

Populist Politics, New Urban Spectacles and the Idea of the Popular in Contemporary Kolkata

The paper focuses on the contemporary interface of populist politics and visual spectacles, as witnessed in the context of Kolkata under the regime of Trinamool Congress (TMC) headed by Mamata Banerjee. This paper which is a part of my MPhil research work attempts to make an intervention in the analysis of the contemporary modes of populist politics in Kolkata by foregrounding the importance of the field of the 'visual' in the performance of the 'political'. The paper explores how recent modes of governance and populist mobilization techniques in the city under TMC are keenly focused on controlling perception and affective management of the masses, with systematic programs of aesthetic renovation of the city spaces. One of the central arguments of the paper is to use the thematic of the new visual fields of populism to stage the main lines of break from the past forms of populist politics in the city along three main lines, firstly through spreading government drive towards urban beautification schemes. Secondly, through organization of year-round cycle of festivals, and thirdly the unprecedented investment in building a personality cult around a single leader; by suffusing the city spaces with the omnipresent iconography of Chief Minister's face in every government sponsored event and programmes. These are propelled by the logic of appealing to popular taste and capturing the imagination of the people. Drawing on ethnographic research, this paper seeks to analyze how popular urban cultures of leisure, consumption and spectatorship that the current ruling party in Bengal has been offering to the people at large, is trying to create a space for new urban public culture, one that is markedly distinct from the earlier (left) mode of mass-politics in Kolkata. What is the imagination of the 'public' and what are the notions of 'public good' and 'popular taste' that is driving the present investment in the politics of festivities and beautification? The first part of the paper shall offer a detailed fieldwork based case-study of the Laketown and Sreebhumi that has transformed from a postcolonial refugee settlement to an increasingly upmarket locality along the lines of gradual political shifts over the years, wrought by local clubs and backed by the patronage and image of local party leaders in recent years. From this microstudy of a locality the narrative moves to a larger space-the E.M bypass, where it is more directly about the state and the ruling party's capture of public spaces through direct Governmental investments in continuous political signages. It provides a critical intersection of the governmental strategy of populism on the one hand and what can be fundamentally seen as image politics on the other hand, where the 'visual' constantly becomes the performative ground for the 'political'.