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**Populism-II:
States and Political Parties**

**Rajat Roy
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2019

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Political Parties and Populist Policies in Contemporary India: Some Reflections on AAP

Sumona DasGupta *

Introduction

There is little definitional clarity around the term populism. Though the use of this term has proliferated in the last decade, in common parlance there appears to be a pejorative even alarmist connotation associated with it because of its association with authoritarian leaders and policies that exploit the fears and anxieties of the masses for short term gains. A more nuanced view of populism however situates it in the context of the disillusionment of working classes with the crisis of what Nancy Fraser calls modern hegemonic, globalized, financialized forms of capitalism. Some have even viewed it as a counter concept to neoliberal politics which remains committed to free movement of capital and deregulated finance despite bringing in some mitigating politics of recognition (Fraser 2018). Regardless of the light in which populism is viewed there are mixed views on how it is connected with democracy and democratic institutions.

In this paper we move away from a value laden connotation of populism as an ideology and stay with an understanding that resonates the most easily with an Indian context - namely any policy, strategy, and movement that is redistributive in nature and as such favours the common person particularly those in subordinate positions, over the elite typically represented by large business and financial interests. The contrast between the 'people' and 'elite' is perhaps the only way the term populism can retain its analytical usefulness without getting bogged down in polemical discussions as to whether populist movements/policies represent the ideological right or the left, whether it is authoritarian or democratic in its origin, whether it represents a movement or simply a discursive style.

This paper will examine selected populist policies launched in contemporary India by a party that grew out of a popular movement against corruption namely the Aam Aadmi Party (hereafter AAP) which by its very name creates a implicit contrast between the "people" and the ruling elite. By tracing its birth and trajectory and focusing on the broad trends of its populist politics and some specific policies we seek to gain a deeper understanding of how a movement "for the people" transitioned into a political party which then had to make policies that were seen to be pro people (pro "aam aadmi"). We also reflect on what this populism implies in terms of democratic decision making and longer term impacts on the economic and political front.

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Populism: Finding a Working Definition

The use of the term populism has a long political history which is outside the purview of this paper. We may note however in passing with Roderik (2018) that the term originates from nineteenth century movements such as farmers workers and miners rallying against the gold standard and Northeastern banking in the US and the Peronism of Latin America. Contemporary populism takes on different manifestations in different political contexts. It has for instance manifested in the anti immigrant parties and policies in Europe, Trump's anti trade nativism in the US, the economic populism of Chavez in Latin America, the rise of the Independence Party in UK and the India against corruption movement in 2011 to name but a few. He has traced the economic roots of populism to what he terms as "globalization shocks" arguing that this was a predictable outcome of the changes in technology, unfair markets, erosion of labour market protection and rising income inequalities. Roderick (2018) identifies four common elements that appears to cut across these diverse manifestations of populism, namely an anti establishment orientation, a claim to speak for the people against the elites, opposition to liberal economics and globalization and often a penchant for authoritarian governance.

It is one thing to empirically identify some common elements across various manifestations of populism. It is however far more challenging to arrive at common conceptual understandings and working definitions of this term. In the last decade or so populism appears to have been used to denote either an ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012), a form of movement organization (Taggard 1995), a policy orientation (Weyland 2001), a discursive style or form of communication (Shils 1972; Laclau 2005).

Given the different ways in which this term has been used over the years the question is: how does it retain its analytical significance? Perhaps the only way it can, is to use it, as Subramayam (2007) argues with an oppositional concept. If populism comes from the people and implies in its most rudimentary sense anything (a programme, a movement, a policy) that champions the common person the oppositional concept is that of an unfairly dominant elite. As Subramanyam (2007) goes on to argue what this would mean in practical terms is that it would involve an element of redistribution and reallocation either in terms of political power or economic resources. Politically in its democratic form populism is critical of anything that mediates the relationship between the people and their leader or government and as such it favors more direct rather than mediated forms of democracy. This could take the form of referendums and popular initiatives which have been adopted in some states of the US for instance and of course in more direct forms of democracies such as Switzerland. In its authoritarian version populism can revolve around a charismatic ruler who claims that he embodies the people's will to consolidate his own power like many Latin American leaders like Peron and Chavez. This brand of populism has been responsible for the pejorative connotation often ascribed to it where the prefix populist is used to insult a party, project or policy (Lara 2018).

In terms of economic redistribution the term populism is used to denote policies that involve redistribution of resources and wealth in favour of the less privileged. This could range from progressive taxation to more direct schemes such as free health services for the poor, cash benefits, all manner of subsidies, loan waivers etc (Subramanyam 2007). Such populist policies would of course end up prioritizing short term popularity over long term economic considerations of debt or inflationary pressures.

Using this lens of populism in this paper we look at a relatively new political party (Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) which in fact grew out of what at least appeared to be a populist movement and

see whether the AAP storyline helps sheds light on the relationship between populism and democratic institutions. Indeed the case of AAP seems to be almost a textbook case of populist politics as defined by the post Marxist Latin American thinker Laclau in his influential book *On Populist Reason* published in 2005. Laclau believes that at certain historical moments multiple antagonisms are at play which may or may not have something to do with class consciousness. As a result of these antagonisms people are compelled to assume a new identity – Laclau calls this empty signifier or floating signifier - that transforms them into political actors. When people identify with this floating signifier it gets filled with political content and what we get is a distinctly populist political mobilization as opposed to a revolutionary one (Sampath 2015).

The floating signifier does not represent an ideology but any ideology including totalitarian ones can don the populist garb – hence its link to any ideology at a given moment is contingent. Instead of an ideology he sees populism as a form of construction of the political that dichotomizes the society into two levels- the bottom and the top with the bottom mobilizing against the top. The driver of such a mobilization is what he calls the “logic of equivalence” where a number of disparate demands – security, healthcare, education, water, housing which would earlier get channeled to the state administration independently – now acquire a collective form and articulation and universal significance. When people’s demands keep rebounding off the government machinery and remain unfulfilled for long this new identity is formed in opposition to a common enemy (Laclau 2005).

In the case of AAP the empty signifier or floating signifier was the new identity of the citizen who would no longer be a passive victim of a corrupt elite. The social dichotomy that Laclau considers central to populism was in evidence right from AAP’s pre-history as an anti corruption movement where the “Aam Aadmi” whose interests were not finding representation among the elite political establishment was mobilized against the latter. So the common enemy becomes corruption. The symbol of that common enemy is the political elite. Here we note that by designating the victim as “aam admi”, it taps into the class divide without however activating class politics (Sampath 2015). So Laclau’s term the empty signifier or floating signifier is very much in evidence because after all who is the aam admi? It could be a farmer, a banker, a construction worker, a domestic helper, or even a banker and media-person. This is because the idea of people as Aam Aadmi “floats.” On one hand, it denotes the bottom of the pyramid at another the population as a whole – every single Indian whether rich or poor will also identify as part of the Indian people (Sampath 2015). This is why AAP has support across classes and from both Left and Right.

AAP: The Trajectory

The inception of AAP is traced to the civil society movement of April 2011 under the banner India against Corruption led by Anna Hazare and directed against the corruption scandals that had rocked the Congress led UPA regime. Led by a coalition of activists from varied backgrounds the movement demanded the passage of the Jan Lokpal bill in parliament to end corruption.

Tracing its own history the party website describes the momentum of the movement and its metamorphosis into a political party in the following way. (aamadmiparty.org)

Spanning over two years, across hundreds of cities, towns and villages, lakhs of people mobilised themselves for this cause. Protest marches, gheraos of politicians, social media campaigns. Led by social activist Anna Hazare, thousands of people in several locations sat on fasts on three separate occasions to build support for the Jan Lokpal Bill, and pressure the government into acting on people’s demand. At the end of the third and final fast, despite all efforts of the LAC, the Parliament had still not come around to passing the Jan Lokpal.

That's when one section of IAC activists, led by Arvind Kejriwal, decided that the only way to rid this country of corruption was to join politics, enter government and clean up the system from within. Thus began the journey of the anti-corruption protest towards the political revolution called the Aam Aadmi Party.

Along with Arvind Kejriwal the other prominent activists who formed the splinter group from the movement and entered the political fray included Yogendra Yadav, Anand Jha, Prashant Bhushan and Shanti Bhushan. Each of these personalities was well respected in their sphere and the beginnings of AAP was marked by what appeared to be a commitment to a sense of collective leadership drawn from all walks of life in tune with the aspirations of the people and in keeping with its populist image. However all these early pioneers have since parted ways with Kejriwal who has emerged as the undisputed leader of AAP rendering the notion of collective leadership redundant very soon. Kejriwal has continued to actively add a series of populist policies to the overall plank of the anti corruption crusade and the vision of “alternate politics” that the party espoused.

If we look at the birth of the AAP party and how it describes its own trajectory on the website (aamadmiparty.org/about/our-history) it is clear that the idea of the ruling political elite who profit from the big ticket corruption and the common citizens who are victims of these political elites are the two “combat” concepts around which the populist narrative is woven. The populism of AAP in the run up to the elections of 2013 was evident in the following ways.

1. Open Membership: Opening the membership of the party to the “people”: By opening the floodgates for the “aam aurat” and the “aam aadmi” to join the party bypassing the usual gatekeepers who typically control membership within the party AAP registered a shift in the history of political parties in India. Breaking through traditional fiefdoms and communal organizations the party presented a new opportunity for women and men, young and old, poor and rich to join politics with the intention of changing the way politics had hitherto been done.
2. Transparent party funding: Once AAP decided to throw its hat into the political arena by contesting elections it had to find a method for financing its activity that was in keeping with its populist credo – that of transparency. AAP pioneered the crowd sourcing model of electoral fundraising in India with small donations to keep the party running.
3. Choice of subjects as the primary election issue: In the run up to the first election contested by AAP in Delhi – the Delhi assembly elections of 2013 – AAP raised the inflated bills for electricity and water as the primary election issues as this affected all sections of the people and helped place its promise of anti corruption centre stage. The inflated bills were linked with the ruling Congress government’s collusion with power distribution companies and the water tanker mafia. Through this carefully crafted choice of its election plank AAP was able to gain the image of a political force that could take on the powerful ruling elite on behalf of the people.

On the back of this populist appeal AAP made its debut on the political firmament by winning 28 (out of 70) seats in the Delhi Assembly elections of 2013. After consulting the people of Delhi on government formation, the party formed a minority government with Arvind Kejriwal as Chief Minister on 28th December, 2013. After failing to pass the Jan Lokpal Bill due to a lack of numbers in the Delhi Assembly, the AAP government resigned in February 2014 to seek a fresh and full mandate. Despite losing all seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections that was held before fresh assembly elections to Delhi could be held, the AAP was able to recover lost ground. In the Delhi assembly elections the AAP won 67 out of 70 with a record vote share of 54%.

Post Election Populist Politics of AAP: Some Explorations

Post election AAP's populism surfaced in many ways and we map some of these in this section. Populist politics were manifested in:

1. The framing of the party constitution
2. The Delhi dialogues
3. Setting out a new institutional design for governance with empowered Gram Sabhas and Mohalla Sabhas.
4. Inviting people's verdicts on important questions in-between elections
5. Initiating direct action by citizens
6. Renewing its commitment to transparent and accountable governance at all times

We examine each of these in turn. Exemplifying the populist notion of "popular self-rule" the AAP, in article II of its constitution stated: "democracy is popular self rule but the current practice of democracy negates this ideal and reduces the citizen to a mere subject." Therefore AAP sought to "restore power to the people" and realise the promise of Swaraj enshrined in the Constitution. Indeed the objectives of the party read almost like a page out of the textbook on populism. (aamaadmiparty.org/about/constitution)

In keeping with this overall philosophy of "restoring power to the people" AAP, in its manifesto, defined politics as an "interactive process, a constant dialogue." Soon after the Delhi assembly was dissolved in November 2014 the party launched the Delhi dialogue, a participatory process of drawing up the party manifesto by forging a partnership between the party and the citizens of India with their lived everyday experience which could be brought to the table along with the views of professionals and experts. It drew up a 70-point actionable plan for all sections of Delhi's population – youth, women, traders, businesses, entrepreneurs, rural and urban villages, safai karmacharis, minorities, unauthorized and resettlement colonies, JJ clusters, RWAs, housing cooperatives and group housing societies. The aim of the Delhi Dialogue was to create an action plan for a Delhi that would reflect among other things the aspirations of people from all walks of life with its emphasis on employment, high quality education excellent healthcare to all, safety of women, more roads, transport and traffic systems, affordable electricity and clean drinking water to all its citizens, and a Delhi where the citizen is made an equal stakeholder and voice in the city's progress (Party Manifesto 2015). (aamaadmiparty.org/wp-content/uploads)

When AAP entered politics it did have an institutional design in mind that it felt would be more in keeping with the idea of "Swaraj" or self rule. This was evident in Arvind Khejriwal's book *Swaraj* (2012) in which he outlined how institutions like Gram Sabhas and Mohalla sabhas should be vested with actual financial powers and powers to appoint and recall government officials. In his institutional design for swaraj the Gram Sabha (village council consisting of all adult members of the village) lies at the centre piece. According to Khejriwal (2012) "The day the gram sabhas start to operate across the country, with power vested in them, that is the day the people will have direct control over the parliament." The redesigning of institutions to make it participatory and citizen oriented is based on the assumption that the new empowered institutions at the grassroots will be free of corruption or if they are indeed corrupt it is somehow better than the corruption evident in the system right from the top. To understand this version of AAP's populism Khejriwal's words in his book *Swaraj* (2012) are instructive:

"It is believed by many that free fund sent directly to the gram sabhas will be misused by the people. How will it be misused was our question? If a sum of rupees three crore is made available to gram

Sabha then it is possible that all villagers decide to keep this money or in other words distribute amongst themselves and not use for their own development. Our reply is then let them do this. Even today what is happening that the entire money is embezzled by the politicians, the officials, the collector, the BDO, the tehsildar. If the villagers have decided to keep this money by themselves, in a joint meeting, then let it be so. The people's money has gone back to the people and not to the middlemen."

Khejriwal however believes that this embezzlement will not happen in practice as people will be invested in their own development though his document does not set out explicitly a system of checks and balances to prevent this. If it happens he is willing to cast a benign attitude to it, in a populist narrative laced with ordinary people versus the political elite. He acknowledges that while it is not likely that the Gram Sabha will misuse money it is possible that the sarpanch may be corrupt and may embezzle funds but "in the new dispensation that we are proposing there is going to be transparency on the size of allocation of funds and the power to dispose off that fund the way the villagers want. Once the people have the power to raise their voices against the sarpanch, the BDO, the Collector and the state government then there are very few chances that this money could be siphoned off easily by all the concerned officials and politicians."

AAP's populism manifested itself in the vision to provide corruption free services to the people as this was their right but believed rather simplistically, it could be argued, that a quick transfer of power to the panchayat would take care of the problem. The ideology, the programme of action, the budgetary implications were not however spelt out and at the end of the day AAP ended up vociferously stating what it was opposed to rather than spending more time on what it proposed to do in order to give a concrete form and shape to its populist framework, defined here as redistribution of political and economic power in favour of the ordinary people and marginalized groups.

How did AAP conduct itself in the political arena after entering politics? Given its populist vision it is worth noting that ostensibly in keeping with the principles of direct democracy AAP sought the "people's verdict" as to whether they should form a minority government after the elections of 2013. However this same consultation was dispensed with when CM Kejriwal resigned after 49 days of governance. The fledgling party was discovering that direct democracy and direct action had its limitations and that populist politics could not be applied in every instance (Jayal 2016). A rather unusual manifestation AAP's version of "direct citizen action" also took the form of initiating a series of sting operations where every citizen was encouraged to use a smart phone to "catch" corrupt officials. This backfired when the party started doing internal stings on one another leading two prominent members Yogendra Yadav and Shazia Iilmi to resign (Jayal 2016).

As Jayal (2016) points out populist politics manifests through a politics of impatience, rejection and accusation sometimes directed at foreigners and ethnic others. The most controversial example of this was the midnight raid of January 2014 in Delhi's Khirki extension where AAP's then law minister with TV cameras turned on asked the police to enter the building without a warrant and question four Ugandan women he claimed had been indulging in drugs and prostitution. The entire affair showed in no uncertain terms the dangers of populist vigilantism and the racist and violent tendencies it can unleash. Striking a populist stand the minister justified the action by claiming that the "people" of that area were with him when he took this action. This action came under severe fire from the party's own women members including one of its founder members Madhu Bhaduri who alleged "AAP has the same mentality as Khap Panchayats on gender justice that is why AAP leadership justifies Khap Panchayats". (Debobrat Ghose 2014)

The populism of AAP was predicated on a single notion- that of transparency and anti corruption. Everything else flowed from this. Transparency becomes not a means to an end but an end in itself. The obsession with transparency as an end in itself also meant that inadequate thought was being given to the long term economic goals of the party and the disagreements regarding this were probably responsible for the delay in drafting the party manifesto (Jayal 2016).

From the overall directions that the populist politics of AAP has taken two things stand out. First it became increasingly evident that the assumption that populist politics is inherently participatory is flawed. As the party grew in strength Arvind Khejriwal became more and more its focal point. In the TV advertisements Khejriwal is clearly portrayed as a savior and the party ended up spending huge amounts of tax payer's hard-earned money on publicity and propaganda with his photograph towering over the party name and symbol. (Praveen Rai 2017) The centralized style of leadership has increasingly come in for criticism in a party that championed devolution of power (Jayal 2016). As Praveen Rai (2017) points out "the personality cult nurtured by AAP was unique as it went far beyond the distinction between *self-esteem and narcissism*, unparalleled in the history of Indian party politics." On one hand the party saw itself as pioneering an alternate politics based on participation of the people on the other hand within its own structures there appeared to be an absence of inner party democracy. Indeed Madhu Bhaduri another founder member who has since left the party alleged that the party allowed little room for dissent and recounts how she was sidelined when she spoke out against the raid at Khirki extension (Bhaduri 2016).

Second, we see that since the populist politics of AAP is constructed on a simple binary formulation of "people" versus the "ruling class" it only acknowledges the power imbalance between the people and the politicians. It fails to take into account the complex power play at the intersection of class, caste, religion and gender and other faultlines that marks all of political life in India. The result is a very technocratic and simplistic approach to politics. Srirupa Roy (2014) in her ethnographic study of AAP's politics has shown how all problems were seen as having a simple solution by way of just getting the concerned official to follow the rule book. Roy chronicles several "intervention stories" where intractable problems faced by citizens ranging from having difficulty in registering a case at the police station to fixing potholes or getting themselves registered as voters in the absence of commonly accepted identity documents were all seen to have been resolved by AAP workers by applying the relevant law or legislative detail.

Populist Policies and AAP

The populism of the AAP was imprinted on a number of policies. These included:

1. Delhi Janlokal Bill
2. Swaraj Bill
3. Reduction of electricity bills
4. Water as a right
5. New government schools
6. Higher education guarantee scheme
7. Education reforms
8. Healthcare provisions
9. Women's security force
10. Land reforms
11. No FDI in retail
12. Freehold Of Resettlement Colonies

13. Regularization And Transformation Of Unauthorized Colonies:
14. Affordable Housing For All:
15. In Situ Development of Slums
16. Dignity To The Safai Karamchari

A detailed discussion on each of these is outside the purview of this paper so we select three key issues. Since Bijli paani (electricity and water), education and health formed the foundation of AAP politics we take a closer look at each of these and the political and economic implications they have had.

Electricity and Water: These were the twin planks which AAP highlighted in its first bid for power linking these to the larger issue of corruption and the prevalence of water mafias that have caused hardship to the people. In August 2015 after coming to power in Delhi AAP gave the “people of Delhi” free water upto 20,000 litres per household very month and a 50% discount on electricity bills for families that consume less than 400 units of power per month. Economically this populist policy had a fallout. In announcing these policies which were part of the AAP manifesto AAP acknowledged that the subsidies for water and electricity were going to cost the government 1400 crores and 250 crores respectively. (Kundan Pandey 2015). Reinforcing the economic cost of such a populist policy the National Green Tribunal observed that the AAP government’s policy of providing free water to housing societies could lead to a “colossal waste of public exchequer. (The Hindu 2019) The Delhi High Court also recorded its disapproval of the policy of providing free water and said that “nothing should be given free” except where it is really needed such as the slum clusters. According to calculations by the Business Standard it will be difficult for AAP to maintain this policy in the long run and it would limit the fiscal space of the government. (Ishan Bakshi & Others 2015)

The response of CM Arvind Khejriwal to the criticism of the AAP policies on water and electricity is illustrative of the way we have defined populism in this paper. According to The Hindu, August 2, 2019 he said:

“I know the television debates will criticize us for giving ‘freebies’. The country’s politicians, ministers, MPs, MLAs, the senior officers are all enjoying free electricity. But no one calls those freebies. All I am doing is extending those benefits to this country’s *aam aadmi* [common man], who work all day long, run their households honestly, raise their children. I am trying to give them the same facilities that we provide for this country’s politicians and bureaucrats. What is wrong if I am giving *aam aadmis* the status of a *khaas aadmi*?” (The Hindu 2019)

The oppositional concept which lies at the heart of our understanding of populism in this paper is laid thread bare here and articulated in terms of the Aam aadmi versus the political class or the Khaas aadmi defined here as the politicians and bureaucrats. Any statistic that indicated that this policy was not economically feasible in the long run was met by this populist rejoinder.

Education and Government Schools: Another pro poor and working class populist policy of the AAP consisted of its attempt to correct the imbalance in the standards and infrastructure of private schools and government schools in Delhi with the latter being attended by a large number of first generation learners. The education ministry led by deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia increased the budgetary allowance of government schools by over 33% and successfully improved their infrastructure, sent educators of over 1000 government schools to Singapore and Finland to acquaint themselves with new pedagogy to improve teaching methods in these schools, introduced new

school management committees with elected parents and social workers as part of the composition and initiated Mission Chunauti and Mission Buniyad in the summers of 2016 and 2018 to remedy the lack of mathematics and basic reading skills. While the inclusion of parents in the school committee for the first time has been seen as a successful experiment and the dramatic changes in school infrastructure has been widely praised the division of children into different groups based on their abilities has been criticized by educationists like Anita Rampal as harmful pedagogy. (Karan Dhingra 2019) On the whole however the transformation in the Delhi public school system after AAP came to power in Delhi has been widely appreciated by students as well as parents. (Business Standard 2017) Unlike the water and electricity freebies these were investments in the education sector that has already started showing results in terms of the performance of students.

Healthcare: The AAP manifesto (2015) made specific promises regarding the health sector: first, to increase the budgetary allocation to health; (Ananya Basu & Susana Barria 2018) second, to expand healthcare infrastructure by creating 900 new primary health centres (PHCs) and 30,000 more beds in order to conform to the international norm of five beds for every 1,000 people; and third, to ensure access to generic, affordable and quality medicines to all by centralising procurement of medicines and other equipment, without corruption.

However unlike the educational sector where the transformation is visible the AAP policies in the health sector have been less visible. There is an acknowledgement that the progress in infrastructure development has been slow with 31 out of 55 health department projects pending in 2019. (Astha Saxena 2019)

The populism is evident with the government attempting to change the face of healthcare for the poorer sections by initiating patient friendly schemes such as free tests at private hospitals, referrals to private hospitals and bearing the cost of treatment of victims of road accidents and acid attacks. A significant achievement has been the setting up of mohalla clinics in the interiors of Jhuggi jhopris (temporary clusters of housing in slum settlements) increasing not only outreach for the underserved and vulnerable sections of the population particularly women, children, and elderly but also reducing the waiting time which is an important opportunity cost for daily wage earners as Basu and Barria (2018) point out.

Overall AAP's policies have been credited with significant improvements in the education and health sector. However the provision of free services – the latest being free rides for women in the metro and bus services - will always be open to the criticism that when no charges are imposed for public goods it creates inefficiencies arising from overconsumption. Ultimately governments may be forced to cap consumption through pricing or rationing (Stiglitz and Rosengrad). It is too early to assess the long term economic fallouts of AAP's populist policies but the warnings on long term sustainability of free services and indefinite subsidies will always be on the radar.

Conclusion

The basic tension that we see in the way AAP politics is played out is the tension between what Margaret Canovan (1999) calls redemptive politics and pragmatic politics. AAP came into power by playing the card of redemptive politics- the politics of impatience with existing legalities and institutions of democracy even if they are legitimately constructed and favouring instead the idea of people's power. Once in power however it had to negotiate pragmatic politics and found that it could not throw rule of law and institutionalist politics out of the window altogether. A populist party like AAP remains deeply conflicted because on one hand they decided to form a political party and

contest elections while on the other hand they questioned the very enterprise of politics (Jayal 2016). In conflating politics with the politician and assuming that the “people” were a monolith who spoke with one voice their several fissures appeared in their brand of populist politics which is in evidence especially in their second innings at government formation following their spectacular victory in the Delhi assembly elections of 2015.

However despite the amorphousness of the *aam aadmi* and the tensions between redemptive and pragmatic politics the AAP did manage to signal a new imagining of politics that looked as representation as a democratic project. It asked society to imagine a new collectivity with a shared preference for a reasonable provision of basic public goods in a manner that is not haunted by leakages and corruption, and governance that is accountable and transparent. Its appeal lay precisely in its cry for a public order in which citizens could have entitlements and enjoy access to daily necessities like food and water, health and education, electricity and transport; where they did not have to pay bribes for ration cards and driving licenses; and where they enjoyed at least minimal security. This was a different sort of claim, quite regardless of the party’s inability to effectively deliver on any or all of these. But the very articulation of these needs and preferences of citizens in this way signaled, however briefly, possibilities of different types of claim-making and citizen-making in Indian democracy.

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Populist Politics and Practices in Competitive Democracy, Chhattisgarh - A Case Study

Rajat Roy *

Populist Politics

In an era when Populist Politics has established itself as a growing trend in global politics, the dividing line between the Left and the Right is often blurred. In the 1970s we have seen Indira Gandhi taking populist measures like nationalisation of banks and coal mines and abolition of the Privy Purse and raising a populist slogan 'Garibi Hatao' that forced the Left to rally behind her. Now, globally, Bernie Sanders in the USA, Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, Le Pen in France and many others are in the forefront of this populist wave. In India also, this trend has raised its head and threatened to bypass and undermine the established class based political practices of Liberal Democracy. One may recall Narendra Modi's election slogan in 2014 'Sab Ka Saath, Sab Ka Vikas'. Partha Chatterjee points out that, "Populism is a form of democratic politics in which an organisation or a leader is able to rhetorically connect the different unfulfilled demands of a variety of groups into a single chain of equivalence by claiming that they are all demands of the authentic people that are being denied by a powerful elite." (Partha Chatterjee 2019)

However, it must be noted that while the theoreticians of Populism have generally envisaged that Populism will come as a movement to challenge the powers that be, which is hegemonic, in the Indian context the emerging scenario seems to be different. Perhaps, the study of Populist politics in Indian context could not be made unless we look deep into the governing of various states by different regimes and the Centre, be it Raman Singh in Chhattisgarh, Mamata Banerjee in Bengal or Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi.

A host of questions can be raised in this regard, such as; must we view the issue of Populism through the prism of governance only? Or, is Populist Politics a crucial instrument by which the governments manage Post-Colonial society? Also, are welfare measures necessary ingredients on which Populist Politics sit? What happens when Populist movements are faced with the challenge from the organised ideology driven movements? To seek answer to these questions, Chhattisgarh has been taken as a case study.

The research work involved scanning of various newspapers spread across the last two decades, interviews of government officials, examination of government documents, documents by other agencies, books and papers related to the topic, discussions with a number of social scientists and experts etc.

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In this backdrop one would like to examine how this populist politics plays out in Indian states, especially, in Chhattisgarh, which has seen some massive welfare and populist initiatives during the 15-year rule of Raman Singh led BJP government from 2003 to 2018, and also continued the trend by the Congress government then onwards. This paper would attempt to examine the welfare measures initiated by the Raman Singh government and the efficacy of that in alleviating poverty in the state. Also, it would be interesting to see how in the face of a challenge armed with more competitive populist slogans coming from a traditional political force, i.e. the Congress, the party in power lost out to the challenger in the hustings.

Chhattisgarh

Chhattisgarh came into being in November 2000 when it was separated from Madhya Pradesh. The state is the tenth largest in area, but its population is 25.5 million as per 2011 census; thus its population density is one of the lowest at 189 per sq. km as against the all India average of 382. With 44% of the land mass under forest and vast mineral resources, Chhattisgarh is a resource rich state. It ranks second in production of coal, third in production of iron ore, and there are large deposits of other minerals like bauxite, limestone etc. It is a power surplus state, has good industrial base with steel plants, power plants, aluminum plants, cement factories and various other mines. Though it is known as a rice basin, its agricultural activities are by and large restricted to cultivation of paddy, that too mono crop. (An Evaluation of the Finance of Chhattisgarh 2014) Thus, despite having a sound economic base and favourable land to people ratio, 48.7% population of Chhattisgarh were living below poverty line as against the national average of 27.5%. In other words, of the total population of 25.5 million there were 12.19 million poor in the state. (Chhattisgarh: Economic and Human Development Indicators, UNDP) Since the yield from farming was never enough to sustain them throughout the year, a significant number of farmers/farm labourers used to migrate to other areas as unskilled and semi-skilled labour, and traditionally they came to be known as Bilaspuri coolies.

PDS Reform by Raman Singh

In a country where a vast majority of the people still lives in poverty, politics around food is a very effective tool in the hands of the politicians to mobilise popular support around them. N T Ram Rao in the 1980s in Andhra Pradesh did the same by introducing rice through PDS at Rs.2 per Kg to common people. Before NTR, MGR in Tamil Nadu first introduced mid-day meal in schools, which was later emulated as a national policy, and much later Jayalalithaa followed MGR by introducing a statewide cheap canteen system, 'Amma Kitchen'. Often that gesture extends to distributing free pressure cookers, colour TVs and mobiles etc. in their attempts to outbid each other as have been witnessed in Tamil Nadu where DMK and AIADMK are the major contestants.

When BJP anointed Raman Singh the chief minister of Chhattisgarh in 2003, few thought that in the next few years he would be earning an epithet 'Chawar wala Baba' (one who gives rice) from the poor people of the state for his initiatives in overhauling and strengthening the PDS that was languishing for years owing to administrative and political apathy and consequent corruption. With the introduction of the Chhattisgarh Public Distribution System (Control) Order, 2004, the Raman Singh government started radically reforming the existing PDS of the state. Before that, Fair Price Shops (FPS) was mostly run by private owners and people were not getting even what was officially allocated to them. With that order Raman Singh cancelled licenses of all private run FPS and handed over the responsibility of running that to co-operative societies, gram panchayats,

women self- help groups (SHG), primary credit cooperative societies and forest protection groups. He increased the number of FPS from 8492 to 10465. With the introduction of end to end computerisation the government could monitor the PDS and bring in transparency.

In 2011, after conducting a survey in eight blocks over the state, Jean Dreze found that the PDS was working fine; 85% of cardholders were getting their full 35 Kgs of grain every month from the PDS (others were getting at least 25 kgs). Only two per cent of the entries in the ration cards were found to be fakes. He further observed that by 2007 Raman Singh had expanded the coverage of the PDS to 80% of the population. With de-privatising the running of ration shops and bringing in transparency in the delivery system, he introduced rigorous monitoring with a system of 'SMS alert' to maintain a live connectivity between the stakeholders and the government. "When people run their own ration shop, there is little incentive to cheat, since that would be like cheating themselves. Community institutions such as Gram Panchayats are not necessarily 'people's institutions' but, nevertheless, they are easier for the people to influence than corrupt middlemen or government bureaucratic juggernaut," Dreze felt. (Jean Dreze 2010) N C Saxena, the former member secretary of the Planning Commission and one of the architects of the Right to Food Act, agrees with Dreze's findings. (NC Saxena 2019)

Raman Singh went ahead with his reform of PDS not merely through bureaucratic fiat, but he also actively mobilised people around it, at least in the initial days. By handing over the running of the FPS to the Panchayat and other local bodies and giving them responsibility of monitoring the supply and distribution of ration, he made them stakeholders. Thus a parallel system was created to keep the bureaucrats in rein, which eventually made the delivery system smooth and functioning. It is also true that Raman Singh's Food Security Programme preceded that of the Centre's Food Security Act. While effort was made to reach out to the consumers by setting up one FPS in every gram panchayat, the village committees were encouraged to monitor the distribution to plug off pilferage.

Populist Measures

During his 15-year rule Raman Singh initiated a host of populist schemes; some of them were targeted to the community as a whole, but mostly targeted to the individual stakeholders.

Some of these initiatives are:

1. Rice for Rs.2 a Kilo for the families living below the poverty line and Rs. 1 a kilo for families with Antyodaya cards, free salt for poor families,
2. Financial assistance for the marriage of poor girls,
3. Free bicycles for school-going girls,
4. Free books for poor children,
5. Increased scholarships for tribal and other poor children,
6. A subsidy of Rs. 100 per gas connection for women and
7. 50 per cent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions,
8. Loans at 3% interest,
9. 24-hour power supply to villages, free power to those with five H.P pumps and
10. Rs. 270 for a quintal of paddy as bonus to the farmers.
11. Also, his government distributed free footwear to tribal people who are engaged in collecting Tendu leaves. (Purnima S. Tripathi 2009)

These were introduced at various phases during his 15-year tenure in power. In 2018, before the state assembly election he also promised to add nutritious value to ration by adding free grams and distribute 55 lakh mobile phones to women in the state.

Besides that, the Raman Singh government also introduced a novel element in the state budget by including a separate Gender Budget (14th Finance Commission Report: Evaluation of State Finances of Chhattisgarh) in that and under that Gender Budget allocations were made at least on 23 subjects in 18 departments for the upliftment of women and girls. Also, the law was enacted to reserve 50% seats in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) for women.

Financial Health of the State

Keeping in tune with his populist policies Raman Singh started increasing expenditure on Subsidies from Rs.202.55 crore in 2007-08 to Rs.1871 crore in 2011-12. The aggregate public expenditure of the State has been higher in terms of percentage of Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) than the other general category states during the same period. (14th Finance Commission: Evaluation of State Finances of Chhattisgarh)

Development Expenditure (in crores)

2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
10,773	12,995	16002	16857	21,310

However, the State was also facing erosion of fund as the average return on investment was very poor @ 0.04% while the State Govt. was paying interest @7.08% in 2011-12. (14th Finance Commission: Evaluation of State Finances of Chhattisgarh)

Subsidy (C&AG Report on State Finance for FY 2011)

Subsidies provided by the State during 2007-2012 (in crores)

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Nutrition Crop	0.44	946.28	1288.78	886.73	750.51
Husbandry	29.35	41.23	41.00	40.07	46.36
Fisheries	0.55	0.41	0.47	0.75	0.60
Forestry	19.53	10.09	10.00	10.00	8.10
Food Storage	606.16	109.47	406.61	488.65	383.67
Minor Irrigation	8.09	10.49	10.62	11.01	10.88

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Power	10.14	128.04	150.10	202.10	321.10
Villages & Small Industries	9.60	24.27	39.26	37.71	52.52
Industries	1.13	4.37	1.46	3.72	1.87
Total	802.55	1,134.68	1,994.30	1,763.81	1870.93

It is to be noted that the subsidies given to industries were minimal. Rather it was heavily weighted in favour of poor rural and urban people.

By 2015-16 the total subsidy stands at Rs.7397.12 crore. (C&AG Report on State Finance for FY 2016) It should be noted that the food subsidy bill grew from Rs.606 crores in 2007-08 to Rs.1334 crores in 2011-12.

The subsidy under the head of Cooperation is the interest subsidy to farmers. The government provides agriculture loan @ 3% per year and reimburses the difference in interest to the Cooperative banks, Gramin banks and others.

There are some more subsidies that are hidden in the government accounts. The bonus paid by the State to paddy growers for paddy purchase over and above the MSP has not been shown here. This was as much as Rs.440 crores in 2008-09, and steadily went up to Rs.1750 crore in 2014-15. Similarly, the subsidy on Power does not reveal the full picture. Subsidy for electrification of Pumps was Rs.10 crores in 2007-08, but climbed up to Rs.100 crores in 2011-12.

Public Distribution System (PDS)

There are 55 lakh households in the state. The quantity of rice provided to a family is 35 Kg rice per family per month @ Rs. 1 and Rs. 2 per Kg, also 1 Kg of iodized salt, and subsidised pulses. According to official records, of these 13 lakh families are in the BPL categories.

Raghav Puri, in his paper in EPW, using data from the Jean Dreze led PDS survey, said that there were 32 lakhs 30 thousand households that were covered by the PDS. However, Raman Singh, in an interview to Business Line later in December, 2016 claimed that the Mukhyamantri Khadyaan Sahayta Yojana Scheme, under which rice, salt and gram are given at cheaper rates, benefited 58,80,000 families. (Business Line 2016) If that be true, then it should be conceded that the state government had brought almost the entire population under the PDS.

In all these years, with the rise in subsidy continuing, the losses started piling up. In 2007-08, the State Civil Supplies Corporation alone incurred loss of Rs. 8 crores, later that rose to Rs.450 crore in 2010-11. Similarly, continuing with the government's pledge to supply electricity either free or against a negligible tariff, DISCOM, the government's power distribution company, started incurring heavy loss. Its economy became unsustainable. Same fate was met by many other departments that also impacted the SGDP of the Chhattisgarh.

According to CAG Report for year ended 31 March, 2016:

1. The growth rate of GSDP during 2015-16 was 6.40% as against 14th Finance Commission projection of 14.42%.
2. The direct transfer of funds to State Implementing Agencies has increased by Rs.130.65 crore (38.92%) from Rs.335.65 crore in 2014-15 to Rs.466.30 crore in 2015-16 for implementing various schemes/programmes in social and economic sectors.
3. 41 per cent) from ` 3,747 crore in 2014-15 to ` 7,397 crore in 2015- Financial assistance by the State to Local Bodies and other institutions decreased from ` 10,573.31 crore in 2014-15 to ` 9,678.18 crore during 2015-16. The expenditure on subsidies increased by ` 3,650 crore (97.16). (Para 1.6.6)

Despite the growing pressure on the state finance in maintaining the popular schemes, the Raman Singh government did not give up. Like any government, with an eye to build a popular support base, it continued with all these welfare measures. A common characteristic among Populist leaders is that unlike traditional politicians they don't want to be restricted by the fiscal discipline imposed by the union government. Rather, they often tend to ignore that and allocate fund for those Populist projects that they thought would help masses rally around them, even it that became detrimental to the fiscal discipline.

No Reflection in HDI

However, the results for this massive populist and welfare initiatives were not reflected in the state's HDI performances.

According to Inequality adjusted Human Development Index for India's States 2011, UNDP Chhattisgarh ranked 18 among 19 states.

In 2007-08, another UNDP report said,

- a) Chhattisgarh's HDI rank was 23 among 23 states in 2006.
- b) Gender related dev. index (GDI) rank was 30 (out of 35)
- c) Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) rank was 19 (out of 35) in 2011

Poverty & Hunger Indicators

Poverty Headcount Ratio (%) was 48.7 (2009-2010) as against 29.8 in India

Total number of Poor (million) 12.19 as against 354.68 in India

From 2005 to 2017, the HDI of Chhattisgarh improved marginally from 0.583 to 0.605. It ranked 24th among 29 states. Its growth rate of GSDP was falling drastically, from previous 14% to 6.40% in 2015-16. Moreover, around the same time the government was embroiled in a massive PDS scam, allegedly to the tune of Rs. 30,000 crores. (Economic Times 2015)

After seeing the HDI report of 2018, that put India on the 131st position among 188 countries, Amitabh Kant, CEO Niti Aayog, blamed Chhattisgarh, UP and Bihar for keeping India backward. (Business Today 2018)

However, Jean Dreze does not give much credence to the HDI report. He feels that one should be beware of summary indexes like HDI. He suggests, "It is better to look directly at the component indicators. Like, in the field of child health, Chhattisgarh does seem to be making good progress." (Jean Dreze 2019) In this context, Dreze refers to FOCUS report and two of his papers published in EPW.

The FOCUS Report on Children Under Six (December, 2006) was essentially based on the field survey of the ICDS, conducted in May-June 2004 in Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh, and the report reiterates that about half of all Indian children are undernourished, more than half suffer from anaemia.

Now, if we compare data from National Family Health Survey -3 (NFHS-3, period covering 2005-06) to NFHS-4 (2015-16), then we see that there has been a definite improvement in the nutritional scene in India. According to NFHS-3 there were 71.2% of children below 5 years in India, who were having any anaemia, whereas 24% of children were having mild anaemia, 45% moderate, 2.0% severe. NFHS-3 report points out that to allow a comparison of NFHS-2 and NFHS-3 anaemia estimates, it is necessary to restrict the analysis to only the last two children age 6-35 months. By comparing data of these groups with NFHS-2, the NFHS-3 also admitted that the prevalence of anaemia increased from 74% in NFHS-2 to 79% in NFHS-3.

The NFHS-4 report does show some changes in the trend. While the stunting in children in Chhattisgarh was brought down to at par with the national average at 38%, it was more than half of children (53%) in Chhattisgarh under age five during the time NFHS-3 report was prepared. Again, according to the NFHS-3 report, among children between the age of 6 and 59 months, 71% were anaemic and 58% of women were having anaemia. The NFHS-4 report indicates that the anaemia in children in Chhattisgarh has been brought down to 41.5%, but the prevalence of anaemia among women in the state is still showing hardly any improvement, there are at least 53% of women, who are having anaemia. It goes without saying that severe malnutrition is most likely to hit children in the most economically deprived regions where women too show high anaemic levels.

While showing improvement in children's nutritional status in Chhattisgarh, NFHS-4 report cautions that it has improved since NFHS-3 by some measures, but not all measures. Stunting decreased from 53% to 38% in the 10 years between NFHS-3 and NFHS-4, and the percentage of children who are underweight decreased from 47% to 38%. However, in the same period, wasting increased slightly from 20% to 23%. It warns that despite the gains in stunting and underweight, child malnutrition is still a major problem in the state.

In another report, released by POSHAN (Partnership and Opportunities to Strengthen and Harmonise Actions for Nutrition in India) led by IFPRI, it highlighted the severe condition of nutrition in Chhattisgarh among the children below 5 years of age and women of reproductive age. Of the total 27 districts in the state, Bastar is worst case scenario, where prevalence of stunted growth among children below 5 years is 41.6%, wasting 33.9%, underweight 50.6% and anaemia 59.4%. Anaemia among women of reproductive age is as high as 67.6%. Like Bastar, Surguja is another district where tribal are the majority population, but prevalence of stunted growth among children under 5 years is 31.3%, wasting 22.3%, underweight 34.7% and anaemia 38.6%, with 35.1% women having anaemia. But in Dhamtari, a district located in between the state capital Raipur and Bastar, is facing severe problem of malnutrition, where 34.2% of children under 5 years are having stunted growth, 27% wasted, 40.2% underweight and 52.7% are suffering from anaemia.(POSHAN: District Nutritional Profile 2018).

The mixed success in improving performance in nutrition and anaemia in children and women indicates that the smooth functioning of PDS did have some positive bearing on it, but more needs to be done to improve the lot. Based on a survey of six states including Chhattisgarh that was conducted in 2016, Jean Dreze, Prankur Gupta, Reetika Khera and Isabel Pimenta argued that Chhattisgarh was doing well in running the PDS. "We end this section on a happy note. In June 2016, as in an earlier survey, we were impressed with the PDS in Chhattisgarh. Regular distribution

every month, without cuts, was the norm. Further, the respondents were generally happy.” (Jean Dreze & others 2019)

Despite Dreze et al applauding the performance of the Chhattisgarh state in running the PDS, the issue of malnutrition keeps coming to the fore again. “According to the latest data released by the NITI Aayog, 37.60 percent children of age below five years in Chhattisgarh are suffering from malnutrition and 41.50 percent daughters and mothers in the state are suffering from anaemia,” said the present chief minister Bhupesh Baghel. (India Today 2019) Jean Dreze showed optimism in Chhattisgarh in its endeavour to come out of BIMARU states. “...Chhattisgarh is now clearly demarcated from the problem region. There is some evidence that child development indicators have improved quite rapidly in Chhattisgarh in recent years. What shows is that Chhattisgarh was already ahead of other parts of the so-called BIMARU states (undivided Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) around the time of the formation in 2000. Quite likely, the gap is even wider today.” (Jean Dreze & Reetika Khera 2012)

It should not be out of place to mention here that a high prevalence of anaemia is found in every state. The only states in which less than half of children are anaemic are Goa (38%), Manipur (41%), Mizoram (44%) and Kerala (45%). The highest prevalence of anaemia is found in Bihar (78%), Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh (74% each), Haryana (72%) and Chhattisgarh (71%). Punjab and Rajasthan are having prevalence of highest level of severe anaemia. (NFHS-4) It only underscores the point that notwithstanding Dreze’s optimism, Chhattisgarh will have to go a long way to detach itself from BIMARU states.

Of late, the Baghel led state government has responded to meet the challenge by introducing a scheme to provide protein-rich food, including eggs and pulses, to households in tribal areas across the state as part of an effort to combat malnutrition after a successful running of a pilot project in Bastar, Dantewara and some other districts with high under-nutrition levels. The scheme to provide protein-rich food in tribal areas is in line with broad strategies for addressing high levels of anaemia among women. (The Telegraph 2019)

Despite all these shortcomings, one cannot negate the urgent need for such welfare schemes as revamped PDS to ensure food safety of the poor. N C Saxena, former member secretary, Planning Commission and one of the architects of Centre’s Right to Food Act, opines that the poor need both short term gains through subsidised PDS and direct income transfer schemes, as well as programmes that improve their skills and capacity, such as quality education and health. There is no either/or option. However, most states have not done well on programmes that bring long term gains to the poor -nutrition, education and health. (NC Saxena 2019)

Common Traits of Populism in Governance

Raman Singh’s pro-poor initiatives in Chhattisgarh and Mamata Banerjee’s similar initiatives in Bengal have the resonance of pro-poor rhetoric of the established Left, yet they are different from the traditional leftist movement. While traditionally, the Left tried to build their politics on class line, both Raman Singh and Mamata Banerjee, to an extent Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi, put stress on addressing a ‘people’ that is amorphous by nature. But one must also give due credit to the UPA-1 government led by Congress in India. During their five-year rule, the government enacted several pro-people laws that acted as game changer in Indian politics. Amidst the prevalent political narrative around the neo-liberal economic policies that was vigorously pursued by the successive governments in India since 1991, the ruling establishment under UPA-1 was forced to take a hard look at the social sector after facing an acute crisis in agriculture followed by farmers’ suicide in numbers. The

outcome of that was MNREGA, or state sponsored 100 days' work for the poor. This Right to Work was followed by a number of rights that were conferred on the people by bringing in requisite legislations in the parliament. Thus, the people got Right to Work, Right to Information, Right to Education, and Right to Food (it came in during UPA-2 rule). Also, for the tribal people who live on forest produce, a Right to Forest Act was put in place. While Chhattisgarh was pioneer in introducing a more effective PDS in the state even before the central act of Right to Food came into being, others started slowly veering round to the idea of taking a 'pro-people' view more ostensibly. Thus, we are faced with a scenario where populist politics (Raman Singh, Mamata, Kejriwal et al) rode side by side with popular politics (of UPA-1 & 2).

Were they Right wing? Yes, some of them are. Does it mean that the Populist strain is necessarily a right-wing characteristic? No, in all likelihood it is not. The prevalent view that the populism is by nature limited to a racist, nativist, or proto-fascist ideology of the far right, was challenged by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and they argued that Podemos and France's National Front and Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump could all be described as populist. In other words, populism could be both right-wing and left-wing. (John B. Judis 2018) Laclau and Mouffe's theory of populism evolved from their rejection of classical Marxist theories on which both orthodox Marxists and social democratic parties stand. Rather, they adapted to Gramsci's concept of hegemony and historical bloc. The Populism, as was viewed by Laclau is a political logic that could be used by the left, right and the centre. Theoreticians of that strand speak of populism as a strategy to mobilise 'people' against a 'power'. This 'people' is not the people belonging to one or more classes having common ground, rather, it is amorphous by nature. The 'power' is denoted by a regime having established hegemony over the people. The argument of populist politics is to mobilise support for that people against the hegemonic power, for they talk of building the 'people' cutting across class, and other social strata.

But in the Indian context, the prevalent western theory of Populism is found wanting. Here, in our country the rise of populism has not followed any copybook model of western populism. Instead, there is a mix of both established trend and local practices. Take the case of Mamata Banerjee. She pursued the traditional agitational course of politics for quite some time, but at later stage started appealing to the broader mass, especially to the left-leaning section of people to build her 'people' against the hegemony of the left. Once she came to power her populist policies were channelised through governance mechanism. Same is true with Arvind Kejriwal. But Raman Singh's case was different. He was brought back to Chhattisgarh from Delhi as the state president of BJP and was entrusted with the task of leading the BJP campaign against the party in power, i.e., the Congress in 2003 assembly election. Once the BJP won the election and Raman Singh was made the chief minister of the state, he started taking populist initiatives. While it is true that his initiatives were mostly channelised through administrative measures, in the case of revamping and overhauling PDS in the state, he mobilised the poor people through panchayats, SHG, FRA workers and various other sections of the rural society. Moreover, Raman Singh de-privatised the PDS and gave responsibility of running the fair price shops to these poor people. Another innovation was to bypass the government bureaucracy and authorise them to monitor the movements of the supply to the shops. By eliminating the corrupt dealers-bureaucracy nexus and bringing in the people in that, the government could cut down on the age old corrupt practices built around the PDS, and made Raman Singh very popular.

That brings us to the question of how to look at populism in India. Contrary to the western perception of populism, if we are to understand the phenomenon in India, we cannot ignore the process of governance mechanism. In other words, perhaps, populism in India should also be looked

at through the prism of governance. Ranabir Samaddar observes that perhaps Populism in India as manifested through state governance should be taken into consideration and that could be a model for understanding Populism and Populist Practices in post-colonial countries as well. (Ranabir Samaddar 2019) Chantal Mouffe argues that the distinction between 'People' and 'Enemy' is fundamental to all politics and there is a conflictual nature in it. (She calls it Agonistic) (Chantal Mouffe 2018).

From a xenophobic position this can label Migrants (Rohingyas or Bangladeshis) or foreign countries (Pakistan and China) as enemy, or Naxalites as most serious internal threat.

Raman Singh and Naxalite Issue

Thus, it is not for nothing that while Raman Singh had initiated a good many pro-poor schemes during his tenure, in 2005, he also established 'Salwa Judum' (a state sponsored armed vigilante movement against the Naxalites) there. After much violence and uproar, in 2011 the Supreme Court ordered the State to disband Salwa Judum and collect all arms from them. Though officially the ban was there the armed bands of villagers were continued to be sponsored by the State under various other names. During the hey days of Salwa Judum, hundreds of thousands of tribal people were forcibly displaced from their home in Bastar and relocated in areas demarcated by security forces. At least 5000 families fled Bastar and took shelter in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh (now that part falls in Telengana). N C Saxena observes that "Of all the disadvantaged groups, tribal, especially in Central India, have been the worst sufferers, primarily because of anti-tribal forest policy, displacement, and poor governance. There is much evidence to show that tribals' access to forests for meeting their basic subsistence needs has deteriorated in the last 70 years....Forest Policy 1952, preference for man-made plantations in place of mixed forests, ...diversion of NTFPs (Non-Timber Forest Production) and forests to industries and exploitation by government agencies and contractors in the marketing of NTFPs. Tribal women in Rayagada were once arrested in 1995 and jailed for keeping brooms in their homes." Dr.Saxena also stressed the point that despite central India being rich in natural resources, mineral and forests, it is home to the poorest, which had been harmed by displacement due to industrialisation. According to him, "nearly 85 lakh tribals had been displaced until 1990 on account of some mega project or the other, reservation of forests as national Parks etc. Tribals constitute 8 percent of population but are 55 percent of the total displaced in the country.The repercussions for the already fragile socio-economic livelihood base of the tribals were devastating—ranging from loss of livelihoods, land alienation on a vast scale, to hereditary bondage."(NC Saxena 2019)

Chhattisgarh, a state in central India, where the tribals constitute a sizeable number of the population, about 30% as per 2011 census, and in Bastar, the main area of Naxalite activities, tribals constitute 70% of the population. In Chhattisgarh, as elsewhere, the tribals are trapped between the state, the state police and para-military forces on one hand, and the Naxalites on the other. Both sides are using violence and the tribals are mostly at the receiving end. (NC Saxena 2019) Moreover, since the central India, more so Bastar, is rich in natural resources, corporate world is attracted to that area for opening up of mines and setting up industries. Naxalites regularly extract rent from them through coercion that sustains them in continuing their activities. Also, they resist infrastructure development (e.g. roads, schools, hospitals etc.) which compromises their effectiveness in voicing tribal concerns.(N Sundar 2006)

Two Prong Approach to Naxalism

Initially, Raman Singh's declared position was that the Naxalite movement would be contained, if not eliminated, soon. But after trying the hard line for some years, the LWE affected states and the government of India started probing for other approaches. In 2008, the Planning Commission's Expert Group came out with a thorough report 'Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas'. In that report, the issue of tribal life and their land was held as the core issue of LWE. The report, while highlighting the point how the tribal were systematically marginalised and losing their land for various 'Development Projects', stressed the point that mere security-centric approach would not work in containing the Naxalism. While the need for security measures was not ruled out, it argued that a holistic approach would be needed; an all-round development of tribal life and protection of their land would go a long way to win them back to mainstream. (Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas: Report of an Expert Group to Planning Commission 2008). Keeping in tune with the Expert Group's advice, Raman Singh came round to the idea that there should be a two prong strategy, security-centric and development-centric, in confronting the Naxalite movement. "We have not stopped the process of dialogue with the Naxalites. It should go forward. Because the issue can be resolved only through dialogue and not by getting involved in arms race," Dr. Singh told reporters in Mumbai in 2012. He told them, "We are trying to win the hearts of the Naxalites. We are taking our PDS there and are trying to rebuild bridges which were destroyed by them." (The Hindu 2012)

Thus he started paving the ground for 'development outreach' in Bastar, Kanker and Surguja districts. PDS was strengthened in Bastar, while metal roads were laid out to connect the interior areas to district headquarters. The enemy or adversary to his populist movement was easy to locate in corrupt leaders of Congress that ruled the state for years and the Naxalites. Against these two adversaries he started to 'work' for the 'people'.

Following the advice given by the Planning Commission's Expert Group's Report, the UPA-2 government at the center started Integrated Action Programme (IAP) in 2012. (Pioneer 2013) Under this programme additional assistance was provided which initially covered 60 districts in 10 LWE (Left Wing Extremism) affected states, later on it was further expanded to cover 88 districts including 76 LWE districts in those states. Of those 78 districts, Chhattisgarh's 14 districts were included. The fund allocation for each district under the project was Rs.25 crores in 2010-11 and Rs.30 crores in subsequent years. In 2013, the project was renamed as the Additional Central Assistance (ACA) for the LWE affected districts aiming at creation of public infrastructure and services. (GOI, MHA, PIB 2015)

Despite all these initiatives in social sector and concerted efforts by security forces, the Naxalite problems could not be contained to the satisfaction of the State. One could detect a tone of frustration in Raman Singh, as he said, "The Constitution does not allow deployment against our own people and neither does my heart. For the sake of argument, if the Army is deployed, the issue can be solved in four hours. But this should never happen." (Indian Express 2015) While talking about the need for development in the LWE affected areas, especially in Bastar, Raman Singh gave away the game plan he had in mind. He slammed the earlier UPA government for allegedly citing environmental concerns and preservation of tribal culture as excuse to stall development in Naxalism-affected areas. (Indian Express 2015) This line of criticism is prevalent in the neo-liberal corporate world that is keen to enter into mineral rich areas in Central India's forest land for setting up mining and extraction and other related industries, and precisely for that reason, the Planning Commission's Expert Group's report asked for a holistic view on the issue.

Despite unavailability of any policy document that could establish a direct causal connection to Raman Singh government's Populist practices and his keenness to contain the growing influence of the Naxalites in his state, perhaps it won't be far from truth to say that this might be one of the drivers for his Populist politics. In a candid interview published by a local weekly, CM Baghel clearly stated that his government believed that the Naxalite issue could not be resolved through guns, but it could be achieved through dialogue. For him, the root cause has social, political and economic bearings. "We will hold talks with all the stakeholders. We will also take up projects especially for the tribal development from Bastar to Surguja." (Chhattisgarh Jan-Mon 2019)

Competitive Democracy

However, we should not forget that Raman Singh's populist politics was also played out in the backdrop of competitive democratic practices, where mobilisation of maximum number of 'people' or various sections of society under a political regime is imperative to establish hegemony and be in power. After winning three consecutive elections Raman Singh was defeated in 2018 and the Congress romped home to victory. During the election campaign the Congress upped the ante by promising 100% loan waiver to the farmers. Raman Singh tried to match that by promising to add value to his existing PDS and offered to give 55 lakh mobiles to rural women to empower them further. Naxalite question did not figure much in the election rhetoric as both Congress and BJP knew that they had failed to contain that.

After returning to power the first thing the Congress government did was to waive short term loan of 16.65 lakh farmers. Within the next six months, the Congress government indicated that they would not back down on the Populist practices initiated by its predecessor; rather it would try to improve upon that. For example, it declared that the government would pay four times the price of land as compensation to farmers if and when their land would be acquired for development works. Earlier, the Raman Singh government notified that they would pay only two times of the price for land. The Bhupesh Baghel government also increased the MSP for paddy substantially. Moreover, on 16 February, 2019 the government did a 'Singur' act by taking back the land given to Tata for setting up of a steel plant and returning that to the farmers. The land parcel of 2500 acre under Chitrakut assembly constituency was given to Tata under an agreement concluded in 2005 between them and the state government (when Raman Singh was the chief minister). But the farmers were unhappy and one third of the total affected 1707 families refused to take the compensation. Like in Singur, the Tatas in Chhattisgarh lost the land when the Congress government took back and returned that to the farmers, after rescinding the earlier order. According to a recent advertisement issued by the Baghel government highlighting their achievements, the Congress government waived off Rs.8818 crore of farm loan of 18 lakh 5 thousand farmers. It also waived off irrigation tax to the tune of Rs.207 crore, raised the wage for Tendu leaf collection (a major economic activity of the tribals there) to Rs.4000 per sack. In the PDS, it expanded the scheme by giving another 7 Kg rice to the sixth member of the BPL family on the top of the existing 35 Kg. For the APL family rice is made available at Rs.10 per Kg. Also, the government procured 80.37 M.T. paddies at Rs.2500 per quintal, and claimed that this was the highest rate given by any state. Ban was lifted from purchasing and selling less than 5 decimal lands. It promised to fill in thousands of vacant posts in government departments, and for that purpose, set up three Kanishth Karmachari Chayan Boards in tribal areas. The baton of Populist Politics has now changed hands in Chhattisgarh; Bhupesh Baghel has replaced Raman Singh.

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