

The Politics of Populist Policies in West Bengal

Under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee, the state of West Bengal has been witnessing a new height of populist politics. A new series of welfare schemes like *Swasthya Sathi* (Health insurance to every citizen), *Duare Sarkar* (Government at your door step), *Paray Samadhan* (Solution in your locality), *Laxmir Bhandar* (monthly stipends for all women) etc., are going on along with the older schemes like *Khadya Sathi* (food security to all through PDS), *Kanyashree* (scholarship for the girl child's education), *Sabuj Sathi* (cycle for the girl students), Special Package of schemes for the tribal people dominated backward *Junglemahal* areas of south-western parts of the state, recognition of ethnic identities (in some areas) for fulfilling some special needs and many others. All these have made everybody wondering: *what's next?* And here lie both the possibilities and fault-lines of populist politics in general and Banerjee's in particular.

By flagging off newer popular schemes (mostly for the poor and the marginal) almost every year is not an easy task in a fund-deficit economy. These schemes, which may be associated to 'biopolitics' following Foucault (since these try to garner political support and maintain control of a large population by fulfilling some of their basic needs for survival), these also usher in a new radical democracy because with every scheme grows the expectations/demands for the more, which in turn is bound to enhance the scope of *public scrutiny/gaze* of the process of distribution. It might take a serious turn, if in future, the common people – the beneficiaries – are brought into participation for planning from the grassroots.

In two recent field studies, undertaken by the present author, in Amlashole (of the erstwhile Paschim Medinipur, now of Jhargram district in the Junglemahal) and in some tea gardens of Doars region of Jalpaiguri and Alipur Duar districts of North Bengal, reveal the above reality. Both of these places had hit the headlines of dailies in the first decade of the new century for hunger deaths and lack of basic amenities and dearth of welfare schemes. Although, after a decade, after Banerjee's coming to power in 2011 and initiation of so many schemes, the people are receiving the benefits of the scheme, the people are looking for more. Moreover, the flow of migrant labour to other parts of the state and outside and human trafficking have not stopped. The families of these migrants demanded some more MNREGA like schemes which will check the flow of migration.

Thus, the force of populist politics is not exhausted, rather renewed, in the states like West Bengal which might compel the ruler (in this case, Banerjee) and even her opponents to

think: how to push further and implement more along the line of new popular demands? If pushed more and more such populism might even see its own limit in the structure of the liberal welfare state. If Mamata Banerjee or other leaders like her try to cross this hurdle, they have to radicalise further their own discourse and practices of politics. If they fail, then this politics of populist schemes would be absorbed by the mainstream of the liberal welfare distributive politics.

The present research proposes to study some of the selected areas of the district of Jhargram and the selected tea gardens of the Dooars region in North Bengal. The present research focuses on both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Necessary data will be collected from primary and secondary sources. For primary data, the field survey method (through interviews following random and targeted sampling) will be applied. In some cases, during the field study if requires snow-bowling method will also be taken into consideration. The researcher will also take the interviews of some political leaders and civil society members. Some important data will be collected from government offices and websites. For secondary data/inputs, the study of relevant books, journals, magazines, articles, newspapers in the library, archives, and also from the relevant websites on the internet, etc will also be undertaken.

Some relevant books

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