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Populism- III : Leadership and Governmentality


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**Populism-III:
Leadership and Governmentality**

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Ria De**

2019

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Mamata Banerjee's Populist Politics

Sibaji Pratim Basu *

Introducing the Theme

Lots of confusion surrounds the idea of populism. Let us attempt to deal with some of them.

Jen Sorensen is an award-winning, popular American cartoonist and illustrator, who often focuses on current events from a liberal perspective. One of her recent cartoons¹ on populism goes like this: “I consider myself a populist”, says a boy sitting opposite to a girl in a restaurant. “You mean like AOC or neo-Nazis?”, the girl wants to confirm.

Thus, for Sorensen, populism represents two types: one is like the democratic-socialist Representative of US Congress, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (popular as ‘AOC’), who is also an influential social-media activist, known for her strong anti-Trump radical democratic views; or like the ‘neo-Nazis’. Perhaps the cartoonist also had Donald Trump’s picture in mind because in another cartoon she compares Donald Trump’s populism with the populism of ‘progressive’, Democrat Senator Elizabeth Warren or of the formerly Independent but now Democratic Presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders. In other words, in popular *liberal* perceptions, there is either ‘good’ (liberal) populist or ‘bad’ populist (like neo-Nazis/Trump).

Ashutosh Varshney, well-known social scientist and contributing editor of *Indian Express*, in an article² also tried grapple with ‘populism’ as something that is *different* from (liberal) democratic politics. His instances are like this: “At the heart of the concept of populism is the distinction between “popular” and “populist”. Jawaharlal [Nehru] and Barack Obama were popular, winning huge electoral majorities, but they were not populists.” Varshney further elaborated:

“In their [Nehru’s/Obama’s] political conduct were absent the core ideas of populism: That democracy is primarily about elections, and the customary institutions of oversight — the press, judiciary, intelligence agencies etc. — which normally constrain democratic governments between elections must follow electoral verdicts, not the law; that some leaders authentically represent the wishes of the masses, while others are corrupt and moral crooks to be tamed by the state and mass hysteria; that charisma is higher than the law; that the constitution matters less than a crusade on behalf of the masses.” Although Varshney was writing about Narendra Modi’s kind of ‘populism’, this description indeed paints ‘populism’ with dark suspicions from the (liberal) points of view, such as ‘law’/ ‘constitution’, “the press, judiciary, intelligence agencies etc.” and so on.

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Thus, for many, populism is a vexed question. It is usually described as a strategic approach that frames politics as a battle between the virtuous, “ordinary” masses and nefarious or corrupt elite. The commentators are also seemed to be confused when they try to distinguish between the ‘popular’ and ‘populist’. Often the word ‘popular’ is confused with *popularity* (as did Varshney) but more troublesome is to distinguish between a popular movement and populist politics for both the terms along with their practices have ‘people’ at the centre. In the history of protest movements, popular movements, with the element of spontaneous participation of ‘people/masses’ from different social groups and classes, have occurred more than the organised movements. Often, movements centring on some of the people’s issues/demands can take the course of ‘popular’ movements, even when they are originally organised under the banners of political parties/organisations.³ For example, the food movement of 1959 in West Bengal, although began as an organised movement soon went beyond the party-controls, engaging more and more masses. But then how to distinguish between popular movement and populist politics?

The differences are also very difficult to identify. A popular movement generally addresses one or a few issues that touch the lives of an array of people. It often occurs in traditional liberal democratic political spaces and may lead to regime changes in favour of a radical one or more or less continuity. But when the entire politics is conceived and practised – not only for launching movements but also for running the government, making long-term policies – the *moment* of populist politics arrives. Thus, while popular movements create the possibilities of the spontaneous participation of masses to realise certain demands, populist politics encourages viewing politics through the prism of mass-participation and refashioning the political institutions and practices to suit that politics.

Yet, despite such wide-scale confusions, 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. In India, we have seen the host of populist leaders in different regions; even states under the populist leaders. In West Bengal, we are witnessing it since 2011.

Populism in the World

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, regionalism and even shreds of leftism. 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*⁴, 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.

But, even with the “empty signifiers”, populism is not a coherent ideology nor there is any *universal* kind of populism. There are only some outward characteristics. Besides, populist politics is largely *located* politics – bound by issues/demands, social settings, economy and culture. Thus, it varies from global north to global south, continent to continent, country to country and region to region within the same country.

In USA, populist politics rose in the first decade of the 21st century appeared 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.

Although disguised as the amorphous word ‘people’, the support base of populism is actually a *coalition* of social groups and classes, which cannot make their demands met, ‘voices’ heard and identities exerted in their individual, separate existences. This conglomerate of ‘people’, in most of the cases, are marked by their distant position from the ‘elite’ and/or the members of the civil society – in many instances, both are averse to each other. Among these ‘people’ are the working classes associated with small/petty industries, the lower rungs of service sectors, various types of urban and rural ‘marginals’. In many instances, a large section of the ‘non-elite’ middle classes also adhere to the populist causes. The constituents of such coalitions are, generally, bound by certain issues and slogans, than by well-knit ideologies and organisational structures. Thus, the populist coalition can never be compared with Mao's concept of the class alliances in New Democracy – combining peasants, proletariat, intelligentsia, and petty Bourgeoisie, under the working class's Communist Party. The element of spontaneity will always define and differentiate it from the ideology-driven, organised, and cadre-based parties.

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 large-scale fear among the people belonging to majority Hindu community about the ‘illegal’ Muslim ‘infiltrators’ from the neighbouring Bangladesh, which would allegedly change 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).

However, it remains a matter of debate whether one can put Modi as a populist leader. The answer is both yes and no. In Modi’s politics, Catarina Kinnval finds the “re-invention of ‘nationhood’, ‘religion’ and ‘Hindu masculinity’ along gendered lines”, which has “created a foundation for governing practices aimed at ‘healing’ a number of ontological insecurities manifest in Indian society”. She further argues:

“Given that one of the main tasks of the new Modi-ruled government has been to enhance and change the image of India at home and abroad, where a positive image for India’s foreign policy-makers has become a key ingredient in attempts to make India an important player on the global stage, the interplay between domestic and foreign policy is becoming progressively blurred. This is also an image that is closely associated with populist politics in which Hindu national identity is intensified as a collective response to the ontological insecurities experienced by the Indian leadership as well as the Indian (or Hindu) public at large”.

However, from another point of view, since Modi’s style of politics is basically ‘authoritarian’ in nature: he never faced a press-conference during his first term. Even many of his ministerial colleagues cannot easily meet him. At the same time, he backs, and in return, is being backed by corporate capital. Yet, he apparently has undertaken many populist policies. Ashutosh Varshney tries to explain this:

“Modi’s economics, however, does not align with the standard populism of the right, which relies heavily on markets and/or business classes to steer economic progress. His economic policy does have pro-market elements (new bankruptcy laws, reform of indirect taxes) and he has also not been able to hide his pro-business proclivities, but his economics concomitantly also has non-market “people oriented” elements (bank accounts for the poor, modern toilets for all, doubling farm income, farm loan waivers). Moreover, he justified demonetisation in terms of mass welfare. It is another matter that the masses have been badly hurt.”

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.

The Left Front (LF) came to power in the state in 1977, as the inheritor of the legacy of turbulent political struggles of 1950s and ‘60s, and also to fill the political vacuum in the state after the lifting of National Emergency in 1977. Attempting to write “the history of contemporary Bengal” after the end of the LF rule, Ranabir Samaddar⁵ holds that the longevity of the Left rule itself had been the source of its decline: after depending on the party and a self-serving bureaucracy, the official Left had forgotten how to converse with society. When its dialogic capacity was at its minimum, the society’s capacity to make claims peaked.

And when the LF rule crumbled like a house of cards in 2011, the vacuum was filled by Mamata Banerjee’s politics and rule. 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 capital 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.

Very recently, she is also taking advice from a professional election strategist like Prasant Kishore. Perhaps, on his advice she has started an online contact programme with masses called

“Didike Bolo” (Tell Elder Sister). Apparently, this would monitor the undisciplined deputies of her party at the local levels and oversee whether the fruits of her developmental programmes are reaching to the real beneficiaries, or a large portion is vanishing in between and filling the pockets of local leaders as “cut-money”. She herself has asked the affected people to ‘recover’ their losses from the local leaders, who had taken “cut-money” for distributing benefits to the people. This move has been proved to a great extent detrimental, giving further to the rising BJP, especially in rural areas. But the question remains: can governmentality alone save her or does she also need to reinvent a new Bengali identity politics – an inclusive and vibrant one to check the rising tide of Hindutwa in the state? But again how to, if at all, do it? How to imaginatively blend her populist programmes with a counter-hegemonic Bengali identity? We need some more time to arrive at a conclusion.

Ranabir Samaddar uttered some words of caution⁶ about seven years ago, when Mamata had just completed one year in office and when everyone was in praise of the efficacy of her “social engineering” (bringing various components of lower strata together), which seem very relevant even today:

“The lower strata of society will give Mamata time, notwithstanding the daily wisdoms dished out by the blow hot blow cold media. But the question will be: Will she and her team learn? Will they be able to combine their direct, fire-fighting, dialogic style of governance with more nuanced, administrative, indirect methods with a strategic perception of what needs to be done? Will they be able to initiate social engineering?

The odds against that possibility are heavy.”

Notes

¹<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2019/7/2/1868898/-Cartoon-Populism-vs-populism> Last accessed on 2 August, 2019.

²*The Indian Express*, 23 October, 2017

³ Sibaji Pratim Basu, “The Chronicle of a Forgotten Movement: West Bengal: 1959 Revisited”, in Samir Kumar Das (ed.), *India: Democracy and Violence*, OUP, New Delhi, 2015

⁴ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London, 2018

⁵ Ranabir samaddar, *The Passive Revolution in West Bengal: 1977-2011*, Sage, New Delhi, 2013

⁶ Ranabir Samaddar, “West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee deserves a chance”, *India Toda*, May 10, 2012 <https://www.indiatoday.in/opinion/ranabir-samaddar/story/west-bengal-chief-minister-mamata-banerjee-deserves-a-chance-101699-2012-05-10> Last accessed 10 August, 2019

Kanyashree Scheme: Populism & Governmental Feminism

Ria De *

Why Look at the Kanyashree Scheme?

Studying a government scheme or a program necessarily entails that we study schemes as a mode of governance, or as an aspect of governmentality; a scheme therefore as something through which a people is identified, defined, categorized and “taken care of”; a mode through which a state establishes a relationship with the people; in the process it produces subjects of governance. The study of a government scheme is then necessarily about a particular form of governance, and in a way of state functions. In that very sense, the Kanyashree scheme, introduced by the Trinamool government in Bengal presents itself as an interesting study; one, because of the time period over which it has been systematised and disseminated (more than six years now); the ways in which it has evolved in its modes of address over the years; how it has widened its scope in terms of who it includes as its beneficiary and therefore narrowing its scope of “exclusion” ; because of the ways in which it is deeply integrated in to the government education system in Bengal; its wide networks of dissemination, particularly in urban spaces; its spectacular presence and visibility on the internet, on print media and on television. The scheme as a point of intersection between governance and let’s say the ‘will of the people’ has also produced peculiar, in the sense of uniqueness , but also in the sense of strange, narratives of people’s participation and therefore to be able to see the scheme as a socio-cultural phenomenon alongside it being one that has a cumbersome bureaucratic life of itself. Of particular importance of course is the implications of gender that is linked with the Kanyashree scheme. This study then looks at the ways in which a welfare scheme, in its spectacularly mediated presence, is part of the contemporary populist politics and strategies of governance in West Bengal in specific, and in India in general.

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

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

1. The first is K1, an annual scholarship of Rs. 1000/- to be paid annually to girls from 13 to 18 years of age group for every year that they remain in education, on condition that they remain unmarried and fulfil a minimum quota of attendance.
2. The second is K2, a one-time grant of Rs. 25000/- to be paid as an incentive to girls when they turn 18, given that they are engaged in education, occupation or remain unmarried.
3. The third is K3, where the Kanyashree recipients, who are enrolled in the Kanyashree Prakalpa of the Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare and have received financial assistance under Kanyashree Prakalpa, stage 2 (K-2), if admitted in post-graduate courses, may apply for getting financial assistance under the aforesaid 'K-3 component' of Swami Vivekananda Merit Cum Means Scholarship Scheme, if they get at least 45 % marks in Graduation and enroll themselves for Post Graduate courses in the State of West Bengal. For pursuing Post Graduate courses in Arts and Commerce, each K-3 beneficiary will receive Rs. 2000/- per month and for pursuing Post graduate studies in Science, each K-3 beneficiary will get Rs 2500/- per month. The K3 segment does not depend on whether the recipient is married or not.

The Kanyashree scheme therefore incentivises through money, education for young women, instead of premature marriage, as a means of empowerment. The scheme is supposed to reduce the high rates of drop outs from school of girl children by offering an annual cash incentive. There are however varied reports about whether the scheme has actually been effective in terms of intervening in the pre-existing patterns of school drop outs. Demographic variations in the implementation of the scheme and its rates of success and failure are also important factors that need to be taken in to account. For instance, whether the scheme has had more of an impact in the lives of girl children in rural Bengal or in urban Kolkata is an issue, and whether there is a distinction in the nature of impact is a question that definitely underscores this study but is able to address only partially. The following section deals briefly with the public dissemination of the Kanyashree scheme, and the ways in which it has come to represent itself both as a flagship project of the West Bengal government, but also in many ways has become synonymous not only with the government, but with the success of the ruling party Trinamool Congress in general, and the gender-sensitive enterprise of the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in specific.

Kanyashree Scheme: A Socio-Cultural Phenomenon

The West Bengal government has widely promoted the Kanyashree scheme through billboards, installations, wall paintings, area-wise public and cultural programmes, advertisements on newspapers, television, radio and social media, through school text book curriculum etc. August 14th

is designated as the Kanyashree Day. On this day, in addition to a main event organised by the WB government, where Mamata Banerjee and other dignitaries hand out awards in recognition of Kanyashree recipients who have excelled in both academics and extra-curricular activities, programmes are organised by BDOs, where school children, particularly the girl students, participate in various kinds of cultural activities. The Mamata Banerjee government also laid the foundation of the Kanyashree university early this year . In addition to these, the scheme has involved the formation of autonomous bodies, such as the Kanyashree Sangha or the Kanyashree Committees, where members hold the title of Kanyashree Joddha or Warriors. Warriors organise cultural activities and awareness programs in their respective localities and communities. These programmes are carried out with the help of teachers and other staff of the school and involve dissuading parents from discontinuing their daughters' education, from underage marriage etc. There are recorded incidents of Kanyashree committees successfully intervening in individual incidents of child marriage and rehabilitation of the girls involved. In addition to the fact that an entire repertoire of state-sponsored visual culture has emerged around Kanyashree (also that a song titled 'Kanyashree', written by Mamata Banerjee, and popular Bengali singer Lopamudra Mitra has been released as part of the Kanyashree 'awareness' exercise,) it is important to note that social media is also full of seemingly autonomous and independent endeavours related to creating awareness about the Kanyashree scheme in general, and the nitty gritty of the bureaucratic procedures in specific. Apart from individual district sponsored songs (baul songs on Kanyashree and women's empowerment), individuals have uploaded commentaries and tutorials on filling out the scheme form. Clearly, the multi-layered technicalities involved in the filling and submission of the application and annual renewal Kanyashree forms is one of the central obstacles between the application and reception of scholarship. The Bankura district police has produced a Baul song, hosted on the Bankura police You Tube channel. The song, performed by Golok Bihari Mahato, urges parents to allow their daughters to complete their school education before marriage, and to hold off their marriage until they turn 18. Many of these videos related to Kanyashree contain thousands of comments on the efficacy and the failure of the scheme, producing effectively a culture of "fandom" around the scheme itself. Parents and family members write grievances about their inability to procure the scholarship for their daughters. They write about the difficulty of filling the forms, 'technical errors' that they are not able to overcome, difficulties of communication faced at the BDOs or the Block Development Offices, where the forms from all the schools in each Block are processed. Of the hundreds of videos dedicated to various aspects of Kanyashree in general, almost 30 of these are specifically about filling the form. The views on these videos range from as low as 2,500 to up to 45,000. One will also find videos on how students can respond to Kanyashree related questions in the board exams. What is also interesting is that prior to the general elections of 2019, Kanyashree beneficiaries were involved in campaigning for TMC, the current ruling party in West Bengal. The campaign included wall painting of the Kanyashree logo in conjunction with that of TMC and its electoral slogan. Anandabazar Patrika regularly carries stories related to the Kanyashree scheme, and the activities of the Kanyashree Sanghas and Yoddhas.

Beginning from the schools to the localities to wider public spaces (in the form of hoardings, wall-paintings, installations along the streets of Kolkata), the Kanyashree scheme is therefore deeply integrated in to the urban and semi-urban public life of Bengal. Going through YouTube itself makes clear the range of activities that take place under the socio-cultural banner-head of Kanyashree. From locality oriented quiz competitions to cultural programs to drama competitions and sports events, the Kanyashree occasions the assimilation of local area-wise communities, with spectacular visual figurations of both the empowerment of the girl-child and the 'industriousness' of the state Chief

Minister Mamata Banerjee link establish a linkage between governance, welfare, charismatic leadership and the cultures and social relations of the people. The significance of this remains in that that the scheme, as much as it functions as a welfare scheme, with a constitutional basis, for the empowerment of girl children and its visual cultural presence and visibility as a widespread awareness strategy, the scheme is also part of TMC and Mamata Banerjee's self-promotion strategies.

As far as the process of enrolment of Kanyashree beneficiaries is considered, the BDOs and the individual schools function as nodal agencies. The schools (Labhpur Girls High School in Birbhum District and Satitara N.G.N.S. Vidyapith High School in Murshidabad) where I have undertaken fieldwork have appointed teachers and clerks dedicated solely to the work of enlisting students to the program, which includes an arduous process of having the forms filled correctly (and this is a significant task because most parents in rural areas are uneducated and therefore ill-equipped to deal with such bureaucratic nuances), of uploading the forms to the BDO server. The rare number of schools where internet services are available, the work of uploading documents happens on the school premises itself; in most other cases, these documents have to be uploaded from the BDO office. Apart from usual documents of identification, each student is expected to provide a government certification from their respective Panchayats of their status as unmarried, a core element of eligibility for the Kanyashree scheme. The enrolment and verification process for the Kanyashree scheme produces on the one hand an entire network of relations between the students, the enrolment officers (that may include school teachers and those in clerical positions), the school principal who also functions as the principal officer of verification of each form. The bureaucratic procedure that enrolment in to the Kanyashree scheme entails, like any other welfare scheme, the production of a particular sub-set of the population as "vulnerable" or in need of "subject"-ification. With the Kanyashree, the single girl child is taken as a vulnerable group, at risk of being married off or trafficked and as necessary subjects of empowerment. The question to be asked then is, does this scheme, by centering the "cause" of the single girl child produce women as subjects of political and specifically electoral mobilisation? Or does the money that the scheme guarantees and disburses enable the mobilisation of a larger sub-set, that of lower-class families of the girls, for whom this money then supplements their income and contributes to their familial needs?

I conducted both individual interviews and group discussions with Kanyashree beneficiaries in the two schools that I visited. More than whether the scheme had had a positive impact on the school drop-out rate, specifically in the instance of the girl students, I was more interested in what ways was the scholarship benefitting them. How were they spending the money? Was there a specific pattern in terms of their class, caste, regional or religious backgrounds that determined the modes of their expenditure or savings? I was also curious about the nuances about the bureaucratic procedure that the students were compelled to be part of.

What is also interesting is the kind of discourse and narrative that such processes produce. What interested me in particular was the anxieties and contestations that the Muslim beneficiaries presented to the process; for instance about Muslim girl students and how many of them get married in secret, and are able to continue to avail of the scheme because there are no apparent markers that distinguish married and unmarried Muslim girls. The male school principal of Satitara High School, also a Muslim himself, however emphatically stated that he could easily spot the Muslim girls who had gotten married and could therefore intervene and stop such girls from availing the Kanyashree. Even the classrooms themselves emerged as sites of contestations between Muslim and non-Muslim students, where non-Muslim students expressed their resentment about married Muslim girls availing of the Kanyashree scheme one, and that they often used the K2 money that is the incentive package of 25000/- to get married. The Muslim students however resisted such "stereotyping"; they

said that the annual 1000/- rupees was a useful contribution to their already failing family economy. In fact, we will see how many of the poorer Muslim girls were not getting married immediately after school; but had signed up for private nursing schools, more often than not, being cheated of lakhs of rupees that already these girls and families cannot afford.

But was there at all a need to negotiate this criteria of “singlehood” or how did the two schools negotiate the primary eligibility criteria? The two schools that I had visited treated this issue differently; the first, enrolled girls in to the Kanyashree scheme, irrespective of whether they were married or single, or if they did not have adequate attendance. The principal argued that it was more important for her to ensure that all options for girls to return to school and avenues to continue their studies were kept open. This was also because the school was still struggling to reduce the drop-out rates, while the second school, over the last five years, since the implementation of the scheme had seen a surge in the number of girl students. The second school however, was therefore more strict on implementing all the rules. There was quite a difference between the social and economic configuration of the girl students in the respective schools; although both are located in rural contexts; and which is substantially reflected in the impact that Kanyashree has had on the girl students. I also found that the girls in the second school were more articulate and knowledgeable in terms of what the scheme promised and delivered. Students “organizations” and rankings of prefects and class monitors appeared to be more systematic and in place. Most of the middle to upper middle-class students left the money to accumulate in their bank accounts. Some said they used it to buy textbooks, while the lower class students gave the annual 1000/- to their families, especially the Muslim girl students whose male siblings had dropped out off school and were away as migrant labourers to Mumbai, Chennai, Gulf etc. While both school authorities claimed that the Kanyashree has led to higher girl student retention in their schools, there is a qualitative difference in their educational achievements and aspirations. Schools in remoter areas, with a higher demography of students from economically and socially backward family backgrounds have not been able to ensure a diversity of higher education beyond the school. Most girls who do not get married after school either take nursing lessons or become school teachers. In the other school however, not only has the rate of school dropout reduced, but more number of girls have taken admission in colleges and universities in various humanities and sciences disciplines. The success of the Kanyashree scheme also needs to be seen in conjunction with other schemes that have been implemented for school students, for instance, the Sabuj Sathi where cycles are given out to students, and the mid-day meal scheme, and the recently announced Rupashree scheme, a marriage assistance scheme for girls, which entails an amount of Rs 25000/- to be given to young women for their marriage. Many of the students were asked what they would do with the 25000/- that they received as part of the K2 scheme; they said they would combine it with the 25000/-, they received as part of Rupashree to be able to pay for marriage costs. Both school principals argued that the Rupashree scheme, announced in 2018, somehow defeats the original purpose of the Kanyashree scheme, ie to encourage women and their families to choose higher studies over marriage and trafficking. On the other hand, some of the girls claimed that they continued their studies after marriage as well, therefore not being in a position where they would have to choose one over the other. And this is where the K3 scheme which grants scholarship to postgraduate women students, irrespective of whether they are married or not is an important addition. However, both schools, and the TMC claim that the scheme and the simultaneous awareness programs have had a positive impact on the drop-out rates (the incentive of 25000/- given to 18 yo girls has been a big factor in that); however, that has not necessarily meant that girls from the lower classes were able to choose better educational opportunities after school. For instance, in the case of the Labhpur HSS school, most girls choosing to study were either

enrolling in to BEd to become school teachers or enrolling in to private nursing schools. According to the principal, this was primarily because the girls were not exposed to the various possibilities in terms of higher education and occupation, and therefore had limited aspirations. The point therefore is that the scheme has not had a uniform application nor reception amongst its beneficiaries. Various other social factors need to be taken in to account to understand the unevenness of its application. For instance, the implementation of the scheme across classes, castes and regions, is reflected in the fact that the Kanyashree committees are not active everywhere. In fact, according to Manisha Bandopadhyay, districts such as Murshidabad have been more successful in setting up and running Kanyashree committees with Muslim girls because Muslims have a stronger social and economic position in the said district. The empowerment of girl children is also directly related to their pre-existing social conditions, and Kanyashree functions as an added element in their mobility.

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

however wants to revive the significance of populism , seeing it as “the very essence of the political”, and the “construction of a people”. (Ernesto Laclau 1990) The uniqueness of populism hence lies in the fact that it combines contradictory political positions, strategies and demands, and brings together diverse interests in terms of their shared opposition to a certain political power or authority. In other words then, one should define populism in terms of its form and not its content: it has the tendency to divide and uphold the social configuration in terms of two opposing categories, upholding the people over what Laclau in different contexts has termed the “dominant ideology”, the “dominant bloc”, “the institutional system”, an “institutionalised other” or even “power” itself. The disparate and non-homogeneous demands that constitute any given populist movement are brought together and contingently made stable , not merely by their opposition to the status quo, but also through the production of an empty signifier, a concept or name that loses its own specificity as it replaces other specific demands to which it is seen as equivalent. In Laclau’s sense, Kanyashree emerges then as the ‘empty signifier’ of Mamata Banerjee’s populist politics. I would then argue that to understand Kanyashree as a populist scheme, one must look at not the content and the administrative efficacy of the scheme but elsewhere i.e. in Kanyashree as a visual cultural presence as a discursive strategy of a populist politics. What would be important then to study Kanyashree as a populist scheme or a populist strategy would be to look at the ways in which it exists as a discursive element, as a component of our social; to analyse therefore, how in its spectacular presence, especially in urban-public spaces, and on media through which it attempts to become co-terminous with an ‘idea’ of the people but more so with the image and iconography of Mamata Banerjee, as a particular form of charismatic leadership that is necessarily gendered. This study will also have to look at how the Kanyashree scheme is driven through a particular affective force that while it produces the girl child as the subject of empowerment, and this particular affective element is even present in the responses given by the Kanyashree beneficiaries, when they were interviewed, the scheme while it produces women as a specific political category as direct subjects of the Chief Minister as a maternal figuration, the larger cultural expression of the scheme serves to largely promote Mamata Banerjee and the TMC government.

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