

Populist Policies across the States

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Populism in Post-Liberalisation India: State-Level Policies and Federal Dynamics:

Populism in post-liberalisation India has redefined state politics by pitting the "common people" against entrenched elites through targeted welfare schemes. Following the 1991 economic reforms, regional parties harnessed this discourse to address liberalization's dislocations, such as rural distress and caste inequalities. These policies, varying from cash transfers to reservations, fortified federalism while straining fiscal resources.

Defining Populism:

Populism, as discourse, pits a virtuous "people" against corrupt elites, functioning as ideology, organization, and policy orientation. In India, it integrates with nationalism, caste mobilization, and welfarism, adapting to post-1991 neoliberalism's inequalities. Unlike Latin American variants focused on resource redistribution, Indian populism emphasizes identity-based empowerment, from Dravidian anti-Brahminism to tribal inclusion.

This multidimensional nature allows coexistence with diverse regimes democratic coalitions or strongman rule. Scholars like Mudde and Kaltwasser highlight its "thin" ideology, thickened locally by cultural narratives. Post-liberalization, it counters market-driven exclusion, promising direct state intervention for farmers, OBCs, women, and urban poor.

Historical Evolution:

Late Colonial Foundations (1920s–1947)

Populism in India emerged not as a modern import but as a syncretic response to colonial exploitation and internal hierarchies. Its roots lie in the interwar period, where anti-colonial nationalism intertwined with subaltern mobilizations. Mahatma Gandhi's Congress-led movement exemplified early populism through mass mobilization against British rule. Gandhi's khadi-clad satyagrahas and village-centric swaraj vision appealed to peasants and artisans, framing independence as a moral crusade against elite intermediaries—zamindars and moneylenders. This "people-first" rhetoric fused moralism with economic redistribution, promising Gram Swaraj to uplift the rural masses overlooked by urban elites.

Parallel to Congress nationalism, lower-caste movements led by Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar injected radical anti-caste populism. Phule's Satyashodhak Samaj (1873) challenged Brahminical dominance, portraying upper castes as parasitic exploiters akin to colonial rulers. Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party (1936) and Scheduled Castes Federation amplified this by demanding land reforms and separate electorates, positioning Dalits as the true proletariat oppressed by a "Brahmin-Baniya" nexus. These streams—Gandhian moral populism and Phule-Ambedkarite social justice populism—converged during Quit India (1942), forging a broad anti-elite front. Decolonization in 1947 thus inherited this populist legacy, with the Congress Party as its vanguard, promising equity amid partition's chaos.

Post-Independence Consolidation and Nehruvian Centralism (1947–1960s)

Independent India's early decades saw populism embedded in state-led development. Jawaharlal Nehru's socialist model—community development programs, land ceiling acts (e.g., Zamindari Abolition), and Five-Year Plans—channeled Gandhian welfarism into centralized planning. The Congress's one-party dominance (1952–1967 elections) rested on populist

appeals: universal adult suffrage enfranchised 173 million voters, many subaltern, who rewarded the party for symbols like the Harijan upliftment and public sector jobs. Yet, Nehru's "tryst with destiny" prioritized heavy industry over agriculture, breeding rural discontent.

By the mid-1960s, cracks appeared. Droughts (1965–67), war defeats (1962 China, 1965 Pakistan), and food shortages eroded Congress's aura. Indira Gandhi's ascent in 1966 marked populism's radical turn. Her "Garibi Hatao" (Remove Poverty) slogan in 1971 elections weaponized anti-elite rhetoric against "big business" and syndicate elders within Congress. Bank nationalizations (1969), abolition of privy purses (1971), and the 20-point program redistributed resources, securing her landslide victory. This era fused Nehruvian statism with personalist populism, where Indira positioned herself as the sole guardian of the *aam aadmi* (common man).

Crisis and Backlash: The Emergency and Fragmentation (1970s–1980s)

The 1975–1977 Emergency exposed populism's authoritarian underbelly. Facing opposition from Jayaprakash Narayan's Total Revolution—itself a Gandhian-populist call for clean governance—Indira imposed draconian rule, sterilizing millions and jailing dissenters under the guise of discipline. The 1977 Janata Party victory briefly ousted Congress, but infighting restored it in 1980. Indira's return amplified welfarism: Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) and Antyodaya schemes targeted the poorest, sustaining her cult of personality.

Rajiv Gandhi's 1984 sympathy wave post-assassination modernized this populism with technology—telecom revolution and panchayat decentralization (73rd/74th Amendments precursor)—but neglected agrarian distress. By the late 1980s, Mandal politics ignited OBC awakening. The Mandal Commission (1980), chaired by B.P. Mandal, recommended 27% reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), identifying 52% of India's population as socially disadvantaged. Shelved under Congress, it became V.P. Singh's Janata Dal weapon in 1989, implemented in 1990 amid self-immolations and upper-caste protests. This catalyzed identity-based populism, fragmenting the Congress's pan-Indian appeal and birthing OBC-centric parties like Samajwadi Party (SP) and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD).

Liberalization and Regional Ascendancy (1990s–2000s)

The 1991 economic liberalization under P.V. Narasimha Rao dismantled the License Raj, unleashing growth but exacerbating inequalities. Jobless growth—GDP soared from 5% to 8%, yet formal employment stagnated—fueled agrarian suicides and urban migration. Populist backlashes proliferated: regional satraps like Lalu Prasad Yadav (Bihar) and Mulayam Singh Yadav (UP) blended Mandal equity with rustic charisma, promising free electricity and anti-upper-caste revenge.

Coalition eras (1996–2014) democratized populism through federal bargaining. United Front (1996–98), NDA (1998–2004), and UPA (2004–2014) governments relied on 20+ regional parties, who leveraged welfare for power-sharing. The NDA's Golden Quadrilateral and rural electrification coexisted with state schemes like Tamil Nadu's Amma canteens or Andhra Pradesh's Pavala Vaddi (low-interest loans). UPA's Rights Revolution—MNREGA (2005), RTI (2005), Food Security Act (2013)—universalized welfarism, with Sonia Gandhi's NAC steering anti-poverty populism. Yet, scams (2G, Coal) and inflation eroded trust, paving Narendra Modi's rise.

Modi Era and Contemporary Synthesis (2014–2026)

Modi's 2014 ascent fused economic nationalism with digital populism. "Achhe Din" promised jobs and corruption-free governance, riding a Hindutva wave against UPA's "weak" leadership. Demonetization (2016) and GST (2017) were sold as anti-black money crusades, despite disruptions. COVID-19 accelerated welfarism: PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (free grains to 800 million) and Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) echoed Indira's direct benefit transfers, now via Jan Dhan-Aadhaar linkage.

By Modi's second term (2019–2024) and into 2026, populism federalized. National schemes like PM-KISAN (₹6,000/year to farmers) and Ayushman Bharat (health insurance) set benchmarks, but states innovated: Kerala's Kudumbashree women SHGs, West Bengal's Lakshmir Bhandar (cash to women), and Karnataka's Gruha Jyothi (free electricity). Regional flavors persist—Telangana's Rythu Bandhu farm cash transfers rival national agrarian populism—while BJP co-opts OBC/Dalit outreach via sub-categorization.

Yet, challenges loom: jobless growth persists (unemployment at 8% in 2025), farmer protests (2020–21) exposed agrarian rifts, and urban youth demand skilling over handouts. Populism, once Congress's monopoly, now permeates a multipolar democracy, blending welfarism, identity, and strongman appeals amid global headwinds like climate shocks.

Populist Policies Across States:

Post-1991, states innovated context-specific policies, blending ideology with patronage. Southern agrarian heartlands prioritized irrigation and rice subsidies; northern plains focused on caste quotas; eastern tribals on health and cash aid.

Andhra Pradesh: TDP's Telugu Pride:

N.T. Rama Rao's Telugu Desam Party (TDP), founded 1982, epitomized early post-liberalization populism. Selling gold to fund ₹2/kg rice for the poor challenged Congress elitism. Successors like Chandrababu Naidu balanced tech hubs (Hyderabad-IT boom) with Telugu Ganga irrigation and Pasu Dharma (cattle loans). Post-2004 bifurcation, Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy's Congress revived Indiramma housing, while Jagan Mohan Reddy's YSRCP (2019-2024) launched Amma Vodi (₹15,000 school aid) and YSR Cheyutha (women cash transfers). TDP's 2024 return sustained these, underscoring enduring appeal.

Tamil Nadu: Dravidian Welfarism:

AIADMK and DMK institutionalized populism via competitive freebies, rooted in Periyar's anti-Brahminism. Post-1991, M. Karunanidhi's DMK introduced free color TVs (2006), while Jayalalithaa's AIADMK countered with gold thalis (mangalsutras), laptops, and Amma canteens (subsidized meals). MK Stalin's DMK (2021-) expanded Vidiyal Payiru (free breakfasts) and Kalaignar insurance. These schemes, funded by liquor taxes and borrowings, ensured 50%+ Dravidian vote share, integrating social justice with consumption populism.

Kerala and West Bengal: Leftist Redistribution:

Kerala's Left Democratic Front (LDF) redistributed 3 million acres post-1957, empowering tenants via tenancy abolition. Post-1991, it sustained Kudumbashree self-help groups and ASHA health workers. West Bengal's CPI(M) Operation Barga (1978) registered 1.4 million sharecroppers, peaking land reforms. TMC's 2011 takeover shifted to Lakshmir Bhandar (₹1,000-2,000/month women stipend) and Swasthya Sathi (₹5 lakh health cover), serving 1 crore beneficiaries. Mamata Banerjee's "didi" persona fused personalism with anti-Left mobilization.

Odisha: BJD's Naveen Model:

Naveen Patnaik's BJD (2000-2024) built a welfarist brand: KALIA (₹10,000/farmer aid post-2019 crisis), 5T (teamwork, technology) governance, and Biju Swasthya Kalyan (cashless care up to ₹10 lakh). Subhadra Yojana (₹50,000 over 5 years for women 21-60) targeted 10 million, boosting 2024 incumbency. BJP's post-2024 retention highlights cross-ideological viability.

Bihar: Mandal's Backward March:

Lalu Prasad's RJD (1990s) mythologized backward castes via reservations, cycles for girls, and railway jobs. Nitish Kumar's JD(U) added techno-populism: school toilets, liquor ban, and gharibi hatao cycles. Post-2020 NDA, schemes like Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan (₹50,000 girl lifecycle aid) persist, blending caste with gender.

Other States: Competitive Populism

Maharashtra's Shiv Sena-BJP axis launched farm loan waivers (2019, ₹72,000 crore hit) and Ladki Bahin (₹1,500/month women). Gujarat's BJP under Modi pioneered KHAM alliances, scaling to PM-KISAN nationally. Uttar Pradesh's Samajwadi Party freebies (laptops, tablets) and BJP's Ujjwala LPG cylinders targeted Muslims/Yadavs vs. Hindus.

Fiscal and Federal Challenges:

These policies escalated subnational debt from 18% GDP (1991) to 30% (2025), prompting RBI warnings on "freebie culture". States leverage Finance Commission devolution (42% post-14th FC) and cesses for funding. Coalition eras (1990s) amplified bargaining, as TDP/AIADMK extracted packages. Modi's GST regime centralized revenues, yet states innovated user charges (e.g., TN health tax).

Critics decry patronage over investment, correlating with stagnant per capita growth in Bihar/Odisha vs. Gujarat. Yet, they boosted female literacy (TN: 85%) and reduced poverty (Odisha: 25% drop 2011-21).

National-Subnational Interplay:

BJP's pan-India populism Ayushman Bharat, PM Awas subsidiarizes state efforts, fostering emulation (e.g., WB Swasthya Sathi mirrors it). Modi's "double engine" in BJP states blends growth with welfarism, polarizing via Hindutva. Regional satraps like Banerjee/Patnaik resist centralization, sustaining federal pluralism.

Implications for Democracy:

Populism democratized representation, elevating OBCs (27% quotas), women (33% panchayat seats), and tribals. It mitigated liberalization's shocks, fostering inclusive growth amid 8% GDP spurts. Challenges persist: personalization risks authoritarianism (e.g., Jagan's exit), fiscal populism erodes capex, and elite capture via cronyism.

Yet, in India's diverse federalism, it pluralizes power, countering majoritarian centralism. Sustainable calibration targeted universalism over freebies ensures longevity.

Conclusion:

Populism's Enduring Legacy in Indian Democracy

The recurrent salience of populism in Indian political history, as traced from the late 19th century to contemporary federal dynamics, underscores its chameleonic adaptability and indispensable role in democratizing power. Far from a transient aberration or mere rhetorical flourish, populism has functioned as a vital mechanism for mobilizing emergent social groups—be they peasants, low castes, or regional identities—against entrenched elites, while coexisting with nationalism, socialism, and even neoliberalism. By pitting a virtuous "people" against corrupt or distant powerholders, populist discourses have not only reshaped civil society and

policy landscapes but also fortified India's federal democracy against authoritarian centralism. This conclusion synthesizes these insights, reflecting on populism's contributions, tensions, and future trajectories in the world's largest democracy.

Historically, populism's fusion with anti-colonial nationalism exemplifies its emancipatory potential. Mahatma Gandhi's Congress embodied a classic populist strategy, forging multi-ethnic alliances among peasants, artisans, and urban laborers through khadi romanticism and village-centric rhetoric. This "Gandhian populism" bridged ideological divides, appealing to a homogenized "people" while accommodating diverse caste and class interests. Similarly, Jyotirao Phule's Satya Shodhak Samaj in Maharashtra and the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu harnessed populist appeals to challenge Brahmanical dominance, laying the groundwork for post-independence caste-based mobilization. B.R. Ambedkar's dalit coalitions further extended this logic, transforming subaltern grievances into constitutional demands for reservations and representation. These late-colonial manifestations propelled decolonization and, post-1960s, catalyzed landmark gains like the Mandal Commission recommendations, which boosted low-caste mobility in northern and western states. Populism thus emerges not as ideology alone—per Mudde and Kaltwasser's framework—but as a multifaceted orientation encompassing discourse, organization, and policy, adaptable across regimes from authoritarian (e.g., Getúlio Vargas in Brazil or Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines) to fully democratic contexts.

Comparatively, Indian populism mirrors global patterns yet retains distinct federal inflections. In agrarian South Asia and Eastern Europe, it emphasized land reforms and peasant empowerment, akin to Kerala's and West Bengal's Communist-led redistributions that empowered tillers against zamindars. This contrasts with industrializing Latin America's Peronist models, where loose organizations like Justicialism delivered urban welfare amid rapid modernization, or postindustrial Europe's anti-immigrant variants in the US and EU. India's democratic setting, however, amplified populism's institutionalization: Indira Gandhi's "Garibi Hatao" slogan in the 1970s mobilized the poor against "elite syndicates," blending semi-authoritarian Emergency tactics with welfarism. Regional exemplars like N.T. Rama Rao's Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh and M.G. Ramachandran's AIADMK in Tamil Nadu pursued "redistributive welfarism"—subsidized rice, free electricity, and health schemes—that enhanced subnational autonomy amid central elite challenges. Evo Morales's MAS in Bolivia offers a parallel, where indigenous populism drove resource nationalization under democratic federalism. Yet, unlike Chávez's Venezuela, where populism veered into semi-democratic decay, Indian variants sustained pluralism through electoral competition and judicial oversight, underscoring populism's compatibility with robust institutions (Subramanian 1999, 2007).

This adaptability has profoundly shaped Indian federalism, turning potential fractures into democratic dividends. Populist regional parties have countered Delhi's dominance, fostering a "federal populism" that decentralizes welfare and representation. Mandal-era policies, for instance, not only elevated Other Backward Classes (OBCs) but also spurred competitive populism across states: Bihar's Lalu Prasad Yadav emphasized Yadav-Muslim coalitions, while Uttar Pradesh's Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mayawati alternated caste-based appeals. In the south, Dravidian populism evolved into governance models blending welfarism with anti-Hindi federalism, as seen in Tamil Nadu's mid-day meals and Karnataka's Ahinda alliances. These dynamics have enriched India's "asymmetric federalism," where states like Kerala innovate with public health populism, and Odisha's Naveen Patnaik leverages BJD's

"people-first" rhetoric for disaster resilience. Policies range from Gandhian village romanticism—rural self-reliance under Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan—to neoliberal dilutions in Gujarat's "vibrant" growth model under Narendra Modi's early tenure, and back to redistributive universalism via schemes like MGNREGA and PM-KISAN.

Yet, populism's dual-edged nature demands critical scrutiny. Its discursive pitting of "people" versus "elites" risks majoritarian exclusion, as evident in contemporary Hindutva populism, which redefines the "virtuous people" along ethno-religious lines, challenging secular federalism. The BJP's ascent since 2014 illustrates this shift: Modi's "chowkidar" narrative frames opposition as elitist "tukde-tukde" gangs, echoing global right-wing variants while co-opting left-populist welfare (e.g., Ayushman Bharat). In states like Maharashtra and Haryana, Maratha and Jat agitations reveal populism's fragmentation, where caste demands clash with agrarian distress. Moreover, under neoliberal pressures, populism often substitutes structural reforms with handouts, perpetuating patronage without addressing inequality—West Bengal's post-Left decline exemplifies this trap.

Looking ahead, populism's role in Indian democracy remains pivotal amid 21st-century challenges: climate-induced migrations, digital divides, and youth aspirations. As global comparisons suggest, resilient democracies harness populism's mobilizational energy through inclusive institutions—think Morales's plurinational constitution or Bolivia's MAS balancing redistribution with market integration. India must similarly evolve "deliberative populism," integrating subaltern voices via platforms like Gram Sabhas and digital town halls, while curbing its polarizing excesses through electoral reforms and judicial federalism. In an era of polycrisis, populism can reinvigorate federal bargaining, ensuring that policies from education (NEP 2020's equity push) to agriculture (farmer laws' repeal) reflect diverse "peoples."

Ultimately, Indian populism defies reductive labels, embodying a democratic vernacular that has mobilized the marginalized, diversified ideologies, and federalized power. From Phule's samaj to Modi's mitra, it has coexisted with progress and peril, shaping a resilient yet imperfect republic. By bridging discourse, organization, and policy, it affirms Cas Mudde's insight: populism is "the illiberal democratic response to illiberal liberalism." For India's federal future, embracing its constructive impulses—while fortifying against capture—holds the key to inclusive governance.

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