certain districts and various heavily subsidized 'Amma' products like 'Amma canteen' (Re. 1/ for a meal), 'Amma laptop' (free laptops for high school and college students) etc.

Mamata's populism – left legacy: the concept of Man ('Manush')

In West Bengal the possibilities of populist politics have been demonstrated most. Old tradition of agrarian populism, anti-establishment politics, history of Left led street agitations, electoral violence, contentions for power at the rural level, strong personality led politics, Leftist rhetoric, middle class as the conduit of social unrest, and small and medium towns, women's participation in politics, and finally its enduring class basis, namely petty, unorganised labouring masses and small producers – have contributed to the re-emergence of populism as the defining feature of politics. We can also take the last 7 years of Mamata Banerjee's rule, which uprooted the 34 years' long Left Front rule in West Bengal. Popular as *Didi* (the elder sister), Banerjee has defined her ideology and policy in these words: "We are not Marxist or capitalist, we are for the poor people," she said in her first major interview with a foreign newspaper. "Our policy is very clear: whatever policy will suit the people, whatever policy will suit the circumstances, whatever policy will suit my state." She dedicated her policies to the causes of *Ma Mati Manush* (*Mother, Land, and the Human*).

Even as administrator, she could not forget the style of her old street politics, which was evident during the recent scuffle between the forces of central intelligence, the CBI and the State Police of West Bengal over the 'interrogation'/'arrest' of the Kolkata CP. In protest, Mamata sat in a *dharna* to 'Save Constitution' at 'Metro Channel', Esplanade – the heart of Kolkata, and then held cabinet meetings in a makeshift office room beside the platform of *dharna*. This unprecedented move had startle, if not shocked a large number of people throughout the country. In recent history, we find a parallel of Mamata's *dharna* in the sit-on-dharna at Raj Niwas, Delhi Lt. Governor's residence by the *enfant terrible* Aravind Kejriwal in June 2018 along with some of his colleagues of the AAP government. One can also find somewhat similarity between the Janata Darbars of Kejriwal since 2014 and Mamata's holding of public Secretariat meetings in districts of the state since her coming to office in 2011.

But the latter has now become a regular affair, which has generated tremendous enthusiasm and expectations in common masses (especially in faraway districts from Kolkata) but at the same time which has disturbed the formalistic mindset of top bureaucrats who generally like to rule Bengal from Kolkata. Many critics even saw a 'drama for cheap popularity' at the cost of harassment of bureaucrats and thereby lowering down the values of an essential institution of the modern state, the bureaucracy. Unperturbed by the criticism, which she rubbishes as 'elite', Mamata sees it as the 'devolution' of power centralised in Kolkata, which as 'Calcutta', was the nerve centre and capital of British colonial administration in India since its inception to 1911, when the colonial Capita was shifted to Delhi.

In last eight years she introduced an array of populist programmes such as, distribution of cycles to students, *kanyashree* (monetary incentives to girl students, the most well-known of her policies), rice at Rs. 2/kg through PDS (public distribution scheme); schemes for peasants, folk artists, artisans, and fisherfolk; donations to traditional youth clubs, festivals celebrating land, and many more. Her usage of language, idioms and phrases, lack the finesse of the elite *bhadrolok* (educated gentry), but are popular among the common masses. She also aims to uphold the Bengali-ness of Bengal in a very synthetic manner without any communal or even ideological bias, and thus attempts to redefine a "new Bengal" – one that draws on the

nineteenth century tradition of Bengal Renaissance, religious tolerance, and local pride. As one author observes, “With Mamata, the people have arrived and are here to stay, and are reshaping what it means to be Bengali. This assertion of Bengali identity is also being used by her to counter Hindu populism of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).”

Limits of Mamata’s Politics

Critics have pointed out that Mamata’s populist politics, despite its mass appeal, has several shortcomings, which after first 3-4 years of rule (a period when anti-LF sentiments were still there) started raising their heads. Some of these shortcomings are common among most varieties of popular politics. For instance, like other popular politicians in India, her politics is exclusively *leader-centric*. She takes the final call in terms of her party organisation, believes in a direct contact with the masses and takes the final decision regarding the liaison with other regional/national parties. Barring Purba Medinipur District, the bastion of the Adhikari family (mainly of Sishir Adhikari and now his son, Shuvendu Adhikari), Mamata is synonymous with her party, Trinamool Congress. As a result, secondly, the organisation of the party, which is entirely *ad hoc* in character, is not strong enough (like the organised left) to withstand the whirlwind of sudden political change. Thirdly, the lack of ideology (because the slogan, *Ma-Maati-Manush* seems like an ‘empty signifier’ in the face a well-knit ideology of the left and the Hindu right) also fails to bind her workers in the face of challenges and crises. Fourthly, after assuming Chief Minister-ship, although she tried to emerge as people’s Chief Minister (CM), she has to depend heavily on the government machinery to ensure the delivery mechanisms, and thus, she has gone far away from her old style of street politics and connect with the masses.

In very recent times, especially after the General Elections of Lok Sabha (May, 2019), when the BJP has bagged 18 seats and made its presence formidable in various parts of the state, the limits, and even cracks of Mamata’s populist politics are becoming more and more evident. Many of her party’s rank and file and even representatives of local bodies and assembly are crossing lines. In such a difficult time, Mamata has told at a press conference that although she tried to leave the chair of the CM and concentrate on party and politics but there seemed no alternative for the CM’s post. “I do not crave for the chair, the chair needs me”, she said. This twine tasks of administering the state and facing the rising challenge of Hindu nationalism posed by the BJP, politically by reviving her party are the main test of her populist politics.