

Populism as a Crisis of the Liberal Script: Reflections on Politics and Policy in India

Amit Prakash*

Liberalism has been seen as a framework for organising the political process while prioritising individual rights, liberty and equality of citizens. Alongside, liberalism may also be seen as a set of promissory notes emerging from a complexly negotiated social contract in each society, the attractiveness of which has been underlined by the widespread support that it has found the world over. However, liberalism has also been characterised by a set of broken promises under the conditions of contemporary finance capital; belying legitimate democratic concerns—about increased participation, better deliberation, or proportional equity for all sections. Populism speaks to such belied expectations and constructs the trope of a homogenous popular will – without any opposition, with promises to deliver on these belied promises.

The impact of such populist political process is complex and far reaching – from institutional ossification, to the TINA of finance capitalism, and, rising socio-political expectations in the face of increasing inequality.

Research on populism has been conducted within the broad contours of the discipline of Political Science with little focus in cognate disciplines. Consequently, understanding of the processes that undergird populist transformations are not fully understood, least in the case of India. For instance, how does the neoliberal turn create conditions for the rise and growth of populism or how do both together impact social structures. How does the interplay between information technology, finance capital and crisis of liberalism colonise the political space to create conditions for the emergence and growth of populism and its implications for the liberal project?

The paper will examine some of these issues with the help of Indian material drawn from recent political patterns at the national level. To be able to examine the large

*Professor, Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi - 110 067, India. Email: amit@jnu.ac.in

phenomenon and to induce some coherence and finiteness, politics and policy debates on select areas will be the main focus.

Understanding Populism as Crises of the Liberal Script

Populist politics is fundamentally related to the nature and character of modern liberal democracy. However, what is modern about such democracy is not quite clear apart from the creation and operation of liberal representative institutions of government in the face of impracticality of direct democracy. It is therefore important to unbundle these concepts to underline the

... distinction between two aspects: on one side, democracy as a form of rule, that is, the principle of the sovereignty of the people; and on the other side, the symbolic framework within which this democratic rule is exercised ... what makes it [democracy] properly 'modern', is that, with the advent of the 'democratic revolution', the old democratic principle that 'power should be exercised by the people' emerges again, but this time within a symbolic framework informed by the liberal discourse, with its strong emphasis on the value of individual liberty and on human rights. Those values are central to the liberal tradition and they are constitutive of the modern view of the world. Nonetheless, one should not make them part and parcel of the democratic tradition whose core values, equality and popular sovereignty, are different. Indeed, the separation between church and state, between the realm of the public and that of the private, as well as the very idea of the *Rechtstaat*, which are central to the politics of liberalism, do not have their origin in the democratic discourse but come from elsewhere...

On one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty. There is no necessary relation between those two distinct traditions but only a contingent historical articulation. Through such an articulation, as C. B. MacPherson was keen to emphasize, liberalism was democratized and democracy liberalized ... [W]hile we tend today to take the link between liberalism and democracy for granted, their union, far from being a smooth process, was the result of bitter struggles ... ¹

Inability of the liberal script to reconcile (perhaps, consciously ignore) these tensions has had multifarious impacts. Foremost is the widely commented upon 'democratic deficit' – a condition wherein the liberal script emphasising question of equality and popular sovereignty is often seen to be irrelevant to the mechanics of democracy keen to stress upon individual liberty and rule of law. It is not accidental that the latter two phrases are popular with the neoliberal recommendations too!

Close together is inability of this tension to reconcile claims of a social community with the tropes of modern liberal democracy. The record of liberal democracy in

¹Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London: Verso, 2000, pp. 2-3.

reconciling claims of social distinctiveness is anything but salutary. The stress on individual liberty and the myth of ethnocultural neutrality that lies at the root of the modern liberal democracy leads to a situation wherein it finds itself unable to speak to the claims of an ideational basis of popular sovereignty whose mechanics are inevitably rooted in the collective. A historically contingent relationship created between the two threads – the idea of nationalism expressed in a historically peculiar organisational form of the nation-state is not only historically limited but also spatially inconsistent with many contexts, especially those in the Global South.

However, for a limited period of time, perhaps, four or five decades from the end of the Second World War roughly until the Oil crisis of the 1970s that undermined the post-war liberal economic consensus, the reconciliation of both these threads – that of individual liberty, rule of law and rights with that of equality, effective representation and popular sovereignty – in the guise of the Keynesian liberal nation-state was a possibility. It was during this period that some of the promises of the liberal script were realised. Public policy towards socioeconomic equality was a reality in most nation-states (even if record towards its realisation was patchy at best). Most nation-states had ambitious programmes towards this end and on most parameters the record of realisation was good: literacy, health services, education and employment generation. While actual gains made towards socioeconomic equality are not something to dismiss as ephemeral, what is of greater salience, discursively, is the entrenchment of the promissory notes embossed in the liberal script. Politics and policy in this era were guided, in good measure, by such promissory notes of equality, popular sovereignty and democracy, which in turn was to lead to individual liberty, rights and rule of law. Such a narrative of the liberal script was internalised by the body politic of many nation-states, especially that in India.

The counter-revolution of such a narrative was never very far away. The constant interrogation of ‘successes’ of the promissory notes witnessed as early in the 1960s – first in the guise of effectiveness of the implementation model and soon, by the 1970s, in the form of questioning of the model itself, was reflective of the tension embedded within liberal democracy alluded to earlier. With the veritable collapse of the Keynesian state and the emergence of the neoliberal order, the balance between

the political and policy; and, its relationship to the promissory notes of the liberal script was inverted.

The resultant shifts in politics and policy and the prioritisation of rational methodological individualism under the guise of neoliberal policies and models increased the tension between the two threads of the liberal script that undergirded the unsteady balance. Unabashed pursuit of individual rational interest buttressed by individual liberty and a notion of rule of law had far-reaching impacts on liberal politics. Promises of the pursuit of equality and popular sovereignty was discarded at the altar of market-led economic efficiency. The promises of liberal script were well on their way to being belied. The impact of such a process was not only on the mechanisms of socioeconomic equality, the fundamental basis of the political community on which the notion of popular sovereignty was premised, was altered. It is not accidental that political assertions claiming recognition as justice for unique social communities grew manifold during this period.

It is within this frame that the idea of populism needs to be embedded. Such contextualisation of populism in the political economy of the liberal script lends itself to a more concrete meaning while differentiating it from other historical episodes that may have been labelled as populism of the Left or the Right. The main argument that is being sought to be constructed is that the contemporary phase of populism must not be conflated with ideological *popular* mobilisations that have been noted in various other temporal and geographical contexts.

Characterizing Populism

There is a great deal of fuzziness about the social science meaning of the term populism:

Back in the late 1960s, “populism” appeared in debates about decolonization, speculations concerning the future of “peasantism”, and, perhaps most surprising... at the beginning of the twenty-first century, discussions about the origins and likely developments of Communism in general Maoism in particular.²

However, the contemporary usage of this term does not necessarily denote a continued intellectual lineage. In fact, its meaning differs across and between the

²Jan Werner Müller, *What is Populism*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, p. ?.

European political landscape and that of the Americas. While European political use the term to denote the rise of illiberalism expressed in xenophobic or narrow nationalist political patterns, democracy theorists are concerned with the rise of liberal technocracy, implying the increasing central role of technical experts or elite who may not be in tune with popular expectations – widening the hiatus between inscription of popular sovereignty of the liberal script and the extant political reality.³ Populism, in this sense, is often construed as a democratic corrective to restore the aspirations of popular sovereignty. The rise of various ‘Occupy’ movements in recent years (for instance, Occupy Wall Street of the US and the Anti-corruption-Lok Pal movement in India) have been described as populist, suggesting an alternative mode of politics. Such “populist” political process is seen expressions of citizens’ disenchantment with political figures seen to represent the old elite and channelise the widespread resentment of the inversion of democratic aspirations, alluded to earlier. Those labelled as “populists” claim to be in actual fact, reflecting popular aspirations of the citizenry and are not restricted to any particular ideological position or school.

However, the claims of populist leadership and adherents notwithstanding, populist politics may not lend itself to restoration or prioritisation of the inherent imbalance of the liberal script. The assertions that the elite driven nature of contemporary politics being corrected by ‘alternate’ forms of populist mobilisations does not stand close scrutiny. The expansion of illiberal technocratic/ elitist democracy that populist forms seek to check or correct may actually entrench the illiberal aspect. The conflation of popular sovereignty with an ersatz version of equality in actual fact, strengthens a hollowed-out version of the other promises of the liberal script: that of individual liberty, substantive equality and, indeed, a robust rule of law. The subordination of the individual to the collective in populist imagination and mobilisation draws from both, the spectacular success of the promissory notes of the liberal script as also from a well-understood weakness of the liberal script. However, both, the weakness of the liberal script as well as its subordination by the populist mode of illiberal democracy are derived from structural factors.

³Ibid.

The paper will examine these issues in some detail with a tentative focus on the following threads of analysis:

- (a) Promises of the Liberal Script: Belied and Realised
 - a. Fracture of the community under Neoliberalism
 - b. Distress and search for new solidarities
- (b) Non-liberal and Illiberal modes of political articulation
 - a. The liberal script and communities
 - b. Politics of identity as new populisms
- (c) Alternative modes of politics as populism;
- (d) The role of social media technologies in such populism; and,
- (e) Debates about social policy as populists' colonization of the liberal promise.
