

Populist Policies and Civil Society Responsibility in India

Dr. G. Krishnaiah

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Kakatiya University, Warangal, Telangana, India.

Introduction

Throughout the past few decades, populist politics have significantly increased in India, the largest democracy in the world. Despite the fact that populism is frequently perceived as a relatively new political movement, its origins in India date back to the years immediately following independence. In order to combat poverty, inequality, and social injustice, early expressions included socialist-oriented redistribution policies, state-led welfare programs, and public mobilization tactics. In order to gain political support, populism also developed over time through identity-based mobilization, utilizing caste, religion, language, and regional ties. The current populist landscape was made possible by these earlier versions.

Strong, centralized leadership and a focus on direct connection between officials and the public are characteristics of populism in India today. In order to avoid traditional political middlemen and position themselves as genuine representatives of the "ordinary people," modern populist leaders mostly rely on large-scale demonstrations, television, and digital channels, especially social media. Welfare-oriented policies are presented as direct advantages to common people, and they are frequently customized through branding and narratives that emphasize the role of the leader in providing social security and development. These tactics have shown electoral success because they speak to the urgent needs and goals of the populace.

However, the long-term implications of these populist policies remain a subject of debate. While they may enhance political participation and provide short-term economic relief, critics argue that excessive populism can weaken democratic institutions, undermine checks and balances, and restrict civil liberties. Dissenting voices may be marginalized, and complex policy debates reduced to simplified narratives. In this context, civil society assumes a crucial role. Comprising non-governmental organizations, independent media, academic institutions, social movements, and active citizens, civil society serves as a watchdog and a mediator. Its responsibility lies in promoting accountability, safeguarding democratic values, and ensuring that populist governance aligns with constitutional principles and long-term democratic stability.

Populism and Political Mobilization in India

In general, populism refers to a political philosophy that portrays society as essentially split between the "pure people" and a "corrupt elite," with political power asserted in the name of the people's collective desire. According to this framework, political opponents, experts, and established institutions are portrayed as being cut off from the general public, while leaders position themselves as genuine representatives of popular interests. Populism in India has developed unique traits influenced by the nation's democratic system, socioeconomic variety, and historical background.

Both cultural and economic factors are used by Indian populism. In order to meet pressing socioeconomic requirements, economic populism emphasizes material gains. Policies like subsidies, forgiveness of agricultural loans, free water or electricity, food security initiatives, and direct cash transfers are intended to give citizens—especially the poor and lower middle

classes—visible and palpable assistance. The idea that political leaders are directly in charge of providing welfare is reinforced by these actions, which frequently deepen the emotional connection between the state and its beneficiaries. Such policies are criticized for creating fiscal hardship and putting short-term electoral gains ahead of long-term economic changes, even if they can encourage social inclusion and reduce poverty.

Alongside economic measures, cultural populism plays a significant role in Indian politics. This form emphasizes nationalism, religious identity, cultural heritage, and collective pride, often invoking historical narratives and symbolic issues. Cultural populism seeks to unify citizens around a shared identity, but it may also marginalize minority groups or simplify complex social realities. By framing political debates in cultural terms, leaders can mobilize emotions and loyalty beyond policy performance alone.

India's vast diversity allows populist politics to assume multiple forms across regions and levels of governance. At the state level, regional populism draws upon local identities, linguistic pride, and regional grievances to consolidate political support. Caste-based populism mobilizes historically disadvantaged groups by appealing to social justice and representation, while religious majoritarian populism operates at the national level by asserting the dominance of a particular cultural or religious identity. These variations demonstrate the adaptability of populism within India's plural society.

Political leaders frequently employ populist rhetoric to bypass institutional intermediaries such as legislatures, bureaucratic processes, and policy experts. Through mass rallies, televised addresses, and digital platforms, leaders communicate directly with citizens, portraying themselves as decisive and accessible. While this direct engagement can energize democratic participation, it may also weaken institutional checks and reduce space for deliberative policymaking, raising important questions about the long-term health of democratic governance in India.

Populist Policies in India

In India, populist policies frequently highlight symbolic representation and the provision of welfare as essential instruments of governance. The goal of programs like free food distribution, affordable housing initiatives, public healthcare programs, and direct income assistance measures is to create a clear and direct link between the state and each beneficiary. These approaches increase political legitimacy and popular support by eschewing middlemen and emphasizing the role of political leadership in service delivery. Such programs have frequently been crucial in lowering poverty, enhancing food security, and increasing access to basic services, especially for disadvantaged and economically vulnerable populations.

Even with these benefits, populist policymaking raises significant issues. An excessive focus on welfare programs, according to critics, can put short-term electoral concerns ahead of long-term structural changes required for sustainable development. The state's ability to invest in vital sectors like infrastructure, education, and job creation can be severely hampered by a heavy reliance on subsidies and giveaways. Furthermore, critical voices and political opposition are frequently portrayed by populist narratives as "elite," "anti-national," or unconnected to the concerns of the general public. Such language runs the risk of undermining democratic discourse and delegitimizing disagreement. The pluralistic underpinnings of India's constitutional democracy may eventually be undermined by this reduction of democratic space.

Populist Policies and the Role of Civil Society in India

Populist policies have emerged as a significant aspect of modern Indian politics, influencing how the government, people, and democratic institutions interact. These policies, which prioritize

welfare delivery, financial assistance, and symbolic representation, are usually presented as direct responses to the needs and goals of "common people." Initiatives like housing projects, income support programs, food security plans, and free or subsidized public services are all intended to have an immediate and noticeable effect. Such measures can improve social inclusion and alleviate long-standing disparities, but they also change the environment in which civil society functions.

In order to engage with populist governance, civil society is essential. On the one hand, by promoting last-mile delivery, increasing awareness, and standing out for underrepresented groups, civil society organizations frequently support populist welfare initiatives. However, civil society serves as a watchdog, closely examining the formulation, execution, and outcomes of populist programs. Civil society assists in determining if these policies are just, sustainable, and in line with constitutional principles through study, public discussion, legal action, and grassroots organizing.

However, civil society may also face difficulties as a result of populist politics. The reputation of non-governmental groups, independent media, and academic institutions may be undermined by populist narratives that depict them as "elite" or obstructive. Political pressure and regulatory restrictions can occasionally limit the freedom of civil society. This conflict emphasizes how crucial it is to have a strong, autonomous civil society in a populist setting.

Ultimately, the interaction between populist policies and civil society reflects the broader health of democracy. While populism can energize political participation and respond to popular demands, civil society ensures accountability, inclusion, and protection of democratic norms. A balanced relationship between the two is essential for sustaining democratic governance and long-term social development.

Democratic Accountability in the Era of Populist Governance

Populist policies have become an influential feature of contemporary governance, shaping the relationship between the state, citizens, and democratic institutions. Framed as direct responses to the needs of "ordinary people," these policies often emphasize welfare delivery, economic relief, and symbolic representation. In India, initiatives such as food security programs, income support schemes, and subsidized public services have strengthened popular support and improved access to basic necessities. However, while populist policies may enhance political participation and short-term social inclusion, they also raise important concerns regarding democratic accountability.

Transparency, institutional checks, and educated public discourse are essential to democratic accountability. By avoiding legislators, policy experts, and independent institutions, populist government, with its focus on strong leadership and direct engagement with individuals, can erode these systems. Civil society is essential to maintaining accountability in this situation. Academic institutions, independent media, and civil society organizations keep an eye on government acts, assess the results of policies, and offer forums for discussion and criticism. Civil society ensures that populist programs stay in line with constitutional ideals and the long-term public interest through grassroots mobilization, campaigning, research, and legal action.

However, by depicting critics as "elite" or anti-people, populist narratives may undermine civil society and restrict democratic space. Because of this, a strong and autonomous civil society is crucial. To maintain democratic accountability and fortify the foundations of democratic administration, a balanced relationship between populist measures and civil society is essential.

Balancing Welfare Populism and Democratic Oversight

Populist policies and welfare initiatives are closely intertwined in contemporary governance, particularly in democratic societies such as India. Populist politics often prioritizes welfare policies as visible and immediate responses to the needs of the "common people." Programs related to food security, housing, healthcare, education, income support, and subsidized public services are framed as direct interventions by the state to reduce inequality and provide social protection. These welfare-

oriented populist policies have contributed to poverty reduction and expanded access to essential services, especially for marginalized and economically vulnerable groups.

Welfare-based populist policies are shaped, carried out, and assessed in large part by civil society. Social movements, community-based organizations, and non-governmental organizations frequently support last-mile delivery by finding implementation gaps, raising awareness, and assisting recipients in accessing entitlements. Civil society makes ensuring that welfare programs reach their intended recipients and meet local needs by getting involved at the grassroots level. Furthermore, data and research produced by civil society organizations aid in evaluating the sustainability, efficacy, and inclusivity of welfare programs.

However, there may be conflicts between civil society involvement and populist welfare policy. Populist narratives may minimize the contributions of civil society or depict critical voices as elitist or obstructive, claiming sole credit for welfare delivery. This may restrict opportunities for helpful criticism and policy change. Furthermore, an overemphasis on immediate welfare benefits could take attention away from long-term structural changes in areas like healthcare infrastructure, employment creation, and education quality.

Despite these challenges, civil society remains essential for ensuring that welfare-oriented populist policies are transparent, equitable, and accountable. By advocating for inclusive development, monitoring outcomes, and representing marginalized voices, civil society helps balance popular welfare demands with democratic values. A cooperative yet critical relationship between populist governance and civil society is vital for achieving sustainable and inclusive welfare outcomes.

Civil Society and Populist Governance in Indian Politics

The relationship between the state, the people, and democratic institutions has changed as a result of populist policies, which are now a distinguishing characteristic of Indian politics. By highlighting direct interaction with "ordinary people" and portraying the government as sensitive to pressing social and economic demands, populism appeals to popular opinion in India's diverse and complex society. Welfare programs, such as subsidized food distribution, housing programs, healthcare initiatives, education support, and cash transfers, are frequently the focus of populist politicians because they establish a clear link between the public and the government. These measures can enhance social inclusion, alleviate economic disparities, and boost political engagement, especially for underprivileged and vulnerable populations.

Civil society plays a crucial role in the context of Indian populist politics. Non-governmental organizations, grassroots movements, independent media, and academic institutions function as both collaborators and critics. On one hand, civil society helps facilitate the implementation of populist welfare schemes by raising awareness, ensuring access for beneficiaries, and providing feedback on policy effectiveness. On the other hand, civil society serves as a watchdog, holding political leaders accountable, evaluating policy impacts, and advocating for transparency and fairness. Through research, public campaigns, and legal interventions, civil society ensures that populist policies align with constitutional principles and long-term development goals.

However, populist politics can challenge civil society's independence. Political narratives may portray dissenting voices or advocacy groups as elitist, anti-national, or obstructive, which can restrict space for constructive critique and public debate. Regulatory pressures and targeted scrutiny further complicate civil society's functioning. Despite these challenges, a resilient civil society remains essential in India's democratic framework. By balancing popular demands with accountability, inclusivity, and institutional oversight, civil society helps ensure that populist politics strengthens, rather than undermines, democratic governance and social development.

Conclusion

Populist policies, which represent leaders' attempts to directly address the needs and ambitions of the public, have become a persistent element of India's political scene. Populist administration has improved political participation and addressed urgent socioeconomic disparities, especially among vulnerable people, by focusing on welfare delivery, economic assistance, and symbolic representation. Programs like direct cash transfers, housing plans, healthcare assistance, and food security programs show the concrete advantages of populist policies and establish a direct line of communication between the government and common people. Despite their popularity, these policies also show how difficult it is to strike a balance between long-term institutional and developmental aims and immediate political responsiveness.

In addition to working together to carry out welfare-oriented populist policies, non-governmental groups, social movements, academic institutions, and independent media also act as watchdogs, keeping an eye on their efficacy, equity, and conformity to constitutional norms. Civil society guarantees that populist initiatives do not jeopardize institutional integrity or democratic norms, encourages citizen participation, and amplifies the voices of the downtrodden. In addition to political narratives that characterize critical participation as elitist or anti-national, it also has to contend with bureaucratic and regulatory limitations that restrict its independence.

The responsibility of civil society in India is therefore twofold: to support policies that genuinely improve citizens' lives while critically evaluating initiatives to prevent abuse, exclusion, or erosion of democratic checks and balances. A resilient and proactive civil society ensures that populism remains accountable, inclusive, and aligned with long-term national interests. Ultimately, the health of Indian democracy depends on a dynamic interaction between populist governance and civil society, where popular aspirations are met without compromising transparency, equality, and institutional accountability. Sustaining this balance is essential for inclusive development, social cohesion, and the strengthening of democratic values in India.

References:

1. Chakrabarti, K., & Bandyopadhyay, K. K. (2020). Populism in Contemporary Indian Politics In Populism in Asian Democracies (pp. 97–120). Brill. Brill
2. Akanksha & Kumar, N. (2024). Populist Politics and Policies: Welfare Populism in India. Springer Nature. CoLab
3. Rovira Kaltwasser, C., Jaffrelot, C., & Tillin, L. (2017). Populism in India In The Oxford Handbook of Populism. Oxford University Press. OUP Academic
4. Wojczewski, T. (2020). Populism, Hindu Nationalism, and Foreign Policy in India: The Politics of Representing "the People". International Studies Review. OUP Academic
5. Yilmaz, I., & Saleem, R. M. A. (2022). Hindutva Civilizational Populist BJP's Enforcement of Digital Authoritarianism in India. Populism & Politics. populismstudies.org
6. Pavan, R. (2020). Civil Society, Populism and Liberalism. International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society, 34(175–190). Springer Link
7. Tripathy, S. (2025). Electoral Populism and Democratic Governance in Indian States: Boon or Bane? ShodhPatra: International Journal of Science and Humanities. ShodhPatra Journal
8. National Alliance of People's Movements (2025). Civil Society Protest Movements in India. The Hindu / Times of India reports. Wikipedia
9. Jaffrelot, C. (2019). The Politics of Hindu Nationalism in India (various academic articles on populism and identity politics). (Use as a general reference to scholars on Indian politics.) — foundational scholar.
10. Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). Populism: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford University Press. (General theory of populism that helps frame Indian cases.)