

Farmer Centric Populism and Stabilization of the Agriculture Sector in Telangana

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Introduction

Agriculture has historically been the backbone of India's rural economy, providing livelihoods to millions of households and shaping the socio-political fabric of the nation. Within this broader context, Telangana, India's youngest state formed in 2014, presents a unique case study of how farmer-centric populism has been deployed as both a political strategy and a developmental framework. The state's agrarian sector has long been characterized by structural vulnerabilities: fragmented landholdings, dependence on monsoon rainfall, limited irrigation infrastructure, and recurring cycles of farmer indebtedness. These challenges have often manifested in acute agrarian distress, including high rates of farmer suicides, particularly in districts such as Warangal, Karimnagar, and Nalgonda.

Against this backdrop, the Telangana government has positioned farmers at the center of its policy discourse. Populist measures such as **Rythu Bandhu**, a direct income support scheme, and **Rythu Bima**, a farmer insurance program, have been introduced to provide immediate relief and stabilize rural livelihoods. Large-scale irrigation projects, most notably the **Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Scheme**, have been promoted as transformative interventions to address water scarcity and enhance agricultural productivity. These initiatives are not merely welfare programs; they are deeply embedded in the political narrative of Telangana's statehood, where farmers were portrayed as the symbolic custodians of the new state's identity.

This paper seeks to critically examine the intersection of populism and agricultural stabilization in Telangana. It asks: To what extent have populist policies contributed to stabilizing the agrarian economy? How sustainable are these interventions in the long run? And what lessons can be drawn for broader agricultural policy in India? By situating Telangana's experience within the theoretical framework of populism and agrarian development, this study aims to contribute to ongoing debates about the role of welfare populism in shaping agricultural resilience.

Conceptual Framework

The study of farmer-centric populism in Telangana requires a clear conceptual grounding in both political theory and agrarian economics. Populism, in its broadest sense, refers to a political approach that seeks to mobilize "the people" against perceived elites, often through direct appeals and redistributive policies. In agrarian contexts, populism manifests as welfare-oriented interventions that prioritize farmers as the symbolic and practical beneficiaries of state policy. This form of populism is distinct from purely rhetorical populism, as it translates political promises into tangible schemes such as subsidies, cash transfers, and insurance programs. (Neog, 2023)

Populism in Agrarian Policy

Agrarian populism has historically been a feature of Indian politics, with loan waivers, minimum support prices, and irrigation subsidies serving as instruments of political

legitimacy. In Telangana, however, farmer-centric populism has acquired a unique character. It is not only a response to agrarian distress but also a continuation of the statehood movement, where farmers were portrayed as the backbone of the new state. Thus, populism in Telangana is both symbolic and material: it reinforces the identity of farmers as central to the state's political narrative while delivering welfare schemes that directly impact their livelihoods.

Welfare Populism vs. Structural Reform

A key distinction in the literature is between welfare populism and structural reform. Welfare populism provides immediate relief through redistributive measures, while structural reform addresses long-term challenges such as productivity, sustainability, and market integration. Telangana's policies, particularly Rythu Bandhu and Rythu Bima, exemplify welfare populism, whereas initiatives like crop diversification and irrigation infrastructure represent structural reform. The tension between these two approaches is central to understanding the stabilization of agriculture in the state.

Farmer-Centric Populism as Hybrid Governance

Telangana's experience suggests that farmer-centric populism operates as a hybrid model. On one hand, it delivers short-term welfare that enhances farmer confidence and reduces vulnerability. On the other, it attempts to embed these populist measures within broader developmental strategies, such as digital extension services and irrigation projects. This hybrid approach raises important questions: Can populism evolve into a sustainable governance model? Or does it risk creating dependency while neglecting systemic reforms

Theoretical Lens

This paper adopts a dual theoretical lens:

- **Political economy of populism:** analysing how populist policies reinforce political legitimacy.
- **Agrarian development theory:** examining how welfare schemes interact with structural reforms to stabilize agriculture.

By situating Telangana's policies within this framework, the study aims to highlight both the opportunities and limitations of farmer-centric populism as a tool for agricultural stabilization.

Historical Background of Telangana Agriculture

Agrarian Distress Before 2014

The agricultural sector in the Telangana region, prior to the state's formation in 2014, was marked by persistent distress. Farmers faced multiple structural challenges: small and fragmented landholdings, dependence on erratic monsoon rainfall, inadequate irrigation facilities, and limited access to institutional credit. These vulnerabilities were compounded by volatile market prices for crops such as cotton, maize, and paddy, which often left cultivators trapped in cycles of debt. The lack of effective crop insurance and the dominance of informal moneylenders further exacerbated financial insecurity.

One of the most tragic manifestations of this distress was the high incidence of farmer suicides. Districts such as Warangal, Karimnagar, and Nalgonda became emblematic of agrarian crisis, with thousands of farmers taking their lives due to mounting debts and crop failures. Reports from the early 2000s highlighted that Telangana accounted for a disproportionate share of farmer suicides in undivided Andhra Pradesh, underscoring the severity of the crisis. (*Bondyalu, 2017*)

Structural Challenges

Several structural issues defined the agrarian landscape:

- **Land Fragmentation:** The average landholding size was small, limiting economies of scale.
- **Irrigation Deficit:** Despite the presence of major rivers like the Godavari and Krishna, irrigation coverage remained low due to inadequate infrastructure.
- **Credit Access:** Institutional credit was insufficient, forcing farmers to rely on informal lenders at exorbitant interest rates.
- **Market Volatility:** Cotton and chili farmers, in particular, faced sharp price fluctuations, leaving them vulnerable to global market trends.
- **Technological Gaps:** Limited adoption of modern farming techniques and mechanization kept productivity levels stagnant.

Farmers in the Statehood Movement

The Telangana statehood movement was deeply intertwined with agrarian concerns. Farmers were portrayed as the symbolic custodians of the region's identity, and their struggles were central to the political narrative. Slogans and mobilizations often highlighted the neglect of Telangana's irrigation needs under the united Andhra Pradesh administration. The demand for a separate state was thus framed not only as a political aspiration but also as an agrarian necessity — a promise that a new Telangana would prioritize farmers and address their long-standing grievances.

Transition After State Formation

When Telangana was carved out in 2014, the new government inherited an agrarian sector in crisis. The political leadership, aware of the centrality of farmers to the statehood narrative, quickly introduced welfare-oriented schemes to signal its commitment to agrarian stabilization. This historical context explains why farmer-centric populism became the cornerstone of Telangana's governance model: it was both a response to structural distress and a continuation of the promises made during the statehood struggle.

Populist Interventions in Telangana

Rythu Bandhu

Introduced in 2018, **Rythu Bandhu** is one of the flagship schemes of Telangana's farmer-centric populism. It provides direct income support to farmers, with seasonal payments per acre of cultivated land. The scheme was designed to ensure liquidity at the beginning of the cropping season, enabling farmers to purchase inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides without resorting to debt. Politically, Rythu Bandhu became a symbol of the government's commitment to farmers, reinforcing the narrative that Telangana was a "farmer-first" state.

Rythu Bima

Complementing Rythu Bandhu, the **Rythu Bima** scheme provides life insurance coverage to farmers. In the event of a farmer's death, the family receives financial compensation, reducing vulnerability and ensuring social security. This intervention reflects the populist emphasis on protecting farmers not only economically but also socially, positioning the state as a guardian of rural households.

Irrigation Projects

The **Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Project** is perhaps the most ambitious infrastructural intervention in Telangana's agrarian sector. Designed to harness the waters of the Godavari River, the project aims to provide irrigation to millions of acres of farmland. While celebrated as a transformative initiative, it has also been critiqued for its high costs and

environmental implications. Nevertheless, it exemplifies how populist politics in Telangana extends beyond welfare schemes to large-scale developmental projects.

Loan Waivers and Subsidies

Loan waivers have been a recurring populist measure in Telangana, aimed at alleviating farmer indebtedness. Subsidies on inputs such as fertilizers and electricity further reinforce the welfare narrative. These measures, while offering immediate relief, raise questions about fiscal sustainability and long-term productivity.

Impact on Agricultural Stabilization

Short-Term Outcomes

Populist schemes have provided immediate relief to farmers by ensuring liquidity, reducing dependence on informal credit, and enhancing morale. Rythu Bandhu payments, for instance, have allowed farmers to invest in inputs without borrowing at high interest rates. Insurance coverage under Rythu Bima has offered social security, reducing vulnerability to shocks.

Medium-Term Outcomes

The expansion of irrigation infrastructure has increased cropping intensity and enabled diversification into cash crops. Farmers have reported greater confidence in cultivating water-intensive crops such as paddy. The combination of welfare and infrastructural interventions has contributed to a sense of stability in the agrarian economy.

Challenges

Despite these gains, several challenges persist:

- Fiscal burden on the state budget.
- Risk of dependency on subsidies.
- Uneven distribution of benefits, with larger landholders often gaining more from schemes like Rythu Bandhu.
- Environmental concerns linked to large irrigation projects.

Critiques of Farmer-Centric Populism

Critics argue that farmer-centric populism, while politically effective, risks overshadowing structural reforms. Loan waivers, for example, provide temporary relief but do not address systemic issues such as low productivity or market volatility. Similarly, direct cash transfers may create dependency rather than incentivize innovation.

Comparisons with other states highlight these concerns. In Punjab, populist subsidies have contributed to groundwater depletion, while in Maharashtra, loan waivers have failed to prevent recurring agrarian distress. (*Gudavarthy, 2023*) Telangana's model, though innovative, must therefore be evaluated in terms of sustainability rather than short-term gains.

Towards Sustainable Agrarian Transformation

For farmer-centric populism to evolve into a sustainable governance model, it must be integrated with structural reforms. Key strategies include:

- **Crop Diversification:** Encouraging farmers to move beyond paddy and cotton to more resilient crops.
- **Digital Extension Services:** Leveraging technology to provide real-time information on weather, markets, and best practices.
- **Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs):** Strengthening collective bargaining and market access.

- **Water Management:** Promoting micro-irrigation and sustainable use of water resources.
- **Value-Chain Integration:** Linking farmers to processing units and markets to enhance profitability.

Telangana's experience demonstrates that populism can serve as both a political instrument and a developmental strategy. By centering farmers in its policy discourse, the state has achieved short-term stabilization and reinforced political legitimacy. However, the sustainability of this model depends on balancing welfare populism with structural reforms. Populism alone cannot ensure resilience; it must be embedded within a broader framework of institutional strengthening and sustainable practices.

Conclusion

Farmer-centric populism has undeniably contributed to stabilizing agriculture in Telangana. Schemes such as Rythu Bandhu and Rythu Bima have provided immediate relief, while irrigation projects have expanded agricultural potential. Yet, the long-term sustainability of these interventions remains uncertain. Telangana's experience offers valuable lessons: populism can catalyze agrarian transformation if strategically aligned with structural reforms, but it risks creating dependency if pursued in isolation. The future of Telangana's agriculture lies in a hybrid approach that combines welfare populism with systemic reforms, ensuring resilience, competitiveness, and sustainability.

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