

Populist Politics and Electoral Democracy: A Study of Mamata Banerjee

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Abstract

One crucial factor behind Mamata Banerjee's enormous success in the landmark 2011 assembly election in West Bengal has undoubtedly been her populist style of functioning. In this paper I examine whether her politics can be labelled as a pathological political phenomenon or as an authentic form of political representation. I try and locate the element of 'the people' and see how she maintains a fine balance between the heterogeneous interests surrounding it juxtaposed against legitimacy and accountability. Lastly I analyse the possibility of ushering of certain self-imposed qualifications and limitations within the larger ambit of her populist style of functioning.

Keywords: Populism, Democracy, the people, Neo-liberal, Legitimacy

1. Introduction

The 2011 assembly election in West Bengal was a landmark in the political history of not only the state of West Bengal but of the country as a whole. The longest serving Left regime collapsed after thirty-four years and the main force behind this has been the fiery politician named Mamata Banerjee. That she had achieved massive personal popularity was clearly demonstrated by the high endorsement at the elections and the scenes of public acclaim. Behind this massive success of Mamata Banerjee one of her characteristics which according to many have done the wonders is her populist style of functioning. Her coming to power has clearly demonstrated the fact that populism is no more a marginal phenomenon in the world of politics. Two images of populism are well-established: it is either labelled as a pathological political phenomenon, or it is regarded as the most authentic form of political representation (Kaltwasser, 2012). I will try and explore in the following pages as to which of the above mentioned images fits into Mamata Banerjee's scheme of politics.

2. Politics of Redistribution Vis-à-vis Antagonism

With the coming of Mamata Banerjee to power there has been an effort to redefine the way power is distributed along the various spectres. What makes a politics 'populist' is not a particular, definable set of values or a particular social, political or economic programme but rather an antagonism to existing orthodoxies, to elite values and to the existing hierarchies governing the way in which power is organised and distributed (Vincent, 2011). The entire political career of Mamata Banerjee has been a proof to the fact that she has had this growing antagonism towards the various political formations active in the state. Even the formation of her political party has been the resultant effect of this

sense of antagonism. The parallel growing sense of antagonism among the common masses especially the middle class and the rural folk because of their own set of reasons ultimately provided her with the golden opportunity to successfully take the fight against the ruling political class to a culminating stage. We need to understand the fact that Mamata Banerjee's embracing populism is not merely an act of opportunism but is rather a response to social demand. She may have been opportunist but the fact remains that there would not have been any scope for this opportunistic behaviour had there not been a social demand for it. The logic and pattern of neo-liberal development (to which the Left Front regime had fallen for in the last leg of its rule) had over the time created a large section of under-privileged and neglected people. The social demand was basically an articulation of their hopes and grievances. One of the important aspects involved with this entire movement is the important idea of revival of democratic norms and practices. Goodwyn views Populism not as a moment of triumph, but as a moment of "democratic promise." To further use his words it was a 'spirit of egalitarian hope'.

It was a demonstration of how people of a society ... could generate their own culture of democratic aspiration in order to challenge the received culture of democratic hierarchy. The agrarian revolt demonstrated how intimidated people could create for themselves the psychological space ... to be autonomous in the presence of powerful new institutions of economic concentration and cultural regimentation. ... The Populists believed they could work together to be free individually (Goodwyn, 1976).

With the ushering of the movement and ultimately taking an overt form in the forms of Nandigram and Singur struggles, the entity called 'people' went through a psychological transformation. By working together and challenging the status quo, they began to sense their power and in the process gained self-confidence and self-respect. In recent times there has been an interesting development whereby this newly emergent sense of self-confidence has been neatly intertwined with the politics of redistribution by Mamata Banerjee. Through her signature style of conducting politics she has successfully provided a significant political space to a large section of earlier neglected population in the state. This includes members of certain caste and religious groups. In the recent past she has exhibited substantial political maturity by going out of the way to invite people from the Left sympathizing sections to join her party in order to efficiently bar the intrusion of the BJP into the political scene and fabric of the state. Though for some this has been reflective of the opportunistic political line of the Trinamool Congress but many have hailed this as a right step towards bolstering democratic functioning in the state. To use the words of Canovan, the phase just before the coming of Mamata Banerjee to power was

surely a ‘redemptive’ phase of democracy wherein there was an effort to bring democracy in the real sense of the term which was viewed as the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people. Whereas the phase after her ascendancy to the helm of power in the state needs to be ideally a ‘pragmatic’ phase of democracy wherein there should be an effort to cope with conflicting interests and views under conditions of mass mobilization and mass communication. Whether we are going to witness the ‘redemptive’ or ‘pragmatic’ faces of democracy in their exclusivity or a fine mix of both the elements in the politics of Trinamool Congress under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee is something to be seen in the coming days.

3. The Popular Will

According to Di Tella populism is the result of the convergence of two anti-status-quo forces, the dispossessed masses available for mobilization and the educated elite that resents its status incongruence... and broods on ways of changing the current state of things. This is what has happened in West Bengal. From the year 2006 onwards there was this overt express of displeasure by a large section of the rural agricultural class against the policy decisions of the Left Front regime. This ultimately culminated into the fierce clash between the farmers and the government surrounding the issue of industrialisation and land acquisition. Coupled with this was also the long time resentment of the middle class in the state as far as their economic prospects and aspects were concerned. During this phase the people were the legitimising authority behind every action of Mamata Banerjee. The most important rhetorical device employed in a politics of populism is the appeal to ‘the people’ as the legitimising authority for a particular set of ideas (Vincent, 2011). Mamata Banerjee has very tacitly cum tactfully employed the people as the legitimising force for her actions. She has been successful in celebrating this entity called ‘people’ and has juxtaposed this against the elite nature of the Left regime especially in relation to their growing distance with the common masses. For there to be populist leaders, there has to be a people- a widespread belief that the social base of society has a collective will, not simply a variety of individual and group interests as in liberalism (Crick, 2005). It was Mamata Banerjee who gave voice to this collective will and successfully placed it at a higher pedestal as compared to narrow group and individual interests. Today populist leaders couple the sacred names of ‘nation’ and ‘people’ and they are impatient of procedures that frustrate the alleged popular will. They want a direct relationship between ‘the people’ and government (Crick, 2005). But it will be surely an error of judgement to conceive that Mamata Banerjee has been successful to completely do away with these narrow group and individual interests. Rather what she has been able to achieve is to defer the overt exhibition of these narrow group and individual interests in the public realm. Though the resultant subtle effect of this has been that these very particular set of interests are now cropping up in a very strong way which in the long run has the potential of miring the ‘collective’ or

‘popular’ will. The maintenance of a fine balance between these various set of interests while at the same time taking into account the heterogeneous nature of the concept of ‘people’ within the larger schema of populist politics is something which is going to be a litmus test for Mamata Banerjee in the distant if not the near future.

4. The Elements of Legitimacy and Accountability

Mamata Banerjee has successfully transformed herself into a public figure with whom a large chunk of the population can identify. She has used the media and her public appearances to convey an image and sense of constant and dominating presence in public space. She has in some ways re-crafted the ways of presenting herself in order to become more and more close to the ordinary people. This is one aspect where she has been undoubtedly much more successful than most other players in the political arena. She seems to have grasped at a very early stage of her political career the very fact that presenting herself as an enemy of the Left conveys an appealing message to her mass audience. But coupled with this is attached the paradoxical situation wherein Mamata has to take some hard decisions even crossing over the minimum threshold of democratic behaviour. When institutions have the full backing of civil society, they can pursue the values of the democratic regime. If, in contrast, the institutions postpone their objectives and expend energy and resources on consolidating and maintaining their legitimacy, then crossing over even the minimum threshold for democracy becomes a remarkable feat (Morlino, 2004). Populism often is pushed forward by individual or collective leadership, but to be effective in a democratic system, populist ideology has to resonate with widely held beliefs and this may limit the claims and policy changes populist leaders wish to make (Wyatt, 2013). This is something with which Mamata Banerjee seems to have been struggling for some time now. For her right now it is the maintenance of her legitimacy which is the greatest concern, for it is this very element which is going to guarantee her continuance in power and will open the paths for future manoeuvres as well.

Accountability is a core feature in the experience of representative democracy-as it grants citizens and civil society in general an effective means of control over political institutions. As far as the liberal tradition is concerned accountability is implicitly based on two assumptions. The first assumption is that if citizens are genuinely given the opportunity to evaluate the responsibility of government in terms of satisfaction of their own needs and requests, they are, in fact, capable of doing so, possessing above all a relatively accurate perception of their own needs. The second assumption is that citizens, either alone or as part of a group, are the only possible judges of their own needs. Indeed, judgements on responsibility imply that there is some awareness of the actual demands, and that the evaluation of the government’s response is related to how its actions either conform to or diverge from the interests of its electors. In fact, the idea that educated, informed and politically engaged citizens always know their own

needs and desires is, at best, an assumption, especially tenuous in situations where citizens might need specialized knowledge to accurately identify and evaluate those very needs and desires. However, too much dependence on common people's intellect for evaluating her government's performance is neither in favour of nor in tandem with the body of politics. The power of defining the welfare of the people needs to rest in her hands. Anything other than that is bound to create clash of interests keeping in view the various economic and social undercurrents prevalent in the state (though this does not entirely negate the possibility of hers taking into account the opinions of various groups).

Schedler suggests that accountability has three main features: information, justification and punishment/compensation (Morlino, 2004). The first element, information on the political act or series of acts by a given politician or political body (the government, parliament, and so on), is indispensable for attributing responsibility. Refusal to state publicly hard but necessary truths can, exacerbate the contempt in which populist leaders so often hold not just particular politicians, but the political process itself (Crick, 2005). This failure to state hard truths (and sometimes even hiding them) by the Left Front government regarding mainly the economic condition of the state, has been one of the major points of allegations by Mamata Banerjee. Hence the bigger responsibility lies on Mamata Banerjee herself to change the entire course of action as far as the dissemination of correct information to the common people is concerned. This is going to be a hard test for Mamata's political acumen because if strictly adhered to, it might prove very costly for her in the short term, although non-adherence to this principle might be costlier in the long run. This act is intrinsically linked with the two other aspects of justification and punishment/compensation.

5. 'The People' and 'The Enemy'

The concept of popular sovereignty is the populist's trump card. It is this very concept of popular sovereignty which has been given concrete shape and voice by the politics of Mamata Banerjee. The plasticity of the concept of 'the people' assists the individual populist, for whom it can expand or contract to suit the chosen criteria of inclusion or exclusion (Stanley, 2008). As far as Mamata Banerjee's populist style of politics is concerned it has been rather conspicuously hazy about who 'the people' are, conceiving them variously as the dispossessed, the hard-working middle classes, the burdened taxpayers, the 'common man', the moral majority, and so on. Regardless of all the vagueness, the populist rendering of 'the people' requires the standard distinction between a certain 'us' and 'them' characteristic of political oppositions. This presupposes an effort to configure the identity of 'the people' and to specify the disagreement that pitches them against named adversaries- the elites, Government, etc. This is correct, but even then the populist 'us' remains conveniently vague. It does so in order to blur the contours of 'the people' sufficiently as to encompass anyone with a grievance structured around a perceived exclusion from a public domain

of interaction and decision hegemonised by economic, political, or cultural elite. The heterogeneous composition of the ‘people’ has been successfully brought under one unified identity by Mamata Banerjee. The identification of one primary enemy (in this case the CPI(M) led Left Front) by her has helped in this process of consolidation. As Lepper has very rightly pointed out that populist seek to portray themselves as sounding boards which resonate with the reason of the ordinary person. Mamata Banerjee’s content and style of politics resonates with the reason of the common people of the state.

Populism can also be conceived of as a kind of democratic corrective since it gives voice to groups that do not feel represented by the elites, and forces them to react and change the political agenda. Populism cannot be described as anti-democratic per se, but rather as a way to fill the vacuum that is being left by the growing chasm between governed and governors. When a society is characterized by high levels of economic, political and social exclusion, populism is a method through which disadvantaged groups may give their voice and lead to the implementation of policies that they prefer (Kaltwasser, 2012).

Mamata Banerjee has given voice to these underprivileged groups and portrayed her scheme of politics as an attempt to correct the course of democratic functioning in the state. As a discursive logic of political articulation, populism follows a particular path involved in hegemonic politics: first the linking of heterogeneous demands, then the formation of a collective identity through the recognition of an enemy (that is, ‘the establishment’), and finally the affective investment in one leader that represents ‘the people’ (Nielsen, 2006). Mamata Banerjee has repeatedly emphasised her physical proximity to the people and simultaneous distance from the elites. Kurt Weyland...define populism as a political strategy with three characteristics: an appeal to a heterogeneous mass of followers, many of whom are subjectively or objectively excluded; a low level of institutionalization of the movement; and finally a direct relationship between the leader and the followers (Weyland, 2001).

Populism involves not only identifying the people as the underdog, but also celebrating them as the people; similarly it is not only about identifying the elites with reference to their structural position as antagonists of the people, but also condemning them for the identities and interests they represent. The positive-negative schema allows the populist to posit antithetical criteria by which the people and the elite can be identified (Stanley, 2008).

The scheme of populist activities has helped Mamata Banerjee to very categorically highlight this positive-negative schema and also to remain on the positive side. The interesting observation to be made here is that the non-adherence to any particular set of ideologies has been a boon to her as far as this situation is concerned. As the populist leaders do not believe in a well-defined ideology that needs to be adhered to, they are free to borrow at will from diverse political traditions (Albertazzi, 2006). The populist style of functioning carries within it a great sense of adaptability. Mamata Banerjee's grammar of politics has not been restricted by any particular set of codified norms or regulations instead they have been formed and restructured by the needs of the time and context in which they are to be applied. Ben Stanley has very rightly commented that ideologies are not products only of logical thought-processes but must resonate with the context in which they are located. And it is this phenomenon which Mamata Banerjee has very skilfully appropriated.

6. The Radical Democratic Project

According to the liberal approach, populism is a democratic pathology because it brings about disruptive forces that transgress both individual rights and representative institutions. This challenge goes back to the classical analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville and his concern with the emergence of a 'tyranny of the majority'. In saying this, he criticized the formation of a democratic rule in which the opinion of the majority achieves the same status as the king in an aristocratic rule, so that both the interests and existence of the minorities are likely to be in danger. Mamata Banerjee has even tried to skilfully tackle this aspect whereby she has promised of abjuring violence against the political opponents (Bodla noy, bodol chai) and taking into consideration the sentiments of people from different shades and walks of life for the fulfilment of the ultimate goal of development.

Populism is a sort of democratic extremism, which is not shared by actors and parties that defend the existence of constitutional limits on the expression of the general will (Kaltwasser, 2012). Populist leader tends to define political competition as a total war between the people and their enemies. From this angle, the respect of certain rules of the democratic game tends to be a secondary issue. But this is also interestingly linked with the negative role that the leader might play in the development of a radical democratic project. As authors like Ardit and Zizek have argued, Laclau deals with the potential underside of a populist leader, which by incarnating the unity of the people, might produce a travesty of empowerment by subjecting 'the people' to his/her dictates. By contrast to the strong organization provided by an institutionalized party and the stable connections established by patron-client ties, the relationship between populist leaders and their mass constituency is un-institutionalised and fluid (Weyland, 2001). This un-institutionalised nature of arrangement and the fluidity is many a times looked upon as the precursor to a radical scheme of politics.

Not only is the relationship but also the very base of support that is ‘the people’ itself heterogeneous in nature with conflicting interests and resultantly having the very potential of affecting the functionality of governance. Weyland considers populism as a political strategy through which a personalist leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers (Kaltwasser, 2012).

By way of emphasising their closeness to the grassroots and their distance from the political establishment, the populist leaders also tend to use colourful and undiplomatic language. This has been one of the most highly talked about traits of Mamata Banerjee. It has been her highly published and declared agenda that she is here to reclaim power for the people. But in this exercise of reclaiming power for the people she has to face the issue of democratic paradox as has been described by Margaret Canovan. She talks of the democratic paradox where the democratic project is to bring the mass of the people into politics; but making this possible requires institutional arrangements that are too complex for most people to grasp in imagination. Business as usual in the state seems to be run by jaded political impresarios whereas the voices of the amateurs which include a large number of common people seem to be unheard after a particular limit or extent. Moreover, the populist leader’s disdain for the procedural channels and for the checks and balances of the democratic process reflects a strong anti-establishment ethos.

Like Rousseau, populists distrust representation as a corruption of the general will and see themselves less as representatives than as the actual voice of the people, but, unlike Rousseau, they also distrust initiatives that empower citizens and that encourage their autonomous initiatives. This ambivalent oscillation between the independent action of the people and the instrumental appropriation of that action furnishes populist representation with a convenient alibi (Arditi, 2003).

Politics in representative democracy generally presupposes the priority of institutional mediations over charisma, the presence of checks and balances to limit the discretionary powers of political leaders, the widespread practice of reaching agreements through negotiations among political elites, and so on. Populism disrupts democracy by mounting its challenge on the redemptive face of democracy, often to the detriment of law and order. The cult of personality can transform leaders into quasi-messianic figures for whom accountability is not a relevant issue, and the populist disregard for institutional checks and balances can encourage rule by decree and all sorts of authoritarian behaviour while maintaining a democratic facade.

The presence of a populist mode of representation in liberal democracies is not just an arithmetic addition to that setting; it

also brings about a geometric dislocation insofar as it permeates the practice of democratic politics itself. Populism can remain within the bounds of democracy but can also reach the point where they enter into conflict and perhaps even go their own separate ways (Arditi, 2003).

Whether Mamata Banerjee has been able to maintain the professed aim of restoring some dignity to politics is something which is highly debateable.

7. Engaging With Neo-Liberal Agenda

One of the interesting aspects in the entire scheme of populist politics is the clubbing of neo-liberal agenda and the support of the very groups who have been affected by those very policies.

The most puzzling characteristic of these leaders is the fact that they succeeded in engaging support for neo-liberal agendas from society's subordinated groups, those groups who are most damaged by neo-liberal policies. The support of the lower classes for leaders who combine a populist rhetoric with neo-liberal policies is not the result of the irrationality, their primitiveness or their manipulation by unscrupulous leaders, but the result of the continued weight of the past experience of partial inclusion as well as the absence of true inclusive alternatives (Filc, 2011).

But it is to be borne in mind that the very dynamics which provide the avenues for (Friedman, 1999) democratic consolidation may not always act as the parameters for the measurement of the legitimacy of democratic practises. On the contrary they may even sometimes be considered as the de-legitimizing factors. These factors may include the uncritical acceptance of the institutions in place, simple obedience for a lack of better alternatives, or negative memories of the past. Sometimes the populist vision to develop a more regulated and equitable capitalism can eventually lose because of the presence of more powerful political and economic interests. When your country ... recognizes the rules of the free market in today's global economy, and decides to abide by them, it puts on what I call 'the Golden Straitjacket (Friedman, 1999). According to Friedman, as a country complies with this Golden Straitjacket its economy will foster growth but the political sphere will shrink as the parameters for policy choice are narrowed substantially (Plante, 2008). This is one of the important factors which Mamata Banerjee has to deal with in the coming times. On the one hand there lies in front of her the mammoth task of economic development of the state for which she (though unwillingly) may have to give in at times to the logic of free market economy. On the other hand this is going to narrow down her policy choices in some respects which again is incompatible to her style of

politics. The interesting thing to look out for in the future is how she brings about a fine balance between the two without risking her political position in the state.

8. Conclusion

As the American sociologist Edward Shils has rightly suggested that populism has two aspects: the supremacy of the will of the people and its endeavour to create a direct relationship between people and government, so it is exactly these efforts what is reflected in the actions of Mamata Banerjee. To use the words of Jean-Marie Le Pen populism precisely is taking into account the people's opinion.

Have people the right, in a democracy, to hold an opinion? If that is the case, then yes, I am a populist (Pen, 2005).

Populism as an ideology is dedicated to identifying the people as the privileged subject of politics and justifying their place on that pedestal. But in this endeavour great care needs to be taken as far as the maintenance of the sanctity of the democratic process is concerned. According to Schmitt the populist subscribes to the doctrine that [t]he specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy. The denouncement of particular politicians is warranted, but the denouncement of the political process is unwarranted for. Beatrice Webb once said that democracy is not the multiplication of ignorant opinions. There is the undeniable fact that there is a need to draw a distinction between opinion and knowledge.

...even 'democracy' needs some qualification or limitation, especially at a time when political leaders tend to speak in emotive 'sound bites' or slogans on a level seemingly set by the great dis-educator of our times... the populist tabloid press (Crick, 2005).

Whether there will be the ushering of a process of certain self-imposed qualifications and limitations within the larger ambit of the populist style of functioning by Mamata Banerjee is surely a question of grave importance for the prevalence of democratic atmosphere in the state. Laclau has commented that if populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice in the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? To this he has said that the answer can only be affirmative. There is an urgent need today to re-examine this alleged synonymous relation which populism shares with politics.

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