

Populist Initiatives in a Competitive Democracy Chhattisgarh: A Case Study

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Chhattisgarh came into being in November 2000 when it was separated from Madhya Pradesh. The state is 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 all India average of 382.

With 44% of its land area under forest and vast mineral resources, Chhattisgarh is a resource-rich State. It ranks second in production of coal, ranks third in production of iron ore, and there are large deposits of other minerals like bauxite, limestone etc. It is a power surplus state. It has good industrial base with steel plant, power plants, aluminium plant, 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, mostly mono crop. (An Evaluation of the Finances of the State of Chhattisgarh, 13th Finance Commission) Thus, despite having a sound economic base and favourable land to people ratio, 48.7 % population of Chhattisgarh were below poverty line as against national average of 27.5%. In other words, of the total population of 25.5 million there were 12.19 million poor people 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 used to migrate to other areas as unskilled and semi skilled labours, and traditionally they became known as Bilaspuri coolies.

In December, 2003 BJP won the election in Chhattisgarh and Raman Singh became the chief minister. Next year with the introduction of Chhattisgarh Public Distribution System (Control) Order, 2004, Raman Singh started radically reforming the PDS of the state. Before that, Fair Price Shops were mostly run by private owners and people were not getting even what was officially allocated for them. With that order Raman Singh cancelled license of all private run Fair Price Shops (FPS) and handed over the responsibility of running that to cooperative societies, gram panchayats, women's self help groups, 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 system and bring in transparency. 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 pilferage. In fact, all gram panchayats were engaged in keeping a strict vigil over the process of PDS. On the other hand the government started buying paddy directly from the farmers and not encouraging the middlemen to run the show. Through the PDS the government had tried to give rice at the rate of Rs. 2 to 30 lakh BPL families and at the rate of Rs. 1 to another 7 lakh 'Antyodaya' families. As a result of that, people of Chhattisgarh started fondly calling Raman Singh 'Chawar wala Baba' (One who gives rice). One could argue that this role of 'Annadata' coupled with other populist measures initiated by him helped Raman Singh rule the state for three consecutive terms.

Raman Singh went ahead with his Reform of PDS programme not merely through bureaucratic fiats, but he actively mobilised people around it. By handing over the running of FPS to 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 the bureaucrats on rein, which eventually made the delivery system smooth and functional. It is also true that Raman Singh's Food Security Programme preceded that of Centre's Food Security Bill.

It should be mentioned here that the Raman Singh government did not stop at reforming the PDS only, but it also introduced some other populist programmes focussed on the poor.

Yet, in 2019 state assembly election, Raman Singh and his party was swept out of power by Congress. Questions might be raised that the populist measures that kept him in power for 15 years might have lost their edge. But, the government run PDS system after the reform proved to be most efficient, transparent and people-friendly one, as acknowledged by Jean Dreze and others. So, we need to look for the answer elsewhere.

After he returned to power for third consecutive term, Raman Singh tried to make his much lauded food security programme more attractive by adding nutritional values. The state government started giving grams and other nutrients to ration card holders free. Also, he announced a scheme

under which around 55 lakh rural people would be given free mobile. But the Congress came out with a promise of complete waiver of debts for the farmers.

It is too early to say that it was the main factor that saw Chaur Wala Baba cornered in the hustings and finally routed in the election. But if it is factored in the post mortem of recent Chhattisgarh election, then we are faced with another question: Is populist politics more likely to give rise to competitive bidding by the contending parties in a democracy? If so, then in a parliamentary democracy, especially, as it is unfolding in India, the prospect of the end of ideology based politics is likely to end and be replaced by the populist politics soon. Whether the parties of Left, Right and Centre are getting ready to give up their class, caste based politics and would try to address the issues dear to broad mass, especially poorer sections in the society, and reposition themselves accordingly, is to be seen. But if the present trend is any indication, then the pressure on them to change their position is only growing.

There is another problem that this paper would like to ponder over. What is the difference between a populist measure and a welfare initiative? How does one draw a line between these two? It cannot be denied that while welfare programmes have got moral approval of the society as a duty of the State towards its people, the populist programmes initiated by the state have always evoked some consternation among the urban elites. It seems that the very word Populism has a derogatory meaning. According to Oxford Dictionary the word Populism means 'A Political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups'. Does it mean that only those welfare schemes are tagged as 'Populist' that targeted to address the poor people's concerns?