

ABSTRACT

Reararticulating ‘Agrarian Populism’ in Postcolonial India

Considerations around D.N. Dhanagare’s *Populism and Power: Farmers’ Movement in Western India: 1980-2014* and Beyond

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Ever since Edward Shils popularised ‘populism’ in 1954 as a concept by broad-basing it to connote anti-elite trends in US society in general (and not specifically in connection with the People’s Party), the concept has travelled a long way. Quite literally, for it has found application in other countries and continents and, more importantly for us, in disparate postcolonial/ ‘third world’ contexts. The remit of the term, predictably, has widened, so much so that Margaret Canovan, one of the foremost commentators on populism, has had to painstakingly justify the continuing relevance of its analytical purchase even as she has had to disaggregate the term into a seven-legged typology. Going by this typology, three of these seven ‘types’ of populism can be grouped under the general rubric of ‘agrarian populism’, i.e. farmers’ radicalism, peasant movements, and intellectual agrarian socialism. The remaining four similarly can be clubbed under the umbrella of ‘political populism’, representing populist dictatorship, populist democracy, reactionary populism, and politicians’ populism. Obviously, these are meant to serve as heuristic, and not historical, ‘types’, since in reality these categories betray a great degree of overlap.

To take the example of D.N. Dhanagare’s study of the farmers’ movement in western India, especially Maharashtra, from the 1980s to 2014 (*Populism and Power: Farmers’ Movement in Western India: 1980-2014*), we find ourselves on the trail of rich archival sources and informed field studies where the umbrella category of ‘agrarian populism’ is woven warp and weft into the fabric of ‘political populism’. Situating his study in the aporia between populism as an ideology, on the one hand, and as political power within the democratic state structure, on the other, Dhanagare, in fact, explores the complex crosshatching between populist ideology and mass participation. How well did it fare at the hustings? Sometimes it fared well; sometimes not. Against this backdrop of mixed electoral fortunes, the ‘popular’ emerges as the demotic idiom that undergirds the book’s chief problematic; *demos*, in my reading then, comes to constitute the ‘popular’ interstice between Dhanagare’s meta-binary: ideology and political power.

It seems useful to me from this perspective to splice Dhanagare’s narrative in the west with a somewhat similar story from the east, but in the latter case one which is focussed on the political career of one man who became emblematic of a movement: ‘Maulana’ Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani. Here, too, in the case of the ‘Mazlum Jananeta’, we find comparable simultaneity of entanglement and opposition between apparent binaries: that of ideology and political power, intellectual agrarian socialism and the barnstorming politician’s populism, mass participation and electoral gambit, and so on.

Let us resist conclusions for now. We’ll cross the bridge when we come to it. Which should be the 18th of this month.