

Populist Policies and Practises in Competitive Democracy, Chhattisgarh, a case study

Background

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 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 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, that too mono crop (An Evaluation 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 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 labours, and traditionally they became known as Bilaspuri coolies.

PDS reform by Raman Singh

When BJP anointed Dr, Raman Singh the chief minister of Chhattisgarh in 2003, few thought that in next few years he would be earning an epithet 'Chawar wala Baba' 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 Chhattisgarh Public Distribution System (Control) Order, 2004, 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 license 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 (villagers mobilised under the scheme). 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 Dre'ze found that the PDS was working fine, 85% of cardholders were getting their full 35 Kg of grain every month from the PDS (others were getting at least 25 kg). 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 ration shops and doorstep delivery, 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," Dre'ze felt. (Chhattisgarh shows the way, The Hindu, 13 November, 2010)

Also, Raghav Puri, EPW, Feb.4,2012

Raman Singh went ahead with his reform of PDS programme not merely through bureaucratic fiat, but he also actively mobilised people around it, at least in the initial days. By handing over 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 keep the bureaucrats on rein, which eventually made the delivery system smooth and functioning. It is also true that Raman Singh's Food Security Programme preceded that of 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

In following years 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 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.

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, Raman Singh government also introduced a novel element in the state budget by including a separate Gender Budget 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, law was enacted to reserve 50% seats in PRI for women.

1. 1.1.4 Gender Budgeting

Gender Budget of the State provides the estimates and expenditure proposed to be incurred within the overall budget on schemes which are designed to benefit women fully or partially. Separate volume of Gender Budget was prepared by the state along with the Budget (2015-16) giving the details of budget provision relating to women and girls in various schemes. As per Gender budget document, schemes relating to women were bifurcated into two categories- (1) Schemes in which 100 per cent budget provision were related to women, and (2) Schemes in which at least 30 per cent of budget provision were related to women. During 2015-16, budget provisions were made in 16 departments (category-1:23 schemes and category-2:101 schemes) for benefit of women and the girl child. The details of Budget estimates as per gender budget document, provision of fund as per Appropriation Account and actual expenditure in respect of 23 schemes for category (1) above are given in Appendix 1.6 (14th Finance Commission Report)

As per Gender Budget 2015-16, the estimated provision for gender budget documents for 23 schemes was ` 1,049.56 crore. However, the final budget provision of ` 619.47 crore (59 per cent) was made by the State Government against which an expenditure of ` 619.49 crore was incurred.

Entire provision of 8.50 crore for the Girls Incentive Scheme had been surrendered during 2015-16 because the scheme was not in existence and funds had not been received from Government of India. Saving had occurred under this head during 2013-14 and 2014-15 as well. Despite the fact that entire provision under this head was surrendered on 31 March 2016, expenditure of ` 0.01 crore was made which is unauthorised. Even though the Government presented an outcome budget for 2015-16 and there were quantifiable deliverables against various items of gender related activities, the nodal department did not monitor the progress of Agriculture Department, Animal Husbandry, Food and Civil supply Department, Forest Department, Higher Education Department, Labour Department, Medical Education Department, Panchayat and Rural Development, Public Health and Family Welfare Department, School Education, Social Welfare Department, Sports and Youth Welfare, Technical Education and Manpower Department, Tribal Welfare Department, Village Industries Department, Women and Child Development Department. Audit Report (State Finances) for the year 2015-16 (8) implementation of the schemes nor there was any special cell in the department for monitoring. There was no evaluation of various programmes or schemes regarding women during the year by any agency of the State.

14th Finance Commission: Evaluation of State Finance of Chhattisgarh observes:

Subsidies: Expenditure on Subsidies increased from Rs.202.55 cr in 2007-08 to Rs.1871 cr 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. Development expenditure, Social sector expenditure and capital expenditure as a percentage of aggregate expenditure in the state were higher than the average expenditure of the general category States during the period.

Table 3.5

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.

Table 5.1Subsidy

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

Head	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Nutrition	0.44	946.28	1288.78	886.73	750.51
Crop					
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
Cooperation	7.50	40.03	46.00	83.07	95.32
Minor Irrigation	8.09	10.49	10.62	11.01	10.88
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

Source: C&AG Report on State Finance for FY 2011

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 for the year ended 31 March, 2016)

It should be noted that the Food subsidy bill grew from Rs.606 cr in 2007-08 to Rs.1,334 cr 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, Garmin 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 purchase of paddy purchase over and above the MSP has not been shown here. This was as much as Rs.440 crore 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 crore in 2007-08, but climbed up to Rs.100 crore in 2011-12

PDS: There are 55 lakh households in the State. Quantity of Rice provided to a family is 35 Kg Rice per family per month @ Rs. 1 and Rs.2 per Kg. One Kg of iodized Salt, and subsidised pulses. According to official record, of them 13 lakh families are in BPL categories.

However, Raghav Puri, in his paper in EPW, using data from the Jean Dreze led PDS survey, said that there were 3.23 million households that were covered by PDS.

The losses incurred by the State Civil Supplies Corporation was Rs. 8 crore in 2007-08, and Rs.450 crore in 2010-11.

Power: DISCOM, the government's power distribution company, started incurring heavy loss. Its economy became unsustainable.

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)

A common characteristic among Populist leaders is that unlike traditional politicians they don't want to be restricted by the fiscal discipline set by the Centre. Rather, they

often tend to ignore that and allocate fund for those Populist |projects that they thought would help masses rally around them, to the detriment of 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 crore. (newspaper reports)

After seeing the HDI report of 2018, that put India at 131st position among 188 countries, Amitabh Kant, CEO Niti Ayog, blamed Chhattisgarh, UP and Bihar for keeping India backward. (Business Today, 24 April, 2018)

Despite all these shortcomings, one cannot do away with the urgent need for such welfare schemes as 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. (Response from N C Saxena via email to the author's queries)

Populist Moment

In an era when Populist Politics has established itself as a rising 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 Privy Purse and raising a populist slogan 'Garibi Hatao' that forced the Left to rally behind her. Now, globally, Bernie Sanders in USA, Jeremi Corbin in 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'. But Partha Chatterjee cautions us 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." (Populism Plus, Partha Chatterjee, The India Forum, June 7, 2019)

However, it must be noted that while the theoreticians of Populism have generally envisaged that the Populism will come as a movement to challenge the power that be, which is hegemonistic, in 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 is a crucial instrument by which the government manage Post-Colonial society? Also, are welfare measures are necessary ingredients on which Populist Politics sit? What happens when Populist movements are faced with the challenge from the organised ideology based movements? Referring to the growing allurements of Populist Politics, Ranabir Samaddar observes: "May be it is too early to theorise as to what is the Social Populism in India, but one needs to understand that a range of Politics and Politicians are now dubbed as belonging to the broad category called Populist. It may become a dominant feature of politics in Post-colonial society."

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. Perhaps, this is what Chantal Mouffe calls a 'Populist Moment'. She 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). 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). 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 hundred 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).

Initially, Raman Singh's declared position was that Naxalite movement would be contained, if not eliminated, soon.

Two prong approach to Naxalism

But after trying the hard line for some years, 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 tribals 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 an all embracing development of tribal life and protection of their land would go a long way to win them back to mainstream.

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 Naxals. 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 Naxals. We are taking our PDS there and are trying to rebuild bridges which were destroyed by them." (The Hindu, 07 August, 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. In 2010, the UPA-2 government at the centre started Integrated Action Programme (IAP). Under this programme additional assistance was provided which initially covered 60 districts in 10 LWE 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 per 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. (Govt. of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, PIB, 4 March, 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.” 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, 12 May, 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 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 practises 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 a driver for his Populist politics.

Competitive Democracy

However, it is to be noted here that Raman Singh’s politics was also played out in the backdrop of competitive democratic practises, 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 promised 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 coming back 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 practises 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. But the farmers were unhappy and one third of the total affected 1707 families refused to take the compensation. 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 specially targeting for the tribal development from Bastar to Suguja.” (Chhattisgarh Jan-Mon, 28 February-06 March, 2019, Hindi).

The baton of Populist Politics has now changed hands, Bhupesh Baghel has replaced Raman Singh. (End)

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