

Possibilities and Disappointments of Populist Politics

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Imprints of the Populist Time brings together Ranabir Samaddar's lifetime of work—popular forms of politics and the effects of neo-liberal capitalism—into a single strand. Even before populism emerged as a concept, some of Samaddar's (1995, 2000) historical work was already geared towards understanding the relationship of leaders and the contentious politics of framing new publics in West Bengal, or tracing how a conception of regional territories emerged within the language of popular unrest. His more contemporary work moved into the realm of strikes and protests and eventually to more theoretical conceptions of dispossession and statelessness under the regime of neo-liberal capitalism. In *Imprints of the Populist Time*, these ideas weave into each other to reflect on the shape and contours of one of the most hotly debated concepts in today's time—populism.

We know quite a bit about populism already. Populism is leader-driven, it drives a polarised wedge between “us” and “them,” it is heavily dependent on welfarist politics and not a transformative one, and that it fundamentally overturns the idea of democracy from within a democratic framework. A growing interest in the question has been on the rising right-wing populism (Gudavarthy 2021). But in all of this, populism does something unique. It has complicated what we understand by welfare. While the idea of welfare has, for the longest time, been associated with welfare state and the rise of rights-based legislations, populism muddies up the water a great deal. How do we assess the various welfare strategies of governments? Is it stemming from the ideas of a developmentalist state or is it just plainly a populist move meant to secure votes?

BOOK REVIEWS

Imprints of the Populist Time by Ranabir Samaddar, Orient Blackswan, 2022; pp 352, ₹955.

Arguably, it is Kalyan Sanyal's foundational work, *Rethinking Capitalist Development* (2014), that set off these questions for many scholars in India. Partha Chatterjee and Samaddar are probably the two most important scholars who have been hugely influenced by Sanyal to the extent that their works seem to mirror each other from time to time in terms of the questions they raise. Governmentality has long been a persistent theme in both their works. Elaborated famously in Chatterjee's (2004) work “political society,” political theory and, by extension, constitutional politics have focused on the creation of a category like “citizens” and “rights,” but simultaneously we have not quite developed a language for theorising and understanding a vast swathe of people who have been outside this realm of constitutional, rights-bearing models of expressing citizenship. But then, this question of a vast swathe of people, their place in a complex democracy like India, and its political potential has continued to plague both these scholars. Therefore, it is not surprising that both of them ended up writing on the question of populism.

Nature of Popular Politics

Chatterjee's most recent work, *I Am the People* (2020), and Samaddar's *Imprints of the Populist Time* run in close conversation with each other. For both of them, populism is a result of the kind of capitalist growth that India has followed. Without going into the contents of Chatterjee's arguments, Samaddar's work largely focuses on the political possibilities that emerge out of this moment and

the complexity that it acquires since this mobilisation happens through populism. He makes an important conceptual shift in the literature of populism. A kind of scholarship that has closely looked at leaders, their speeches, and their diverse forms of appellations, Samaddar turns this perspective on its head. What could the question of populism tell us about the nature of popular politics? Populism to him calls out the “republican myth” (p 27). He chooses to turn to a concept like “multitude” that combines class, people and populations, rather than invoking concepts like citizenship. Samaddar here does something important for all of us to consider. Populism may be all that people accuse it of, and yet, it does allow the populations to not be overpowered by the language of economics. Post the economic crises, when we are witnessing widespread unemployment and unsustainable agriculture, the term populism has muddied what welfare could possibly mean. But populism, rather than being a crisis itself, is a response to an ongoing crisis. And the bourgeois discomfort with populism is not that it entails welfare but rather that there is a class nature to this kind of populist politics that renders civility superfluous (pp 81, 106).

This book refuses to take a pejorative lens on populism, which has been analytically the most popular so far. In a moment when a welfare state has completely rescinded into the background, he asks us to consider what it means to bring back the language of welfare into representative democracy. And just by doing that, the people, hitherto outside the realm of representative democracy, are being able to wrest some control. He refuses to argue that it necessarily descends into quasi-fascist or fascist politics. He also does not find the good populist/bad populist argument useful. He asks us provocatively if populist governments are indeed more “capricious than institutionalized leadership of say CPI(M) or Indian National Congress” (p 13). Instead, he sees this moment as the undoing of the long-standing liberal democratic, elitist project.

At a time in India, when debates on welfare have taken centre stage in Indian politics, Samaddar's claim is an important one. Rather than seeing welfarism as democracy having come undone, Samaddar wants us to consider if it is only a liberal democratic sensibility of politics coming undone. It provokes us to reconsider the contemporary political lexicon of—beneficiaries, *laabharthi* and such, political debates that have dominated our news in the last few years.

Unsurprisingly, his insights are drawn from West Bengal politics like his previous works. West Bengal makes for a telling case because the deep class and caste divides almost burst open into the public (what Samaddar calls the social war) with the end of the long left rule in 2016. In the post-reform period, regional political structures acquire a different level of importance altogether because these regimes are central in driving regional models of development in the post-liberalisation period. John Harris's (1999) work, long before the term populism had even gained currency, compared the developmental frameworks of states like West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Published in 1999, Harris makes a case for West Bengal's success for actual, meaningful decentralisation under the CPI(M), unlike Tamil Nadu where the Dravidian parties were not able to initiate institutional changes and had to depend on the star power of popular leaders. This kind of comparative Indian politics literature was once popular, but in its lack, we have some works coming from different regions expanding on these individual trajectories taken by states which can be illuminating.

The Dravidian Model: Interpreting the Political Economy of Tamil Nadu, written by A Kalaiyarasan and M Vijayabaskar (2021), argue that populism and welfarism aside, Tamil Nadu has in fact been able to historically build a developmental state on the pillars of social justice and redistribution. Without getting into the criticisms of this argument (Geetha 2024), it seems like Samaddar may be making an analogous argument for West Bengal. West Bengal is significantly different from Tamil Nadu in the aspects of this intense social war that spills over into

political violence every now and then. Samaddar's work throws at us some provocations every now and then to make sense of this comparative nature of Indian politics embedded in regional parties. He acknowledges that states like West Bengal and Bihar have not been able to come up with an effective counter to neo-liberal politics, and that they mostly approach politics from the perspective of consolidating their position (p 145). He shows us how their modes of operation are completely different. From illegalities to state-sponsored festivals, they have all been mobilised to strengthen party roots. But what remains unexplained is how much of this is a continuity from the left rule and how much of it is an invention of the populist regime of Trinamool Congress.

Certain Limitations

Is he romanticising the “people”? To be fair, he does not. He acknowledges that popular politics is cruel and embodying them under a political umbrella will therefore not follow the civic ways that we valorise in democracies. But if we are to follow this from the argument that Harris made in 1999, then we are definitely in need of an explanation of how the developmental regime changes with the downfall of the left and the rise of Trinamool Congress and the continuities and the discontinuities.

But Samaddar takes a different turn in situating this moment into the global moment of chaos where several countries find themselves at the same juncture. To me, this was the weakest part of his writing. The examples across the world show similar moments in world politics, which hark back to some of the extremely important work he has done on logistical forms of capitalism and refugee rights. But those insights did not particularly illuminate our experience in India beyond similarities in this case. The rise of the precariat class worldwide, and the extension of neo-liberalism, though useful ideas to consider, changed the tenor of the book without necessarily adding any significant insight into the nature and workings of populism and people who constitute these multitudes.

But the first half of the book, which is where most of his important arguments are ensconced, are absolutely crucial if we are at all to make sense of Indian politics going forward. Rather than dismissing populism and most importantly popular politics, he urges us to look closely at both the possibilities and disappointments of this new kind of politics.

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