

RESEARCH NOTE: PEOPLE, POPULISM, DEMOCRACY¹

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The Demos (People) in a Democracy

While much of what is written on democracy focuses on how the demos (the people) exercise their control over the State, this paper proposes to turn the focus on how the various segments of the people constitute themselves into a body and how people as a body comes into being and with what effects. Any democratic regime is also constantly haunted by the fear of what Spinoza would have called a "ferocious multitude" posing a threat to law and order. They 'must necessarily come together', Spinoza tells us, if they are 'to live together as securely and well as possible if they are to enjoy as a whole the rights which naturally belong to them as individuals' (1670). Their life should be no more conditioned by 'the force and desire of individuals that will be injurious to other fellowmen but by the power and will of the whole body'. Spinoza's project of overwhelming the fear from the "ferocious multitude" with 'terrorisation' by those who govern, Balibar tells us, has the potential of spiralling into a civil war: "Once th[e] fear has become reciprocal, and those who govern terrorised by latent power of the masses, seek to terrorise them in turn (or to manipulate them to terrorise their rivals), a causal chain of violent passions (hatred between classes, parties and religions), is set in motion which leads inevitably to civil war" (Balibar 1998:39).

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Unlike many of his contemporaries who took the 'people' for granted, Dr Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, was concerned with the problem of constituting 'We, the People of India'. On the one hand, he was strongly opposed to the idea that the 'We, the People of India' had its origins in the Indian nation. The people of India - especially the Hindus - historically riven into an incredibly wide variety of castes and communities - are inherently incapable of forming a homogeneous nation. On the other hand, he would have envisaged a body of people who would be bound together in terms of their adherence to the moral principles laid down in the Constitution. While 'terrorisation', according to Spinoza, is central to the constitution of the People, the people - for Dr Ambedkar - are founded on such moral principles as liberty, equality and justice as are laid down in our Constitution.

Populism thrives on the construction of the people that resembles neither of the two varieties.

Populist Construction of Demos

Ernesto Laclau's *The Populist Reason* (2007) is widely cited as the key reference text for developing an understanding of the populism of our time. Laclau refers to the two constitutive principles of 'difference' and 'equivalence' in this connection. While the People is constituted as a body necessarily 'different' from what is perceived as its other - more often than not another that is internal to itself, individual constituents within the body are always considered as 'equivalent' to each other. Let us try to illustrate the point with a reference to the contemporary Northeast.

Back in 2016, the apex Court asked the Government of Nagaland to hold elections in urban local bodies as per the 72nd and 73rd Amendments to the Constitution of India providing for 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in urban local bodies. While such women's organizations as the Naga Mothers' Association and Joint Committee for Women's Reservation were demanding the implementation of this provision, other Naga bodies like Naga Hoho, Eastern Naga Peoples' Organization (ENPO) and AoSenden were opposing it on the ground that the provision, if implemented, would violate Article 371 (a) (i) of the Constitution.

One may recollect that the Article declares that no law concerning religious and traditional practices legislated by Parliament shall apply to the State of Nagaland if it is not ratified by the State Legislative Assembly. According to them, the two Amendments would not come into force till the Nagaland Legislative Assembly ratifies them. Needless to say, the Assembly is yet to ratify it. The situation took a violent turn In February 2017 when two persons were killed in Kohima and large-scale violence broke out apparently to prevent the urban polls from being held in the state. The articulation of the Naga People, according to Naga Hoho and similar organizations, thrives on the constitutive absence of Naga women. In the words of Laclau: "...the outside is not simply one more, neutral element but an excluded one, something that the totality expels from itself to constitute itself (to give a political example: it is through the demonization of a section of the population that a society reaches a sense of its cohesion)."

If Naga women are absent in this articulation of the Naga community (nation or nationality), the very recent populist construction of Bengali People forces a constitutive expulsion of *bhadraloks*. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's politics, as Nielson argues, underlines a gross depreciation of the hitherto dominant *Bhadralok* idiom of politics. Who is a *bhadralok*? Nielson argues:

A *bhadralok* is the embodiment of a particular combination of cultural capital, manners and dress code. A quintessential *bhadralok* is educated, refined, eloquent and with a good knowledge of English. He is a high-caste Hindu, often a Brahmin, and has style, manners and dignity, although he will usually display a measure of modesty and moderation in public life. His uniform is the crisp white dhoti and kurta, and a genuine *bhadralok* will be well-versed in the world of arts, literature and poetry. Virtually all of West Bengal's chief ministers from B.C. Roy to Siddhartha Shankar Ray, Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya have conformed to this model of a *bhadralok* politician (Nielson 2010:117)

Mamata Banerjee's marks a paradigm shift in the politics of West Bengal. As Nielson observes::

In terms of political style and oration, Mamata Banerjee departs significantly from certain culturally informed ideas about how political leaders should comport themselves. Political leaders in Bengal have

historically been recruited from the Bengali bhadralok, the respectable and educated middle class, and to this day the state assembly has a disproportionately high representation of legislators with a bhadralok background....(Nielson 2010:58).

Unlike Spinoza, multiculturalists like Brettschneider and others, consider recognition of societal multiplicity as the key principle of democracy. The more a society is sought to be tidied up, the greater the threat to democracy: "... [Multicultural politics] as a theory and practice is as much about acknowledging working from the multiplicity of our communities in national politics as it is about multiplicity within communities" (Brettschneider 2002:8-9).

Equivalence, according to Laclau, implies that "all other differences are equivalent to each other - equivalent in their common rejection of the excluded identity" (Laclau 2007: 70). In simple terms, the populist constructions must have the power to bring both the Naga and Bengali societies to realize that the exclusion of Naga women and the hitherto archetypal Bengali bhadraloks respectively is constitutive of the formation of their People. Let us cite an illustration from contemporary West Bengal politics.

Any story of contemporary politics in West Bengal politics must be told concerning the acquisition of land for industrialization in Singur. As the Left Front came to power under the leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) winning 235 seats in an Assembly of 194 seats in 2006, the Government issued a notification to that effect. Parallel to it, Krishi Jami Raksha Committee (or the Committee For the Protection of Agricultural Land or KJRC) was formed in Singur consisting of a rainbow alliance of leading personalities and organizations: litterateurs like Sankha Ghosh, Atin Bandyopadhyay, thespians like Kaushik Sen, Bibhas Chakraborty, Bratya Basu, organizations like Matangini Mahila Samiti, People's Conference of India, Party of Democratic Socialism, Janata Dal (United), Socialist Unity Centre, Bharatiya Janata Party, Jamiat Ulema e-Hind, Indian National Trade Union Congress and many others.

While the coalition's victory catapulted the Trinamool Congress (TMC)-led Government into power, it is to be noted that the electoral outcome of 2011

marginalized all other forces that were nevertheless an integral part of the peasant resistance in general and KJRC in particular and helped TMC and its partners appropriate and monopolize the oppositional space. The portents were clear even before the elections. As Banerjee observes:

Mamata Banerjee quite predictably, harnessed the outburst of anti-LF popular anger in her march towards her next goal - the chief ministership of West Bengal. Through a clever combination of platitudinous slogans and promises of instant nostrums and histrionics, she has managed to rally the different disgruntled segments of Bengali society - ranging from urban slum-dwellers long deprived of essential services to villagers threatened with displacement by industrial projects. Her rise in West Bengal politics is a sign of the bankruptcy of the traditional Bengali left, as well as the political cul-de-sac that the intelligentsia are facing (Banerjee 2010:21).

The rainbow space of civil society activism that emerged in West Bengal in the wake of the Singur movement and other cases of peasant resistance was effectively controlled and monopolized gradually by the TMC splitting it almost down the middle along party lines (Das 2017: 29-45).

People of Affect

The People as a body, according to populist understanding, does not come into being in terms of their common adherence to reason. Laclau argues that the people as a body, as what he calls 'hegemonic totalization' requires 'a radical investment': "... the affective dimension plays a central role here" (Laclau 2007:71). In other words, the constitution of People as a body is not the product of any rational argument. Members do not form the People as part of a contract they execute with any expectation of return; they become part of the People by their emotional attachment to it much in the same way as one becomes part of the family.

Thus it is not without reason that such family appellations as 'uncle' Laldenga, 'chacha' Nehru, 'amma' Jayalalitha, 'didi' Mamata Banerjee and so forth become profoundly relevant in Indian politics. The analogy between family

and State drawn by Jean Bodin can hardly be missed in this context. As he puts it: "... the well-ordered family is a true image of the commonwealth" (State} (Bodin 6). Pu. Laldenga (1927-1990) would be lovingly addressed by the Mizos as 'uncle'. The formal repertoire of State bureaucracy outside the Mizo society could barely understand the significance of this appellation. As I interviewed a very senior ex-rebel of the Mizo National Front, a party that Laldenga had founded - I came to know how he was seething in anger when he was not allowed to meet the 'uncle' - Laldenga- in Silchar (Assam) prison and on that very day he changed his original plan which was to join Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and decided to join rebel ranks. He was snubbed by the prison guards with the words: "All Mizos call him the uncle. We know the trick." His idea of the Mizo nation resembles a closely knit family under the leadership of an old uncle and if ever there is any issue of difference to be settled, it would have to be settled within the family. He told me how mothers would bring their delinquent children to Laldenga with the hope that the uncle would admonish them and make them fall in line. It is like saying that all this happens within the family.

Nielsen shows how the appellation 'didi' (elder sister) in Bengali attached to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee comes with a responsibility almost resembling that of the parents towards their children. She is hardly addressed by her name. She is the 'universal' didi:

[A]n elder sister or didi is expected to show parental love towards her younger siblings and should act almost as a proxy mother. A proper didi will dress her younger siblings, feed them and wash their hands and faces, set up their toys and play with them. She will look after their well-being, support them, protect them and nourish them. It is not too far-fetched to argue that many of Mamata's supporters direct similar expectations towards her and that their consistent use of the term denotes a special kind of intimacy. They too expect her to stand by them in their hour of need and help them deal with the challenges they face (Nielsen 123-124).

Thus to cite an example, she goes on record saying that bandhs (strikes) are an anathema to West Bengal's work culture, although she called many of them while in Opposition during the Left Front rule. Instead, like a true didi she

likes to retain the right to declare unscheduled holidays. The Anandabazar Patrika, the largest circulating Bengali daily in India brought out several letters to the editor on 8 September 2022 most of which accused the chief minister of destroying the work culture of the state. Puja (autumn) holidays in celebration of the largest Bengali festival would usually stretch for five days while these were further stretched into 10 days at her instance. In the process, precious man days are lost. Isn't this to be called 'wasteful expenditure'? On her policy of providing subsidies (Rs.60,000 per club in 2022), Surajit Kundu from Uttarpara(Hooghly) asked if there was any 'rationality' (jouktikata) in giving subsidies to the Puja organizing clubs (Anandabazar Patrika 2022:5). In both instances, family appellations are invoked to trump up any rational argument.

Borrowing from Bodin, one may say that 'the government of all commonwealths, colleges, corporate bodies, or households whatsoever, rests on the right to command on one side the other members [by being a member of the family without offering any reason], and the obligation to obey on the other'(Bodin1955:9).

From Populist to Popular Politics

We have already seen how it becomes imperative on the part of the People to assert their differences vis-a-vis the other - whether within or without. The same principle of difference also demands from the concerned People that they 'reject' all other differences and thus establish the principle of equivalence. Laclau also points to the incommensurability between the principle of difference and the principle of equivalence - a paradox that defines populist politics and therefore calls for populist resolution.

One way of resolving the paradox is to fall back on the same bourgeois, liberal-democratic institutions and their laws: (a) In the Naga instance, the matter involved a prolonged and continuing legal battle in the law courts of India - a country that was viewed by Angami Zapu Phizo (1904-1990), the father of Naga insurgency as 'an occupation State'. (b) Sometimes the entire paraphernalia of State institutions and laws is sought to be mimicked by these organizations claiming to lead their People. When I asked Abdul Ghani Lone (1932-2002), the slain leader

of the All-Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) - the same question and became interested in fathoming the representativeness of his leadership and his organization he claimed to enjoy, Lone avoided the question by merely saying that "we have our ways of communicating with the people" without elaborating on what he meant by 'our ways'. APHC subsequently instituted its own Election Commission and entrusted it with the responsibility of establishing its representativeness, an idea that was instantly shot down by Shri I. D. Swamy - then the Minister of State for Home Affairs - as "ridiculous". Whether in actuality or mimicry, populist politics revolves around bourgeois, liberal-democratic principles.

Achieving the equivalence or unity of the People was never the prime mover of popular politics for Gramsci. The equivalence, according to him, is not important unless it at the same time marks what he calls 'the assertion of the rationality of history'. The rise of popular politics is not indicated simply by the massive popular mobilization or for that matter by the mass base of the kind of politics that a leader leads, but by what he calls "a certain validity... in forcing the introduction of a new truth [that] has exceptional evidence and capacity for expansion" (Gramsci 1999: 774). If equivalence is marked by 'expansion' and encompassing the masses of people, such equivalence, according to Gramsci, has also to be backed by 'truth', that is to say, by the objective grounds of 'validity' and 'reason' something that the populist politics of effect deliberately ignores.

If the leader is not ready to wait for history to unfold itself in keeping with the objective laws and also to 'grip the masses' while making her politics popular, populism consists of forcing unity on a body that is plagued by the incommensurability between the two principles of difference and equivalence. Since there is no 'determinable *apriori*' for the equivalence to emerge, it has to be supplied from outside. A populist leader is called upon to forge unity from outside whether by hollowing out the bourgeois-liberal institutions that mediate between the rulers and the ruled or by invoking family ties or any combination of them. The very act of forcing a unity therefore is perpetually contingent and momentary and therefore produces what we may call pure politics - a politics that refuses to be framed by reason, objectivity, ideology or scientific law. Populist politics can only be understood concerning an unmitigably contingent, perpetually unstable and

extremely momentary configuration of forces initiated by a populist leader. Populist politics always meets with uncertainty. Populist leaders are either replaced by other populist leaders or bring the country to a breaking point as happened in Argentina, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Very rarely does the end of populist politics inaugurate populardemocratic politics.

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