

## **Populism and Populist Politics in South Asia with Special Reference to India**

Organised by  
**CALCUTTA RESEARCH GROUP**  
collaboration with  
**ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG SOUTH ASIA**

Date: 12 FEBRUARY 2019  
Venue: Akash Deep Hotel, Kolkata

### **A. Activities:**

A planning meeting on ‘Populism and Populist Politics in South Asia with Special Reference to India’ was held on 12 February 2019 at Hotel Akash Deep, Kolkata. The preparation for the planning meeting was conducted over a period of three months, leading up to the final event. From November 2018 to February 2019, meetings were held to discuss and finalize who the current area specialists are and who would be invited to participate in the planning meeting. Once finalized, invitations were sent out to scholars, of which a total of 31 scholars agreed to participate. The total list of participants is included in the **Appendix II**, which includes a detailed report of the proceedings of the planning meeting. Ajay Gudavarthy, Amit Prakash, Manish Jha, Oishik Sircar and Sumona DasGupta were the outstation participants who agreed to participate in the event. Meetings were held to decide who maybe approached as a contracted researcher and invited to submit a brief abstract for presentation at the Planning Meeting. It was confirmed that three staff researchers including Rajat Roy (Program Co-ordinator), Ria De (Program Associate) and Sibaji Pratim Basu (Researcher) would present their abstracts in addition to at least one contract researcher for which Sumona DasGupta was approached and she agreed. In the next meeting, the overall structure of the planning meeting on populism was decided, what each session would entail and who would be the presenters, moderators and discussants for these sessions. In the following meetings, other logistical details were discussed, including a feasible venue, accommodation options for the outstation participants, travel and food budget, folders, pens, writing pads etc. Outstation participants were mailed about their stay requirements. Hotel Akash Deep was finalized

as the venue and for boarding. Flight tickets were booked for outstation participants. Abstracts were received from Sumona DasGupta, Rajat Roy, Sibaji Pratim Basu and Ria De, and the final schedule was circulated to all the participants. **Appendix III** contains the abstracts submitted for presentation at the Planning Meeting. **Appendix I** includes the final program schedule and the structure of the Planning Meeting, and specifications about the presenters, discussants and moderators. Researchers of the project presented their abstracts and received valuable feedback. The themes of 'gender', 'judicial populism', 'populism and the private', 'policies' and 'institutions' were suggested as prominent issues on which CRG should continue to work this year and beyond. Possibilities of institutional collaborations was discussed with JNU, New Delhi; Jamia Milia Islamia University, New Delhi; OP Jindal Global University, Sonapat; Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai; Sarojini Naidu College for Women, Kolkata; PRIA, New Delhi; NUJS, Kolkata; Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata and Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. Publications through newspaper articles, readers, journal volumes and other non-traditional forms via the internet such as podcasts, blogs etc.

**B. Challenges in conducting the activities (only in case of deviation)**

None

**C. Deviation from the planned activities (if any)**

None

**D. Activities planned for the next two months**

Work on the website section on populism with detailed bibliography and references to scholarly as well as non-scholarly work on populism. Section design is to be finalised. A visual repertoire of populist slogans in South Asia is to be collected towards a digital representation on the CRG website.

**Appendix I**

**Populism and Populist Politics in South Asia with Special Reference to India**

**Planning Meeting**

**12 February 2019**

**11:00 am-11:30 am: Registration and Tea**

**11:30 am-11:45 am: Welcome Address**

Sibaji Pratim Basu, MCRG, Kolkata

**11:45 am-01:00 pm: General Outline of Project**

Speaker: Ranabir Samaddar and others

Moderator: Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty, MCRG, Kolkata

**01:00 pm-02:00 pm: Lunch**

**02:00 pm-03:30 pm: Discussion of Abstracts and Proposals**

Moderator: Amit Prakash, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and  
MCRG, Kolkata

Speakers: Sumona DasGupta, Independent Researcher, New Delhi

*Political Parties and Populist Policies in Contemporary India:*

*Some Reflections on the Aam Aadmi Party*

Sibaji Pratim Basu, Vidyasagar University and MCRG, Kolkata

*Mamata Banerjee's Populist Politics: 'Crisis' of Democracy?*

Rajat Roy, MCRG, Kolkata

*Populist Initiatives in a Competitive Democracy, Chhattisgarh: A  
Case Study*

Ria De, MCRG, Kolkata

*Mamata Banerjee and the Kanyashree Scheme: Gender and its  
Implications for Gender Politics*

Discussant: Ajay Gudavarthy, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New  
Delhi

**03:30 pm-04:00 pm: Tea**

**04:00 pm-05:30 pm: Discussion on Publications**

Discussant: Paula Banerjee, Sankrit College and University and MCRG,  
Kolkata

## **Appendix II**

### **Populism and Populist Politics in South Asia with Special Reference to India**

#### **Report on Planning Meeting**

**12 February 2019**

**Venue: Hotel Akash Deep**

**48, Circus Avenue,**

**(Near Park Circus)**

**Kolkata-700017**

#### **Participants**

- i. Ajay Gudavarthy (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)
- ii. Amit Prakash (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and MCRG, Kolkata)
- iii. Apala Kundu (MCRG, Kolkata)
- iv. Anup Shekhar Chakrabarty (NIAS, Bangalore)
- v. Arup Kumar Sen (Serampore College and MCRG, Kolkata)
- vi. Ashok Kumar Giri (MCRG, Kolkata)
- vii. Kaustubh Mani Sengupta (Bankura University)

- viii. Madhurilata Basu ( Sarojini Naidu College for Women)
- ix. Maidul Islam (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta)
- x. Manish Jha (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai and MCRG, Kolkata)
- xi. Monirul Hussain (Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi)
- xii. Nasreen Chowdhory (University of Delhi, New Delhi and MCRG, Kolkata)
- xiii. Oishik Sircar (OP Jindal Global University, Sonipat)
- xiv. Paula Banerjee (Sanskrit College and University and MCRG, Kolkata)
- xv. Prabir Sinha Roy (PIPPFD)
- xvi. Rajat Roy (MCRG, Kolkata)
- xvii. Ranabir Samaddar (MCRG, Kolkata)
- xviii. Ratan Chakrabarty (MCRG, Kolkata)
- xix. Ruchira Goswami (NUJS, Kolkata)
- xx. Ria De (MCRG, Kolkata)
- xxi. Samaresh Guchhait (MCRG, Kolkata)
- xxii. Shatabdi Das (MCRG, Kolkata)
- xxiii. Shyamalendu Majumder (Sivanath Sastri College and MCRG, Kolkata)
- xxiv. Sibaji Pratim Basu (Vidya sagar University and MCRG, Kolkata)
- xxv. Soumen Mukherjee (Presidency University, Kolkata)
- xxvi. Subhashree Rout (MCRG, Kolkata)
- xxvii. Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty (MCRG, Kolkata)
- xxviii. Subir Bhaumik (MCRG, Kolkata)
- xxix. Sumona DasGupta (Independent Researcher)
- xxx. V. Ramaswamy (Howard's City Pilot Project)
- xxxi. Aditi Mukherjee (MCRG, Kolkata)

**Session I: 11:30 am- 11:45 am****Welcome Address: Sibaji Pratim Basu, Vidyasagar University and MCRG, Kolkata**

The welcome address was delivered by Sibaji Pratim Basu of the Calcutta Research Group.

**Session II: 11:45 am-01:00 pm****General Outline of Project****Moderator: Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty, MCRG, Kolkata****Speaker: Ranabir Samaddar, MCRG, Kolkata**

Following a brief welcome address to the participants of the Planning Meeting, **Sibaji Pratim Basu** introduced the first session on the general outline of the Project on Populism and Populist Politics in South Asia with Special Reference and welcomed the resource persons and participants attending the meeting. The session was moderated by **Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty**. He introduced **Ranabir Samaddar** as the one to lead the discussion on the general outline of the project to be followed by inputs and ideas from all participants. Ranabir Samaddar started by giving a background of the Popular Movements project conducted by CRG during the years 2016-2018. The period of research covered the popular movements in India during the years 1951-1971. The popular movements research project and the publications that emerged from it form the background to the proposed research on populism. Samaddar specifies that although the project at present is designated for a period of one year, it would be productive to continue the work beyond the given time period. He goes on to raise and respond to the question, “Why is it important to work on populism in the present context?” Given that there are not enough Indian books on populism, the research needs to begin by looking at what populism would mean? Internationally also, except the research done by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, there is not enough theoretical work on populism or left wing populism, which has been read widely by European English speaking left-wing students and activists. Samaddar goes on to talk about how critiques of populist politics, such as Subir Sinha,

characterise populism as a mode of politics where hard stands are not taken or avoided, thereby dismissing the possibility at all of a left wing populism. One of the reasons therefore, Samaddar argued, for CRG to take up a project on populism was not so much to study the possibilities of left wing populism, but given the global interest in populism, to explore the scope and peculiarities of right wing populism in India. Is there therefore an organic connection between popular politics and populist politics in India? Is there something intrinsic in popular politics that develops in to populist politics or is in some sense is populist politics a form of popular politics? While it maybe the case that popular politics developed in Bengal and metamorphosed in to the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s, or on the other hand, Bihar as a site of populist politics during the time of JP Narayan, there is some kind of amnesia which has prevented the study of populism in both the colonial and postcolonial times, simultaneously admitting that there maybe discontinuities between the two. Samaddar argues that Marx stated during his time that it was then that the world in some senses was experiencing populism for the first time. People have also commented on Lenin's oscillating attitude towards populism. Samaddar goes on to comment on the Russian and Argentinian leftists and their historical relationship with populism and populist politics. He then turns to the South Asian instances of populism, citing first from Pakistan and the rise of the People's Party under Bhutto's leadership and then Fajlul Haque's agrarian populism in Bengal and finally Indira Gandhi's 20 point program in India. Samaddar further argues that the combination of authoritarianism and populism has been remarkable, and that populism has been highly suspicious of the ways in which democracy arrives. The significant mark of populism has been that there should be no intermediary between the people and the state; that the so-called representative institutions do not represent people. The people therefore, as the right wing, would say have the right to communicate directly with god. Samaddar then points to the possible religious basis of populism since almost religions across the world mandate a direct a relationship between people and their god. Popular movements on the other hand have shown a consistent distrust with popular leaders, and several prior researchers from CRG have worked on this. The innate suspicion then of the whole repertoire of representation is something that connects popular movements and populism.

One of the approaches to populism would be to study its theoretical contours, while the other would be to take a more historical approach. Samaddar asks, if it would then be important to go back to the history of populist movements and study populist rhetoric and the ways of mobilising people? Further questions then can be raised about whether populism is then an ensemble of practices or is there an ideological core to populism? What are the kind of stakes in taking either of the two approaches. If populism is called an ideology, then one has to show how it has historically taken the shape of an ideology? On the other hand, one can draw on historical, religious, familial and other sources to study the patterns of populism? Then one can look at the commonality of these set of practices and term them as populism. Therefore, it is immaterial whether populism can be used by the right wing or the left wing. What is more important, especially for the project would be to identify these basic set of practices etc. The project at this point is open to either of these routes being taken towards the study of populism.

Samaddar stated that the number of papers to be worked on will range from 2-3. One of the primary aspects to study would be the trajectories of populism in South Asia and a general background to the contemporary or present history of populism in South Asia. Other thing that needs to be looked at more vigorously has to do with what is said about populist governments in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka or Bihar etc. Samaddar pointed out that these concerns were the basis for Sumona DasGupta being invited to work on her research on AAP in Delhi. He insisted that instead of looking at the one year time period as a limitation, researchers should approach the problematic of populism on more conceptual terms.

Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty then took over from Samaddar as moderator of the session and summed up the main points that the latter covered ie left wing movements to personalities to practices to rational basis of the variety of populism. Following this, the session was opened up to participants for discussion and their opinions.

**Maidul Islam** agreed with Samaddar that there could be two broad themes of research on populism; that of the history of political mobilisation, and another could be that a post-Laclau kind of research on populism. He added that there was a need to look at state populism. In a post-Laclau context,



what needs to be addressed is the ways in which a populist party, once it forms its government, sustains its politics. This is something that Laclau does not address at all. One could take the example of the Biju Janata Dal which sustained its rule for 20 years, as well as the kind of politics practiced by Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal. He further stressed that existing literature does not look at aspects of state populism.

**Manish Jha** stated that one of the important understandings of populism entails that there is a dismissal of the intermediary between the people and the constituent institutions. He went on to add another layer in terms of the strategies that a populist leader uses to undermine intermediary structures, and what is the nature of these structures? For instance, what did Indira Gandhi do to her own party in order to become a populist leader? What then a chief minister do to his own political party is also part of the process of undermining of structures of democratic governance? How are these structures replaced by another kind of structure which allows populist politics to continue and thrive? Samaddar responded to Jha that such an issue maybe addressed through a study of the historical nature of the political parties that function in India. Manish Jha further added that one needs to look at what constitutes the normative forms of party structures in India, and then find the contestations within that.

**Amit Prakash** added to the discussion by citing Alain Badiou's notion of creative subversion. Then he went on to state that one should steer away from making value judgements about whether populist movements and politics are good or bad. But one should still needs to address the unease that remains with populist politics. There is a time in democratic practice when something happens and the institutions collapse, and a direct invocation takes place in terms of the leadership and the constituents. Why does this happen is something that we need to address? Is there then something in the liberal script which gives rise to populism from the left, right or centre? He pointed to a second issue whereby a large amount of writing on populist politics is averse to talking about social movements. One also needs to look at the ways in which populism has challenged the liberal script. A third question, Jha raised was about the ways in which the liberal script gained legitimacy if not through popular movements, and if that is accepted then how do we go about defining populism?

**Sumona DasGupta** talked about her thoughts on populism, especially beyond the existing value judgements. She asked what then is the difference between populism and popular movements? She warned against the anarchic tendency in the understanding and definition of populism. She mentioned four clusters of ideas around which populism has been used which were populism as ideology (as already suggested by Samaddar), populism as a movement or an organisation, populism as a policy orientation and populism as a form of communication or as a form of discursive politics. The notion of an unfairly advantaged elite vs the masses remains at the centre of understandings of populist politics. In such a situation, the understandings of populism becomes too vague or amorphous. Looking at as a discursive style will perhaps give populism as an analytical significance, which we would not otherwise get if we look at it in terms of only ideology.

**Nasreen Chowdhury** stressed on the need to look at populism in terms of practices, and the fact that even within practice-oriented studies, the classic example of Dravidian movements remains under-studied. She cited the Sri Lankan case and the one in Bangladesh as examples where the critical study of the practice of populism may be studied. The study of practices will be the only way in which one can understand if there is an ideological core to populism or if there is a continuity in terms of practices across political parties.

**Ruchira Goswami** asked questions about the nature of the ongoing project and whether it would divest from the study of popular collective movements. Her primary question was about the scope of the project and the time period it is focusing on etc.

**Oishik Sircar**, in his discussion, took two cues from Samaddar's speech; firstly, that populism is an ensemble of practices and the suggestion that that ensemble is a form of communication. He went on to ask a question whether there was a way to bring about the question of the private in populism in the sense of how a common sense language emerges in the private, and the kind of pedagogical training that happens in the private. He also gave the example of *Sananda*, the women's magazine and the role it played in building a certain kind of a populist feminine common sense in the private space. He stated that although there was some kind of indeterminacy in the way that the word populism is used, the one critical area where the thinking and use of the word populism is judicial

populism. He gave instances of various litigation movements where we see a certain kind of return of a certain kind of judicial populism under conditions that we would otherwise not consider to be not progressive or liberal enough. In 2018 for instance, three landmark judgements were passed in India; decriminalising section 377, the criminalisation of Triple Talaq and the Sabari Mala judgement. Sircar then raised the question of how the judiciary responds to the expectations that come its way. He pointed to shifts in Public Interest Litigation. In response to Samaddar's question about populism and the private or the familial space, Oishik Sircar added that the private space is possibly one with the least amount of intermediation, so the pedagogical practices in the private space are more intimate and far less adversarial within the family space.

**Arup Sen** spoke about the possibility of defining populism as an ideology at the discursive level. While talking about populism as a set of practices or a movement, it would be difficult to distinguish between what is a popular element and what would be a populist element? He felt that it would be problematic to define populism as a set of practices because one would have to begin by making a distinction between what are the specific practices of the left movement and what are the specific practices of the right wing etc. Sen pointed out that the subversion of institutions was one of the most important aspects of populist politics but questions maybe raised about whether those institutions actually worked or even if the governments could function. If one takes the government as a practice, then the distinction between the popular and the populist would be blurred. What then is the basis of saying that intermediary institutions are being subverted more spectacularly under the populist regime? Arup Sen pointed out the need to understand that institutions have been subverted long back.

**Kaustabh Mani Sengupta** made a brief comment about the scale of populist movements. He pointed out that the movements cited in the discussion were largely very local or regional, and that there may be a need to go back to the earlier decades or centuries, and think of populist movements that are national or transnational, thereby extending beyond the regional. Sengupta's second point was about the specific nature of populist movements; whether they are about language or identity or religion. How then does one analyse the idea of religion and how it becomes imbricated in

articulating state power. In doing so one acknowledges that religion has become a very important driving force in Indian politics.

**Rajat Roy**, as the next speaker, talked about how one can arrive at the difference between the ideology of a populist state and the ideology of a welfare state.

**Ajay Gudavarthy** contributed to the discussion by focusing on policies and what makes them populist. Such policies always existed, given that different kinds of populism always existed in India beginning from peasant populism. He added that populist politics has something to do with a certain kind of flexibilization of social hierarchies. Without a sociology of caste, religion and region, there would not be much sense in talking about populism in the current context. The question to be asked then would be about how populist policies make flexible certain kinds of social hierarchies. Categories such as social psychology and political emotions are required to understand what is so fundamentally different about the current moment of populist movement. That could be a common focus of the project and be an original contribution to the project.

The discussion then came to **Soumen Mukherjee** who talked about the need to look at some of the populist accounts from the colonial and premodern times. It would be relevant to understand how during this time religion does become an ideology. Europe is cited as an important example to understand the historical significance of religion and religious studies. What then constitutes religion? According to him, it would be important to understand how religion and ideology feed in to each other, and that would throw light on what is happening in the postcolonial times. One also needs to look at what emerges out of the dynamics between religious faith and ideology and how do they articulate themselves.

**Madhurilata Basu** referred to welfare regimes in India as a form of populist regime. She talked about the works about Jayalalitha, Mamata etc. that have shed light on how populist and welfare regimes go together.

**Monirul Hussain** pointed out that the discussion on populist movement was limited primarily to a national level. He was however more concerned about Assam and other smaller areas, where the movement is absolutely different from what is happening in the rest of India, where it is tending

more towards identity. The multiplicity of movements in Assam, Mizoram and Manipur need to be understood. It would also be important if CRG commissions a research to that effect, writing a paper at least on one specific movement.

**Maidul Islam** pointed out at a singular confusion at the conceptual level in relation to the understanding of populism. Populism can be regarded as an ideology or a set of discursive practices as discussed earlier. However, one common theme in Laclau-Ian point of view is that it is a strategy of political mobilization. So if it is a strategy of political mobilization, and that that should be taken in to account.

**Ranabir Samaddar** concluded the discussion with a few comments about the challenges facing such a research. It would entail taking all the points discussed in the session into account. One of the things to take into account would be the varying scales of the different movements.

#### **02:00 pm -03:30 pm: Discussion of Abstracts and Proposals**

**Moderator:Amit Prakash, JNU, Delhi**

**Discussant:Ajay Gudavarthy, JNU, Delhi**

The post-lunch session entailed a discussion of the themes and ideas that the researchers involved in the project proposed to study and reflect upon.

#### **Sumona DasGupta: Political Parties and Populist Policies in Contemporary India: Some Reflections on the Aam Aadmi Party**

Sumona DasGupta's paper proposed to move away from a value laden understanding of populism as an ideology and stay with an understanding that resonates the most easily with an Indian context - namely any policy that is redistributive in nature and as such favours the common person particularly those in subordinate positions over the elite typically represented by large business and financial interests. She argued that the contrast between the people and elite in terms of strategies, movements, policies, organization is perhaps the only way the term populism can retain its analytical usefulness without getting bogged down in polemical discussions as to whether populist

movements/policies represent the ideological right or the left, whether it is authoritarian or democratic in its origin, whether it represents a movement or simply a discursive style. Her presentation will examine selected populist policies launched in contemporary India by a party that grew out of a popular movement against corruption namely the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) which by its very name creates an implicit contrast between the ‘people’ and the elite. By focusing on some of its key populist policies, DasGupta seeks to gain a deeper understanding of how a movement “for the people” transitioned into a political party which then had to make policies that were seen to be pro “aam aadmi” and what this populism implies in terms of democratic decision making and longer term impacts on the economic and political front.

### **Sibaji Pratim Basu: Mamata Banerjee’s Populist Politics: ‘Crisis’ of Democracy?**

In light of the 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 Commissioner of Police and the subsequent *dharna* to ‘Save Constitution’ at ‘Metro Channel’, Esplanade – the heart of Kolkata by the Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, Sibaji Pratim Basu argued that a deep concern for the ‘crisis of democratic institutions’ was expressed all across the nation. Indeed, the populist politics in South Asia in general and the last 7 years’ rule of Mamata in West Bengal (with popular programmes like ‘Kanyashree’ for girl students, ‘Sabujspathi – cycles for students of backward classes, rice at Rs. 2/kg through PDS schemes for peasants, folk artists, artisans, fisher folk; donations to youth clubs etc) has pushed further the sacred boundaries of conventional liberal democracy in such a way that it demands the insights and labour of social scientists to grasp adequately the meanings and connotations of such politics, which cannot be even fully comprehended by the spectacles of Ernesto Laclau alone. Such ‘new’ politics also raises a host of questions - What are the limits of such politics? Does its failure ensure the return of the ‘traditional’ politics? Even if that happens, can the champions of ‘traditional’ politics abandon the contents of populist politics in entirety? - which Basu proposes to grapple with in his paper.

### **Rajat Roy: Populist initiatives in a Competitive Democracy Chhattisgarh: A Case Study**

By undertaking a case study of the populist politics – reformation of the Public Distribution System and other programmes benefitting the poor - engaged in by the Raman Singh government in the state of Chhattisgarh, between 2003 and 2019, and their recent loss to the Congress in the 2019 state assembly election, this paper will look at some of the following questions on the subject of populism in Chhattisgarh and their implications - Is populist politics more likely to give rise to competitive bidding by the contending parties in a democracy? What is the difference between a populist measure and a welfare initiative? How does one draw a line between these two? Does it mean that only those welfare schemes are tagged as ‘Populist’ that targeted to address the poor people’s concerns? Also, what was the relationship between the Raman Singh government’s so-called populist measures and the growing threat of Maoist initiative in the region?

**Ria De: The Kanyashree and Rupashree Schemes: Gender and its Implications for Populist Politics**

This research will study the ways in which gender is configured by the Mamata Banerjee government in West Bengal *vis-a-vis* two governmental schemes – the Kanyashree scheme that was introduced in 2013, and the Rupashree scheme which was rolled out last year. Both Kanyashree and Rupashree are conditional cash transfer schemes; in the first instance, the government promises an annual grant of Rs. 1000/- for girl children below the age of 18, and a consolidated amount of Rs 25,000/- to women above the age of 18. In either case, whether the girls are above or below the age of 18, the condition remains that they should be unmarried and that their family income should be below Rs 1.5 lakhs per annum. In the second instance, the Rupashree scheme promises a sum of Rs 25000/- for the marriage of women above the age of 18. While the Kanyashree scheme aims to enable the empowerment of women through education, Rupashree directly links women’s lives to the question of marriage.

Taking the Kanyashree and the Rupashree as possible case studies to understand the ways in which the story of gender is being plotted within a populist project, De wishes to study these in relation to the various other “women’s rights” governmental schemes in contemporary India, for instance, the

“Beti Bachao Andolan”, the various other schemes undertaken by the Ministry of Child and Women’s Development, such as the National Database of Sex Offenders, the linking of women’s medical histories to their Aadhar accounts as a means to control female foeticide etc. Given that the Kanyashree and Rupashree projects have very contradictory goals in terms of women’s lives, one that posits education as a means to prevent child marriage, while the other claims to ease the poor man’s burden of marrying his daughter, De proposes to look into how they relate to more historical, social problems related to women’s lives and upbringing; such as the entanglement of marriage and family with women’s subjectivities and the positing of education in opposition to that. How does one really address the problems raised by caste and patriarchy through such schemes or does it in fact negotiate with it?

### **Discussion:**

**Ajay Gudavarthy** began the discussion by stating that the policies being discussed are by themselves not populist. We have had always such policies since our post-independence days – community development programmes, poverty eradication programmes. Why call them populist at all, he questioned. Populism would mean that these policies are invested in certain narratives, certain strategies of mobilization that are very distinct. Gudavarthy suggested that to study these policies in themselves would not be enough; they would have to be placed in narratives of certain strategies, slogans, modes of communication, new kinds of faultlines, new kinds of polarisations and interrelations with other political parties. One must look at a range of variables, since one of the most significant aspects of populism is its heterogeneity. About DasGupta’s paper, Gudavarthy commented that both the AAP and the right-wing BJP’s mobilization strategies were populist. Considering this, he suggested that it would be interesting to look at why the BJP is so antagonistic towards AAP, and the conflicts between the two. The notion of unmediated direct democracy has its own complexities. In one interview, Arvind Kejriwal himself admitted that his participation in the direct *dharna*, where he was signing files sitting on the Parliament streetgave a cultural shock to Delhi. There is a certain conflict and overlap of meanings when it comes to questions of populism.



For example, when Kejriwal resigned after 49 days, many thought that he was being honest, but many viewed it as a dereliction of duty and responsibility. Populism thus throws up multiple meanings. Referencing Sibaji Pratim Basu's paper, Gudavarthy reads it as delving into how populism works in the space between the regional and the national. In Indian imagination, the spatial imagination has been very important regarding how democracy works. In a recent study conducted by the Azim Premji University on trust in institutions, it was found that most people have least trust on local institutions and place higher levels of trust in institutions that they never see. The BJP has very successfully exploited this disconnect between the local, regional and the national, one of the reasons why there is no opposition against them. Right wing politics displays a better understanding of what can translate into a national discourse, a regional or a local one. Basu's paper, Gudavarthy claimed, would be able to sufficiently problematise the interrelations between populism and spatial politics. Drawing attention to Rajat Ray's paper, Gudavarthy explained how policy framework itself has a right-wing polarizing agenda and therefore, policy is not independent of this kind of faultline drawing that is being discussed. All the policy frameworks of this Raman Singh government under discussion is about defining who is a citizen, who is eligible for a policy. Liberal notions of procedures have produced an exclusion, and the right-wing is being very aggressive about these exclusions. If one looks at the policy structure of the right-wing, one sees it is open-ended. The principle on which the policy is implemented is never really fleshed out. For instance, the policy dealing with autonomy of universities. The BJP are critiquing liberal universality for exclusion but are also using that critique to create new kinds of exclusion based on nationalist networks. This again has a strange purchase for the subaltern, because they were the ones who were excluded. To look at the populist politics in Chhattisgarh through the optics of exclusion would contribute to the paper greatly. Another question that the paper could explore, suggests Gudavarthy, is the reluctance of the BJP in engaging with agrarian populism. Finally, with respect to Ria De's paper, he stated that though it was exploring a new area, the links between gender and populism would have to be more explicitly discussed. The social content of the Kanyashree and Rupashree schemes need to be studied. What kind of narrative structures are they

really part of? One of the reasons behind the rise in women-centric schemes is that post-2000, we are witnessing the emergence of women as an independent constituency like caste, regional identity. Gudavarthy ended with the claim that populism in the Indian context is also about creating new social and political constituencies, and how BJP, through their policies, as in the triple *talaq* issue, is upturning the notion of who is a minority in India.

**Oishik Sircar** responded to Ria De's presentation with suggestions of literature on state feminism, literature on carceral feminism and on governance feminism, the last two being offshoots of state feminism.

**Maidul Islam** commented that the popularity of Mamata Banerjee among the masses must be seen in the context of the larger crisis of liberal democracy, and the larger crisis of neoliberal economics. There was a continuity from the Congress regime and the Left Front regime. Briefly during the Indira Gandhi interregnum, there was a suspension of institutions and then the Left Front normalized it. It is when the CPI(M) was hegemonized by the neo-liberal economy that Mamata popularity begins to rise. It with such populist policies like Kanyashree and Rupashree, as Ria suggested, that her popularity is sustained. Islam points out how the degree of identification with the populist leader varies with different categories of women. The lack of intermediaries supports her popularity.

**Amit Prakash** raised the issue of how identity, which is relevant to the question of populism, often gets couched only in economic terms.

**Nasreen Chowdhory** stressed on the need to establish some framework about the parameters of what is populist policy, what is a welfare scheme, and what is populism. She also expressed her discomfort with the phrase 'crisis of democracy'. About the Chhattisgarh question, Chowdhory comments that the term period becomes important. This is because with a government coming back to power for three consecutive terms, there are chances of policies becoming populist. The evolution aspect of these populist narratives must be studied carefully. When the policies transform the lives of lives, then they take on the populist character. Finally, regarding Ria De's presentation,

she emphasizes that in viewing the Kanyashree and Rupashree schemes as populist, one stands a chance of neglecting the way in which they have benefitted the masses.

#### **Session IV: 04:00 pm- 05:30 pm**

#### **Discussion on Publications**

#### **Moderator: Paula Banerjee, Sanskrit College and University, and MCRG, Kolkata**

The final session of the day involved a discussion on the possible modes of publications on populism. The discussant **Paula Banerjee** of the Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata and MCRG, Kolkata stated that gender is an important factor that needs to be taken into consideration for CRG's current project on populism. Given that one of the proposed abstracts on populism by a staff researcher already raises questions about the ways in which gender and women in particular are mobilised by populist politics in West Bengal, CRG will work on a reader on populism where one of the thematic sections should be dedicated to research articles on gender. Paula Banerjee further suggested the possibility of a reader on populism similar to the one produced by MCRG for the Popular Movements project, titled *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade*. She also stressed the need for a dedicated section on "gender and populism". She added that at least four publications on populism may be published in the *Policies and Practices* series, including those by two staff researchers and two contracted researchers. She added that CRG must explore the scope of non-traditional forms of publications such as web publishing, web-based journals, pod casts, webinars etc. where short form and current deliberations on populism may be regularly published and updated. While adding to Paula Banerjee's suggestions, **Ranabir Samaddar** from CRG talked about CRG's earlier association with popular journals, in particular *Anustup Potrika* and practices of translating CRG publications in to Hindi for wider circulation and dissemination. He then suggested that the scope of public writing and circulation in the form of newspaper articles, Hindi translations, contributions to the journal *Anustup Potrika* can also be explored. Following the opening up of the discussion to other participants of the session, possible themes of research in relation to populism and populist politics were suggested. **Maidul Islam**

committed to contributing a paper on populism. **Oishik Sircar** from OP Jindal suggested themes such as private space and populism, populism and the university curriculum and juridical populism, all of which were found to be important for the current considerations on populism. Samaddar suggested CRG engage with how populism has been represented in the popular domain and thereby look at the integral relationship between the popular and populism. trajectories of Indian populism etc. A plan was made for CRG to contact interested contributors for articles for the proposed reader. Banerjee tentatively finalised a deadline of two months i.e. till mid-May to acquire 1000-word abstracts from interested contributors. Participants proposed the possibility of liaisons with law institutes and legal scholars who could contribute to the research theme on “Juridical Populism”. Oishik Sircar agreed to work towards contacting legal scholars and publications towards finding interested contributors for the theme of juridical populism. The possibilities of institutional collaborations between MCRG and TISS, Jamia Milia Islamia, JNU, Sarojini Naidu College for Women, PRIA, OP Jindal and Sanskrit University were discussed with participants of respective affiliations. **Manish Jha, Monirul Islam, Amit Prakash and Ajay Gudavarthy, Madhurilata Basu, Sumona DasGupta, Oishik Sircar and Paula Banerjee** tentatively agreed to act as liaisons between CRG and their respective institutions towards materialising different modes of intellectual collaborations such as conferences, workshops, public lectures, extension lectures etc. The limits of intellectual and logistical contributions from each of these institutions was also deliberated upon. Samaddar stated that it would be very impactful if keeping in mind the upcoming national elections, CRG could contact EPW to host a special issue on contemporary populist politics. Further, journals such as Seminar and the Routledge Indian Law Review were suggested by participants as possible platforms for publications on the Populism project.

## **Appendix II**

### **Abstracts Presented at the Planning Meeting**

#### **1. Political Parties and Populist Policies in Contemporary India: Some Reflections on the Aam Aadmi Party**

**Sumona DasGupta**

There appears to be little definitional clarity around the term populism. Though the use of this term has proliferated in the last decade, in common parlance there appears to be a pejorative connotation associated with it and mixed views about how populism is connected with democracy and democratic institutions. In this paper we move away from a value laden understanding of populism as an ideology and stay with an understanding that resonates the most easily with an Indian context - namely any policy that is redistributive in nature and as such favours the common person particularly those in subordinate positions over the elite typically represented by large business and financial interests. The contrast between the people and elite in terms of strategies, movements, policies, organization is perhaps the only way the term populism can retain its analytical usefulness without getting bogged down in polemical discussions as to whether populist movements/policies represent the ideological right or the left, whether it is authoritarian or democratic in its origin, whether it represents a movement or simply a discursive style. This presentation will examine selected populist policies launched in contemporary India by a party that grew out of a popular movement against corruption namely the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) which by its very name creates an implicit contrast between the ‘people’ and the elite. By focusing on some of its key populist policies we seek to gain a deeper understanding of how a movement “for the people” transitioned into a political party which then had to make policies that were seen to be pro “aam aadmi” and what this populism implies in terms of democratic decision making and longer term impacts on the economic and political front.

## 2. Mamata Banerjee's Populist Politics: 'Crisis' of Democracy?

Sibaji Pratim Basu

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 and the subsequent *dharna* to 'Save Constitution' at 'Metro Channel', Esplanade – the heart of Kolkata by the Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee and then holding of cabinet meetings in a makeshift office room beside the platform of *dharna* have startle, if not shocked a large number of people throughout the country. Mamata's *style* of politics and administration once again consumed the prime times of national/regional news channels, hit the headlines of all the dailies and was in most circulation in all forms of social media – Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. In this nationwide discourse – apart from allegations and counter-allegations over the 'hyperactive' CBI and the 'resisting' WB Police (which detained the CBI officers and even temporarily besieged the latter's office buildings) – a deep concern for the 'crisis of democratic institutions' was also expressed. The 'purists' decried the holding of cabinet meetings and official programmes on street as the instances of supreme disrespect to the long cherished democratic norms and practices. In a recent editorial, *Ananada Bazar Patrika*, while giving a lefthanded compliment to Mamata's tit-for-tat politics over Modi's highhandedness has also treated it as 'defeat of democracy'.

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.

Indeed, the populist politics in South Asia in general and the last 7 years' rule of Mamata in West Bengal (with popular programmes like 'Kanyashree' for girl students, 'Sabujsathi – cycles for students of backward classes, rice at Rs. 2/kg through PDS schemes for peasants, folk artists, artisans, fisher folk; donations to youth clubs etc) has pushed further the sacred boundaries of conventional liberal democracy in such a way that it demands the insights and labour of social scientists to grasp adequately the meanings and connotations of such politics, which cannot be even fully comprehended by the spectacles of Ernesto Laclau alone. Such 'new' politics also raises a host of questions. What are the limits of such politics? Does its failure ensure the return of the 'traditional' politics? Even if that happens, can the champions of 'traditional' politics abandon the contents of populist politics in entirety?

### **3. Populist initiatives in a competitive Democracy, Chhattisgarh: A Case Study**

**Rajat Roy**

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 resources-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 'Antyoday' 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? (End)

#### **4. The Kanyashree and Rupashree Schemes: Gender and its Implications for Populist Politics**

**Ria De**

This research will study the ways in which gender is configured by the Mamata Banerjee government in West Bengal vis a vis two governmental schemes, first the Kanyashree scheme that was introduced in 2013, and for which Mamata Banerjee won the UN Public Service Award in 2013, and the later Rupashree scheme which was rolled out last year. Both Kanyashree and Rupashree are conditional cash transfer schemes; in the first instance, the government promises an annual grant of Rs. 1000/- for girl children below the age of 18, and a consolidated amount of Rs 25,000/- to women above the age of 18. In either case, whether the girls are above or below the age of 18, the condition remains that they should be unmarried and that their family income should be below Rs 1.5 lakhs per annum. In the second instance, the Rupashree scheme promises a sum of Rs 25000/- for the marriage of women above the age of 18. While the Kanyashree scheme aims to enable the empowerment of women through education, Rupashree directly links women’s lives to the question of marriage.

Taking the Kanyashree and the Rupashree as possible case studies to understand the ways in which the story of gender is being plotted within a populist project, I wish to study these in relation to the various other ‘‘women’s rights’’ governmental schemes in contemporary India, for instance, the ‘‘Beti Bachao Andolan’’, the various other schemes undertaken by the Ministry of Child and Women’s Development, such as the National Database of Sex Offenders, the linking of women’s medical histories to their Aadhar accounts as a means to control female foeticide etc.

Such a study would require me to look at what the scheme is claiming to achieve in terms of their impact on women's lives in specific and in terms of a social transformation in general. What for instance is the basis of these schemes; what is the relationship between the scheme and the social reality? What kinds of research goes in to the formulation of such monetary plan? What is the constitution of the committees? It would then be interesting to look at the bureaucratic-administrative processes. Given that the Kanyashree and Rupashree projects have very contradictory goals in terms of women's lives, one that posits education as a means to prevent child marriage, while the other claims to ease the poor man's burden of marrying his daughter, how do they relate to more historical, social problems related to women's lives and upbringing; such as the entanglement of marriage and family with women's subjectivities and the positing of education in opposition to that. How does one really address the problems raised by caste and patriarchy through such schemes or does it in fact negotiate with it?