

Populist Policies in Indian States

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Introduction

In the last few years, Indian politics has entered in a new phase of populist politics, where state welfarism promotes the policies with a strategic sense of belonging to a particular ideology. The populist persuasion of Hindutva ideology and beneficiaries creates the ground of adaptability beyond identity. There have been various policies introduced and implemented all across the nation. Political parties and their leaders have condemned and criticized the opposition's promises. Undoubtedly, Indian democracy is facing new challenges in the form of populism and populist persuasion by the leaders. India is known for the welfare state to institutionalize the discourse of social justice and empowerment of weaker sections of society. However, these schemes are not a new initiative in the way of inclusive development and welfare populism. The history of welfare populism is constant from leftist Indira Gandhi to the rightist Modi. However, the origin of populist welfarism can be traced back to the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Contemporary right-wing populism favors faith, spirituality, and modern technology altogether. But these populist measures are unsustainable without policies and programs. Strategic welfarism is one of the aspects of Modi's populism. Since 2014, the BJP has continued to leverage its "new welfarism. In this context, populist policies have emerged as a powerful political tool at the state level. State governments frequently announce schemes that provide direct material benefits to citizens, especially vulnerable groups such as farmers, women, students, and the poor. It focuses on tangible services such as cash transfers, cooking gas, electricity, shelter, water, etc., directly related to welfare populism. These policies are often popular and electorally rewarding, making populism an enduring feature of Indian politics.

However, populist policies raise important questions: Are they genuine welfare measures or short-term electoral incentives? Do they promote social justice or undermine economic discipline? This paper seeks to analyse populist policies across Indian states to understand their motivations, patterns, and consequences.

Conceptual Framework: Understanding Populism.

In the present scenario, policies go beyond mere public policy under the leadership of Narendra Modi. Modi could make a direct relationship with the people, claim to be anti-elitist, nationalist, morally right, and have enlarged social benefits. Populists are undoubtedly charismatic and gain autocratic power through pro-people stances. They use policies to assert themselves as representatives of the people. For a populist, majoritarianism always works while making a distinction between the people and the corrupt elite. The populist rhetoric of "the poor" is an Indian version of populism. Public policies are populist regimes and a populist leader is infallible. They act in the best interest of their people. All this is possible because a strong bond ties the government, its leaders, and its people. Every utterance of a populist is legitimate because it represents people's will. Modi's speeches create an emotional fusion between himself and his supporters as he claims that, "all our schemes must serve the poor," also "the dreams of the poor are the dreams of my government, and reducing their troubles in everyday life is my government's biggest responsibility." India's right-wing populism is a thin-centered ideology, which means it mixes up with different ideologies, whether left or right. At the state level, populism manifests through subsidies, free services, loan waivers, and cash transfer schemes. These measures are framed as instruments of empowerment and social justice, especially in a society marked by historical inequalities of caste, class, and gender.

Evolution of Populist Policies in Indian States

Populist policies in India are not a recent phenomenon. From land reforms and subsidised food programmes to the expansion of reservations and welfare boards, state governments have long used welfare measures to build political support. At the state level, populism manifests through subsidies, free services, loan waivers, and cash transfer schemes. These measures are framed as instruments of empowerment and social justice, especially in a society marked by historical inequalities of caste, class, and gender. Since the 1990s, economic liberalisation and coalition politics have intensified competitive populism. States now compete with each other in announcing welfare schemes, particularly during elections. The rise of regional parties has further strengthened state-level populism, as these parties rely heavily on targeted welfare promises to consolidate support.

Major Forms of Populist Policies

Populist policies in Indian states can be broadly categorised as follows:

Subsidies and Freebies

These include free electricity, water, transport, and distribution of consumer goods. Such measures provide immediate relief but often place heavy burdens on state finances.

Cash Transfer Schemes

Many states have introduced direct benefit transfer schemes for farmers, women, and unemployed youth. These schemes are 1. Mahila Samridhi Yojana – Delhi, 2. Subhadra Yojana – Odisha, 3. Ladli Behna Yojana – Madhya Pradesh, 4. Gruha Lakshmi Yojana – Karnataka, 5. Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana – Maharashtra, 6. Lakshmi Bhandar Scheme – West Bengal, 7. Mukhyamantri Maiya Samman Yojana – Jharkhand, 8. Magalir Urimai Scheme – Tamil Nadu, 9. Women-Centric Announcements in BJP, Congress Manifestos Ahead of Haryana Polls. With less than a month left for the Haryana assembly elections, both the Congress and the BJP have promised direct cash benefits for women voters. The Congress has pledged a monthly allowance of ₹2,000 for every woman aged 18 to 60, while the BJP has promised ₹2,100 per month for women in the state.

However, women centric cash transfer schemes have become a significant tool for Indian states aiming to empower women and secure their support in elections. While these initiatives provide immediate financial relief and promote inclusion, it is essential to balance them with considerations of fiscal responsibility and long-term economic impacts. Continuous assessment and adaptation are crucial to ensure these programs achieve their intended outcomes without imposing excessive burdens on state finances.

Loan Waivers and Debt Relief

Farm loan waivers are a common populist measure aimed at addressing agrarian distress. While they offer short-term relief, they raise concerns about moral hazard and fiscal stress.

Social Sector Welfare

Schemes related to education, health, housing, and nutrition form a significant part of populist governance and often have long-term social benefits if implemented effectively.

Political Logic of Populism

The popularity of populist policies is rooted in India's electoral structure. High levels of poverty, inequality, and informal employment make voters more responsive to direct benefits. Political parties use populist promises to signal responsiveness and compassion, especially when institutional trust is low. Moreover, federalism allows states considerable autonomy in designing welfare schemes, encouraging competitive populism among states.

Impact of Populist Policies

Positive Outcomes

Populist policies have contributed to poverty reduction, social inclusion, and improved access to basic services. They have empowered marginalised groups and expanded the role of the

state in social protection.

Negative Consequences

At the same time, excessive populism can strain state finances, reduce capital expenditure, and increase public debt. Poorly targeted schemes may lead to inefficiency, corruption, and dependency.

Populism, Federalism and Fiscal Sustainability

Indian federalism provides states with policy flexibility, but also imposes fiscal responsibility. Persistent populist spending without adequate revenue mobilisation threatens fiscal stability. This raises concerns about inter-generational equity and the long-term capacity of states to invest in development. The debate on populism has also entered judicial and constitutional discourse, particularly regarding the distinction between legitimate welfare and electoral inducements.

Conclusion

Populist policies in Indian states represent both the strength and the challenge of Indian democracy. They reflect democratic responsiveness to social needs but also expose the risks of short-termism in governance. The key challenge is not to reject populism outright, but to design welfare policies that are inclusive, transparent, and fiscally sustainable. A balanced approach that combines social justice with economic prudence is essential for the future of Indian federalism and democratic governance.

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