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Populism in Contemporary Indian Politics

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Introduction

In recent times we see populism all around us, but its precise definition remains elusive. From a democratic point of view, the ambivalence is already apparent in the term “populism.” Its root is the Latin word *populus* (the people), which exhibits a clear link with the democratic idea. Where there is democracy, in other words, there is always populism.¹ On the other hand, the suffix “ism” signals an ideological potentiation in contrast to the moderate character of today’s democracies. By exaggerating the democratic element and mobilizing it against the constraints introduced into democratic systems by constitutional principles, populism moves at least potentially into the proximity of opponents of the system.²

According to Mounk,³ the list of movements that have historically been called populist is strikingly long and varied. There are the *populares* of Ancient Rome, the agrarians of nineteenth-century Wisconsin, and the Peronists of twentieth-century Argentina. Even today, the populist label is being applied to Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro, and to Italy’s Beppe Grillo as well as France’s Marine Le Pen. Yet the movements they lead are not inspired by one single political ideology. Some favor state ownership of the means of production, while others want to privatize prisons; some seek to put politics under religious tutelage, while others are stridently secular. In global politics, populism is often used to signify a movement in which an “outsider” or anti-establishment figure tries to capture power by appealing directly to the masses. Some dictionaries define populism as a political philosophy that favors the rights of “the people” as opposed to those of elites.⁴ This seems to be the common political imagination shared by populist leaders the world over.

Populist leaders do not only promise good things to everybody — even though to be a merchant of dreams is an important part of their politics — they also articulate a political style. Populists claim to represent the people and this stance places them above any institution, including the judiciary, because they identify directly with the people’s sentiments, sense of justice, and morality. Müller names this as a “moral monopoly of representation.”⁵ According to Müller, it is this posture that makes populists inherently dangerous. Because they

¹ Margaret Canovan. “Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy.” *Political studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2-16.

² Frank Decker. “The populist challenge to liberal democracy.” *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 3 (2003): 47-59.

³ Yascha Mounk. “Why Populism Is Sweeping Europe.” *The New Republic*, July 19, 2017.

⁴ Bhaskar Dutta. “What is Populism? - Voters Have Not Booted Out Re-distributive Schemes in India.” *Telegraph India*, January 14, 2014.

⁵ Jan-Werner Müller. *What is populism?*. Penguin UK, 2017.

see themselves as the only legitimate political actors, they seek to take over the judiciary, to gain control of the media, and to co-opt other institutions. While other political forces might, to varying degrees, engage in similar practices, only populists can “undertake such colonization openly.” The openness of the populist challenge to pluralism makes them much more dangerous than more covert enemies of democracy.⁶

Populism, however, is not an ideology. It is not, for instance, either right or left wing. It is not simply demagoguery either. Populism invokes an idea of the masses of common people who are either excluded from or have limited access to privilege, distinguished from the elite, who do have access to privilege and embody alternative cultural traditions. Harriss quotes Swamy and defines populism as a doctrine which reinstates that ordinary people have been robbed of their due owing due to no fault of their own.⁷ This idea further holds the elite sections of society responsible for seizing just avenues for advancement and forgetting their moral obligations to protect the poor and underprivileged. Nevertheless, the ambiguity and ambivalence of populism as a philosophy make it impossible to create one single definition of this phenomenon.

In contrast, populism in popular parlance in India is used to refer to virtually any policy that is redistributive in nature instead of being purely growth-oriented. This is particularly true when such a policy is announced before impending elections.⁸ Given this background, this paper seeks to understand the context (socioeconomic and political) in which populism is practiced in Indian politics. Subsequently, the paper will also analyze its impact on Indian democracy and its democratic institutions. The second section will situate the rise of populism in India and the world while highlighting the causes contributing to its rise and significance. It will also elaborate upon popular perceptions of populism in the national and sub-national contexts. The third section discusses the factors which incentivize the practice of populism in the national and sub-national contexts using case studies to exemplify how populism is employed in practice. In this section, the paper also examines the impacts of such populist policies on the Indian democratic system. In the concluding section the paper will try to identify the role of civil society vis-a-vis populism.

History and the Rise of Populism in India

Since the late nineteenth century, populism has played a vital role in different phases of Indian history, particularly in mobilizing emergent groups and bringing about different movements and civil society initiatives. Populism has co-existed with several different ideological strands, and yet influenced a range of policies with its discourses and mobilization.

Contemporary politics is awash with populist developments, surrounding elections, political parties, and leaders. These trends have significant implications for how we look at modern democracies and their institutions. Most significantly, they signal widespread distrust in conventional democratic institutions, increasing

⁶ Müller. *What is populism?*.

⁷ John Harriss. “Populism, Tamil style: is it really a success?.” *Development Studies Institute Working Paper Series* 01-15 (2001).

⁸ In accordance with this idea, employment guarantee schemes, a food security bill (guaranteeing some amount of food grains at highly subsidized prices), and old-age pension schemes that are in place in several states are all “populist” measures. So are the loan-waiver schemes for farmers implemented from time to time, and indeed all the various subsidies that are announced intermittently. All of these can be subsumed under the umbrella of “populism.”

disconnection between citizens and elected representatives, and a growing dislike of “politics as usual.”

The term populism is generally used by the press in India to refer to the indiscriminate use of public resources to give goods away to voters. With these connotations of crowd-pleasing politics, populism has become a pejorative term. Populist politicians are criticized for giving away “freebies” or “sops” and pandering to the baser instincts of voters.⁹ It is assumed that populists govern in irrational and irresponsible ways¹⁰ and threaten fiscal chaos with their largesse.

In this context, it becomes imperative to understand contemporary populism within the realm of Indian history to trace its roots and reasons for its development. Politically, populist appeals were deployed extensively in the late colonial period with Gandhi’s agro-artisanal romanticism, an imagined pre-colonial social economy based on self-sufficient villages.¹¹ Populist forces emerged in the 1960s to increase emergent group representation and enhance the quality of India’s democracy. The most popular example of left-wing populism remains Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who in the 1970s concentrated power in her own hands, pledging to work for the people and end poverty in the country.¹² Indira Gandhi’s populism on the national stage vividly employed a strategy of anti-elitism. Paradoxically, the daughter of India’s first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru managed to portray herself as anti-elitist by delegitimizing the establishment of her own party and claiming not only to represent the people but even to personify the Indian nation itself.¹³ However, whereas Indira Gandhi exhibited important elements of populism, anti-pluralism was not part of her political strategy. To the contrary, by promoting clientelism and personal loyalty over party structure in order to expand her electoral base, Indira Gandhi’s leadership is widely regarded as contributing to the rise of a politics based on caste, tribal-ethnicity, and religion in the 1980s.¹⁴ At the same time, while the Indian National Congress (INC) engaged with populism associated with the common people, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) offered an indigenous populist alternative to India’s secularist and multicultural institutions, believing it to be a Western import helping a narrow elite retain their dominance.

The Indian subcontinent has also seen popular struggles in the form of caste movements, environmental struggles, and farmer mobilizations. Lower and middle caste movements to oppose caste inequalities and exclusions have had a deep presence in western and southern India from the time of the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth Seeker Society) led by Jyotirao Phule in regions that now constitute Maharashtra. Similarly, in the current state of Tamil Nadu, the Self-Respect Association has mobilized middle castes in an attempt to reclaim the autonomy this group previously enjoyed. These organizations pressed larger organizations to promote caste mobility. Environmental movements that resisted logging in the Himalayas in the 1970s and protested the construction of the Narmada dam from the 1990s have also been viewed through the lens of populist markers. The rise and fall of peasant movements in India between the 1980s and 2014 has been explored by eminent sociologist D. N. Dhanagare from the perspective of populist movements.¹⁵ A steady popular wave began in 2011 when Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal led the India Against Corruption movement, and it has been on the rise ever since.

⁹ “Freebies Galore in AIADMK Poll Manifesto.” *The Hindu*, March 25, 2011.

¹⁰ Francisco Panizza. “Introduction: Populism and the mirror of democracy.” (2005): 1-31.

¹¹ Narendra Subramanian. “Populism in India.” *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 27, no. 1 (2007): 81-91.

¹² Subramanian. “Populism in India.”

¹³ Ramachandra Guha. *India after Gandhi: The history of the world's largest democracy*. Pan Macmillan, 2017

¹⁴ Thomas Blom Hansen. *The saffron wave: Democracy and Hindu nationalism in modern India*. Princeton University Press, 1999.

¹⁵ D. N. Dhanagare. *Populism and Power: Farmers’ movement in western India, 1980--2014*. Routledge India, 2015.

The roots of the current round of populism lie in the economic system. The reforms of the 1990s produced modest liberalization of the Indian economy, greater internal deregulation, and continued growth in the services sector but stagnation in agriculture and unstable growth in industry.¹⁶ This economic growth has been unevenly experienced across different states.¹⁷ Domestically, the service sector produced relatively few jobs, and the vast bulk of those that were generated were in lower-productivity activities.¹⁸ The global competitiveness of services and manufacturing relies on informal production arrangements, the low wages and insecure informal contracts of those in supporting services such as logistics, security, and transport, and the ability to pay skilled professionals lower salaries than the global average.¹⁹ This has negatively impacted employment, income, and the standard of living for the masses and prompts support for populism that promises to change the status quo, propagating political and economic ideas that run counter to the established system. Thus, populist leaders often come to power in sustained weak economic conditions where they channel the rage of the people and garner support brought about by wealth gaps. Populist leaders promote the goal to work for the people and claim to represent the voice of the people; hence formulas such as “India is Indira and Indira is India.”

According to Plagemann and Destradi,²⁰ although the two most recent Congress-led governments (2004-2014) were sometimes dubbed “populist” in the Indian discourse, they did not reflect Indira Gandhi’s centralization of leadership nor anti-pluralism. Quite to the contrary, the Nehru-Gandhi era at the helm of the Congress party was the embodiment of India’s political elite. Moreover, the Congress rather consistently stuck to the long-held principles of secularism and pluralism. An example of this is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). According to Plagemann and Destradi,²¹ the Indian government under present Prime Minister Narendra Modi can be considered populist as it clearly entails both constitutive dimensions of populism: anti-elitism and anti-pluralism. The electoral victory of the BJP in 2014 came after a series of corruption scandals that tainted the image of the INC. The desire to replace corrupt elites and to put an end to India’s dynastic politics was a core element in Modi’s electoral success. Modi himself—the son of a tea-seller—embodied such anti-elitism.²² For instance, mocking the INC candidate Rahul Gandhi, the scion of the Gandhi-Nehru family, as a “prince” was a common feature during his campaign. In their analysis of the 2014 national election campaign, Chakravartty and Roy found that the BJP media team cultivated the party’s role as an underdog against the hereditary and corrupt political establishment in the form of Congress by “spending unprecedented amounts on an ‘advertising blitz’” and attacking the established media outlets, particularly the English language ones.²³ After the BJP came to power, the notion of fighting corrupt, impure, and spiritually malformed elites in politics, economics, and society became a key component of the ascetic celibate’s rhetoric.

¹⁶ Atul Kohli. "Politics of economic growth in India, 1980-2005: Part I: The 1980s." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2006): 1251-1259.

¹⁷ Aseema Sinha. *The regional roots of developmental politics in India: A divided leviathan*. Indiana University Press, 2005. For example states like Gujarat, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, with strengths in science, technology, and infrastructure, benefitted the most.

¹⁸ Jayati Ghosh. "Growth, industrialisation and inequality in India." *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 20, no. 1 (2015): 42-56.

¹⁹ Priya Chacko. "The right turn in India: Authoritarianism, populism and neoliberalisation." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 4 (2018): 541-565

²⁰ Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi. "Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15, n o. 2 (2018): 283-301.

²¹ Plagemann and Destradi. "Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India."

²² Plagemann and Destradi. "Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India."

²³ Paula Chakravartty and Srirupa Roy. "Mr. Modi goes to Delhi: Mediated populism and the 2014 Indian elections." *Television & New Media* 16, no. 4 (2015): 311-322.

Populists that rise in the wake of a social or moral crisis often mobilize people on the philosophy of “the other,” which can be any group representing imminent danger and conflict. For example, in colonial times this was the colonial power or the “non-sons of the soil.” In contemporary India, the Government of Gujarat countered the uneven development of the state Gujarat through an appeal to sub-national populism, which worked to neutralize/assuage the dissatisfaction amongst the impoverished marginalized groups within the category of the Gujarati people. This sub-national populism drew on the notion of Gujarati identity and set “the people” of Gujarat against the ineffectual governing elite in New Delhi. Moreover, this sub-national identity was defined specifically in Hindu terms and positioned against religious minorities.²⁴ In the wake of such a movement, nationalism is promoted as the social glue that holds people together and one that is an essential component of the struggle. The theory of cultural backlash positions populism among those holding traditional cultural values in any social space, mostly comprising the less educated groups or older individuals in a population. Populism as a political style flourishes in democracies as it requires a public space conducive to the freedom of expression.

Essentially, what this sequence establishes is what Germani terms “national populism”²⁵ that has affinities with the nationalist right and an identifiable ideology. This brand of populism has been successful in most regions of the world today, whether it is in phenomena such as Brexit or systems of government voted to power in the most powerful democracies in the world.

Populist Measures in India

India is an example that proves economic liberalization can co-exist with populist politics and that populism can be used as an ideological framework within which the political contradictions that follow from economic change can be managed. The capaciousness of populism allows for a range of interests, some of them conflicting, to be acknowledged in both symbolic and practical ways.

According to Kaur,²⁶ Pavan Verma at the Jaipur Literature festival said, “Ultimately the route to power is through winning elections, which is about swaying people’s emotions in your favor.”²⁷ Politicians can’t act on their promises if they don’t win elections – and winning votes requires public support. It is widely perceived by political parties that providing individual benefits is the surest way to win over voters, especially the poor. Hence it can be said that populist measures are means for politicians to be voted into power.

This section presents four case studies analyzing two populist measures at the state level and two at the national level. These case studies are presented chronologically. Through the following case studies, this article seeks to understand their impact on socioeconomic development as well as on democratic institutions.

²⁴ Christophe Jaffrelot. “Narendra Modi between Hindutva and subnationalism: The Gujarati asmita of a Hindu Hriday Samrat.” *India Review* 15, no. 2 (2016): 196-217.

²⁵ Gino Germani. *Authoritarianism, fascism, and national populism*. Transaction Publishers, 197. National Populism is a political ideology associated with authoritarian nationalism involving a rejection of liberal democracy, syndicalism, and secularism in favour of a traditionalist, militaristic, and one-party state dominated by a single leader.

²⁶ Nehmat Kaur. “Populism Threatens Democracy, but Is It Also Essential to It?” *The Wire*, December 15, 2017.

²⁷ Pavan K. Varma is a former diplomat, diplomat and now in politics, where he was until recently a Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) and earlier Advisor to the Chief Minister of Bihar with the rank of Cabinet Minister. He has authored over a dozen bestselling books, and served as Ambassador in several countries. He is currently the National General Secretary and National Spokesman of the Janata Dal (United).

Case Study 1: Guaranteeing Wage Employment in Rural India

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a social security measure that guarantees the “right to work” to Indian rural citizens. The scheme provides a legal guarantee for at least one hundred days of employment in every financial year to the adult members of any rural household willing to do public works-related unskilled manual labor at the statutory minimum wage.

The scale of the program is staggering, providing employment to a third of India’s rural population at an annual cost of nearly one percent of the GDP. It has formed the backbone of the United Progressive Alliance’s (UPA) anti-poverty and rural safety net program.²⁸

According to Mookherjee,²⁹ estimates from studies using the methodology difference in differences (DID) show a rise of approximately five percent in daily wages that can be attributed to the program, a figure that rises to nine percent in the “star”³⁰ states. Different studies using this methodology find corresponding positive effects on food and non-food consumption, calorie and protein intakes, and savings. Rural-urban migration rates have dropped, largely because of a fall in “distress migration”; urban unemployment rates fell by seven percent while child labor fell by approximately 10 percent.

Other studies have shown that the scheme has contributed to lowering poverty rates and altering rural power relations in ways that benefit the most vulnerable in rural India – women, *Adivasis*, and lower caste groups.³¹ Providing employment to rural unskilled labor is the single most direct and effective way of reducing poverty. Mookherjee insists, “With regard to targeting success, it beats the other big-ticket subsidy items in government budgets: food, fertilizer, and petroleum subsidies, each of which accounts for 0.8 percent of the GDP and benefits mainly the middle class rather than the poor. A leakage rate of 30 percent or less seems a vast improvement on the 70 percent-plus leakage rates associated with the Public Distribution System (PDS). The MGNREGA is far from perfect, but considerably more effective than any of these schemes in lowering poverty.”

³²

The Act emphasizes that the nature of work will be determined in *Palli-Sabha*³³ through participatory people’s plans, approved in *Gram Sabha*,³⁴ and accordingly the shelf of activities would be prepared. The *Gram Sabha* is further entrusted to take an active role in the approval and monitoring of work and conducting social audits.³⁵ Such measures promote citizen participation and stand to strengthen local institutions of democracy.

The Act not only guarantees wage employment as a right, but also promotes community participation in planning and monitoring through vigilance and monitoring committees, social audit through *Gram Sabha*, and also

²⁸ Dilip Mookherjee. “The Other Side of Populism.” *The Indian Express*, May 3, 2014.

²⁹ Mookherjee. “The Other Side of Populism.”

³⁰ Top performing states

³¹ Tanya Jakimow. “Breaking the backbone of farmers’: contestations in a rural employment guarantee scheme.” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41, no. 2 (2014): 263-281.

³² Mookherjee. “The Other Side of Populism.”

³³ All voters living in the Ward level electoral constituency are members of the *Ward Sabha*. In a state like Odisha it is constituted with all voters of a revenue village and is called *Palli Sabha*.

³⁴ *Gram Sabha* means a body consisting of all persons whose names are included in the electoral rolls for the *Panchayat* at the village level. The term is defined in the Constitution of India under Article 243(b).

³⁵ Social audit is a process of reviewing official records and determining whether state reported expenditures reflect the actual monies spent on the ground.

makes provisions for complete transparency as mandated by the Right to Information Act of 2005.

With regard to the implementation of mandated provisions, the evidence shows myriad shortcomings and wide variations across states. Less than 50 percent of beneficiaries were aware of the work-on-demand feature, and just 20 percent were aware of their unemployment benefit entitlement. There is substantial rationing: in 2009-2010, while 25 percent of rural households were provided work, 19 percent sought work but did not become employed.³⁶

Household surveys and social audits reveal numerous complaints – delayed wage payments, non-issuance of dated receipts, non-payment of the unemployment allowance, and payment of less than full wages.³⁷ Lakha et. al has found that implementation of the innovative social audit provisions of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which were to promote accountability, transparency, and participation, has been hampered by the lack of training for the monitoring committees entrusted to carry out these audits; the reliance on state governments which lacked the ability and commitment to ensure the effective functioning of the scheme; and the lack of awareness among potential beneficiaries of their entitlements.³⁸

According to Mookherjee, MGNREGA helped the UPA win for the second time in the 2009 general elections. There is regression discontinuity (RD)-based evidence showing that the Congress reaped electoral benefits from rolling out MGNREGA and that the budgetary allocations for the program across districts and blocks have been manipulated in certain states to increase these benefits.³⁹ However, there is also recent evidence that the electoral benefits which arose for the Congress in the early stages of implementation turned into a liability in the later stages. With the passage of years, citizen expectations from the scheme have risen, while the problems of implementation have become more evident. Failure to implement the MGNREGA properly has thus become a political liability for the Congress in the medium to long run. Herein lies a cautionary tale for parties in power when they introduce populist schemes: failure to implement them properly will turn out to be a political liability later on.

Case Study 2: Providing Subsidized Cooked Food in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu's political history for the past four decades has been characterized by a slew of populist measures. The laundry list of freebies handed out by the late Jayalalithaa included the waiver of all farm loans, free laptops for Class X and XII students, free cell phones for all ration card holders, and government reimbursement of education loans.⁴⁰

One of her flagship schemes was the *Amma Unavagam* (Mother's Canteen) launched with much fanfare in 2013. Meant to provide wholesome food at heavily subsidized rates, the canteens run by the government but

³⁶ Mookherjee. "The Other Side of Populism."

³⁷ Mookherjee. "The Other Side of Populism."

³⁸ Salim Lakha, Rajasekhar Durgam, and Manjula Ramachandra. "Collusion, Co-option and Capture: Social Accountability and Social Audits in Karnataka, India." *Oxford Development Studies* 43, no. 3 (2015): 330-348.

³⁹ Mookherjee. "The Other Side of Populism."

⁴⁰ "Why Tamil Nadu's Freebie Culture Works. It Has Combined the Cult of Personality Politics With Real Economic Growth." *Live Mint*, May 12, 2016.

staffed by women from self-help groups (SHGs) were a runaway success.⁴¹ Following a positive public response, these canteens were set up at all 200 wards in Chennai city. The state government has taken these canteens to nine other cities.⁴² Now, Chennai alone has more than 400 Amma Canteens; other cities and towns have 247 more.⁴³

The clockwork precision of Amma Unavagams is a testament to how ostensibly “populist” government schemes end up positively impacting the common man’s life. The Amma Unavagams were introduced as a measure to tackle urban hunger by providing nutritious food prepared in a hygienic atmosphere at highly subsidized rates. The hallmark of Amma Unavagam lies in its innovative design of co-opting SHGs from local slum settlements in running and managing these canteens. In the process of ensuring food security through subsidized cooked food, these community kitchens have generated regular employment and remunerative wages to SHG members. The outcome of the Amma Unavagam scheme is not just limited to mitigating food insecurity, but has also created livelihood security for urban deprived women, thus enabling their inclusion into formal sector employment. These canteens are located at certain vantage points like opposite government hospitals or next to bus stops where the poor and the vulnerable frequent. “They are a boon for the urban poor and migrant workers, for whom one of the major issues is food security.”⁴⁴

Such has been the success of these canteens that states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Delhi have also started their own versions of subsidized food canteens.⁴⁵

According to Govindarajan, “there is a huge opportunity cost in going ahead with this scheme.”⁴⁶ The fiscal impact of distribution and subsidy programs leave little for the state to spend in productive and long-lasting investment that could transform the economy. While acknowledging that the objective of the scheme was laudable, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) pointed to the lack of surveys to identify beneficiaries such as wage laborers in each area of the city. The CAG said the food was “provided to all people” at subsidized rates in Amma Canteens. Even as the state government claimed that the scheme was a social welfare measure, the CAG said the reply was not acceptable as the expenditure was incurred without providing funds for such a scheme in the budget passed by the municipal corporations such as Chennai. The deficit of Chennai Corporation increased from Rs. 303.1 crore⁴⁷ in 2013-2014 to Rs. 471 crore in 2014-2015. The percentage of deficit in Amma Canteens in relation to the overall deficit of Chennai Corporation has also increased from 8.26 percent in 2013-2014 to 13.44 percent in 2014-2015.⁴⁸

Although the canteens address some of the food-related issues and manage to generate employment of women in the state, they simultaneously promote political patronage. Lack of intervention by the state to address social and economic inequities cannot be simply wished away by patronage. Patronage and personality-driven politics also bring along with them the problem of corruption. It reduces the electorate to passive recipients of

⁴¹ N. Doval. “Tamil Nadu’s Amma Canteen Concept Catches on in Other States.” *Live Mint*, March 7, 2017.

⁴² J. Sam Daniel Stalin. “What Makes Jayalalithaa’s ‘Amma’ Canteens so Successful.” *NDTV*, June 4, 2013. Coimbatore, Madurai, Trichy, Tirunelveli, Tuticorin, Salem, Erode, Vellore and Tirupur are the cities

⁴³ “Popular Leader, Populist Schemes.” *The Hindu*, December 6, 2016.

⁴⁴ Vinita Govindarajan. “Indira Canteens are Strikingly Similar to Amma Canteens, But Will They Work Equally Well?” *The e Scroll*, April 27, 2017.

⁴⁵ N. Doval. “Tamil Nadu’s Amma Canteen Concept Catches on in Other States.” *Live Mint*, March 7, 2017.

⁴⁶ Govindarajan. “Indira Canteens are Strikingly Similar to Amma Canteens.”

⁴⁷ 1 crore is equivalent to 10 million rupees

⁴⁸ Aloysius Xavier Lopez. “Amma Canteens Eating into Civic Body Funds: CAG.” *The Hindu*, September 22, 2016.

welfare, who use elections as sites of transactions – “social bribes.”⁴⁹

Case Study 3: Free Laptops to the Students of Uttar Pradesh (UP)

With nearly 200 million people, UP remains the most populous Indian state. It ranks sixteenth among the seventeen Indian states according to the 2015 Human Development report.⁵⁰ According to Sen and Ray,⁵¹ UP continues to be counted among the BIMARU⁵² states while others, such as Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, have come out of it. The crisis in education is especially apparent in the four BIMARU states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh – with 445.1 million of India’s population of 1.2 billion and some of the lowest literacy rates in the country, according to the 2011 Census.

The erstwhile Samajwadi Party (SP) government of the state deemed that distributing free laptops to students would provide the students some relief. The scheme, which would cost the state government Rs. 3000 crores annually, was SP’s election promise to 1.5 million students who have cleared higher secondary examinations and 2.6 million who have passed secondary examinations from the state government-run and aided schools in 2013, and made them eligible for laptops. In the 2012-2013 budget, Rs. 96 billion was allocated for secondary education. Significantly, out of this total budget for secondary education, one third was for the distribution of tablets and laptops to students. The money for laptops and unemployment allowance was arranged by diverting funds earmarked by the previous government for the construction and maintenance of *Dalit* memorials and parks.⁵³

In December 2016 as election fever was catching on, the previous UP state government seemed to suddenly wake up to its promise of free laptops, much to the delight of students in Ghaziabad and Noida. Days ahead of the Election Commission announcing the Assembly polls, 695 students in Noida and 631 in Ghaziabad, the two western UP districts adjoining the national capital, were gifted laptops — delivering on a promise made in 2012 that free laptops would be given to meritorious students in Classes 10 and 12.⁵⁴

According to Shrivastava,⁵⁵ a minister in the state government said on the condition of anonymity that according to SP Supremo, the distribution of laptops and tablets will instantly win over more than 4.1 million students and make them supporters of the party. “Some of them may be below eighteen years at the moment. However, the SP Supremo’s analysis is that out of the 4.1 million new and young supporters of the SP, at least 3 million students would be first-time voters in 2014. Family members of the beneficiaries would also vote in their favor. If there are pictures of Mulayam Singh Yadava and Akhilesh Yadav on laptops and tablets, they would keep

⁴⁹ Srinivasan Ramani and Deepu Sebastian. “The Price of Populism in Tamil Nadu.” *The Hindu*, April 23, 2016.

⁵⁰ Tadit Kundu. “Why Kerala is like Maldives and Uttar Pradesh, Pakistan.” *Live Mint*, December 17, 2015.

⁵¹ Sunny Sen, and Suchetana Ray. 2017. “Uttar Pradesh Needs Lot More Than Political Will to Get Healthier.” *Hindustan Times*, February 13, 2017.

⁵² BIMARU is an acronym formed from the first letters of the names of the India states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. It was coined by the Indian economist Ashish Bose in the mid-1980s. BIMARU has a resemblance to a Hindi word *Bimar*, which means “sick.” This was used to refer to the poor economic conditions within those states.

⁵³ Anirudha. “Uttar Pradesh 2012-2013 Budget: A Review.” *Active India*, June 5, 2012.

⁵⁴ Kritika Sharma. “UP Elections 2017: Ghaziabad, Noida Students Get Laptops in Poll Season.” *Dna India*, January 26, 2017.

⁵⁵ Piyush Srivastava. “Laptops, Tablets Meant for UP Students to Have Pictures of Akhilesh and Mulayam.” *India Today*, March 1, 2013.

them in mind at the polling booths also. The SP leaders in the districts have already been asked to keep a record of the beneficiaries under these schemes to meet them during elections,” he further added.

Before the 2017 state assembly elections, most politicians were in the race to deliver the most promising sops. Manifestos of political parties in UP promised free laptops and smartphones. No party sought to specify where the finances to support such populist schemes would come from in a state already reeling under fiscal burdens from the previous years. The then-ruling SP this time promised laptops to meritorious students and smartphones for all, while the BJP went a step ahead, promising a laptop to every student “without discrimination” along with 1 GB of internet data every month for a period of one year.

After being elected in 2017, the BJP government was criticized by the opposition for presenting a state budget for 2017 which was silent about the free laptops to the students of UP as promised before the elections. According to an RTI enquiry, it emerged that of the 1.5 million laptops purchased, merely 600,000 were distributed by the SP government. The BJP government ordered a thorough probe in response to the findings.

In April 2018, the BJP government proposed UP Free Laptop Yojana 2018 with a budget of Rs. 1800 crore. According to the proposal, the state government would provide free laptops along with 1 GB of data to twelfth pass students taking admissions for their higher studies. However, this time the proposal of around Rs. 1200 crore was less than the previous government had proposed during 2012-2013.

According to Dutt,⁵⁶ the three central stakeholders — students, teachers, and educators — are either silent or have been muted out from the discussions. In the rush to provide a quick fix to the ailing education system by providing modern state-of-the-art technologies, the state government glossed over the fact that most schools in UP do not have electricity, let alone desktop computers. Given the local context of UP, investing in building schools or books for the school library could benefit several successive batches of students and remain accessible to everyone in the school. However, when a government opts to gift laptops to the individual students, effectively it turns public resources into private property.

Case Study 4: Demonetization

The issue of corruption has long been a feature of the BJP’s electoral mobilization against the Congress. An opinion poll of 19,000 respondents conducted in mid-2013 found that 69 percent of respondents thought that the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government was corrupt and that corruption had increased under the UPA’s rule, while only 23 percent thought that corruption had increased under the NDA government.⁵⁷ Seeking to capitalize on these perceptions, a key theme in the BJP’s election manifesto was a populist narrative on corruption, according to which a “lack of openness in government and lack of people’s participation had led to concentration of power in a few hands and lack of transparency breeding corruption and nepotism on a massive scale.” Corruption was also “a manifestation of poor governance” and “reflects the bad intentions of those sitting in power.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Yogender Dutt. “Missing the Power Point.” *The Hindu*, June 13, 2016. <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/missing-the-power-point/article5234483.ece>

⁵⁷ S. Rukmini. “Two Out of Three Say UPA is Corrupt.” *The Hindu*, July 23, 2013.

⁵⁸ “BJP Manifesto Pledges Good Governance, Talks of Constructing Ram Mandir, Abrogating Article 370.” *The Indian Express*,

After being elected, the BJP-led government tried to live up to its promise of addressing the issue of corruption with demonetization to invalidate and replace 500 and 1,000 rupee notes (around 80 percent of the currency in circulation at the time). The government justified demonetization in populist terms as serving the interests of the “poor, neo-middle class and middle class” and as an attack on “black money” and the “anti-national elements” that uphold the shadow economy.

In a speech defending the policy, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi claimed that over the last ten to twelve years, 500 and 1000 rupee currency notes were used less for legitimate transactions and more for a parallel economy. The excess of cash was fueling inflation and black marketing and denying the poor their due. Invoking the neo-middle class politics of aspiration, the Prime Minister noted, “According to information with the government, there are only 2.4 million people in India who accept that their annual income is more than 10 lakh rupees. Can we digest this? Look at the big bungalows and big cars around you.”⁵⁹

In his speeches on demonetization, Prime Minister Modi repeatedly emphasized the benefits of “citizen sacrifice” and short-term pain for long-term gain. In this respect, Modi was following an established nationalist script of sacrifice for the nation.⁶⁰ The suffering caused by demonetization was depicted as a “historic rite of purification” and as an “ongoing *Yagna* (Hindu ritual sacrifice) against corruption, terrorism, and black money.”⁶¹ Both the BJP government and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), whose support base of small traders and farmers were among the worst affected by demonetization, sought to justify the policy by drawing on key Hindu nationalist tropes on separatism and Islamic terrorism.

On the basis that secrecy was necessary for demonetization to proceed effectively, but also in a reflection of the centralization of power in the prime minister’s office, only ten individuals in that office, the Finance Ministry, and the Reserve Bank were privy to the decision which appears to have been ultimately made by the Prime Minister himself. Bypassing Parliament, Prime Minister Modi announced the decision through a televised public address and refused opposition calls for a parliamentary vote and formal debate. Instead, legislation related to demonetization was introduced through ordinances that allow the government to avoid the need for parliamentary approval. Ordinances⁶² are a legacy of colonial governance. In the post-independence period, however, the repeated re-promulgation of ordinances has been used by governments to circumvent parliamentary debate.⁶³

While the RBI has often tussled with the executive when it comes to the central bank’s independence, it has maintained high standards of competence and professionalism. Unfortunately, the bank’s credibility took a hit in the wake of demonetization. The ruling party has maintained that demonetization was a call taken by the RBI, although facts suggest an alternative narrative. On November 7, 2016, the government advised the RBI Central Board that it ought to consider withdrawing Rs. 500 and Rs. 1,000 notes to mitigate the triple threat of

April 7, 2014.

⁵⁹ Siddharth Varadarajan. “Narendra Modi Just Dug Himself a Great Big Hole.” *The Wire*, January 1, 2017.

⁶⁰ Dilip M. Menon. “With Demonetisation, Modi Reiterates the Post-Colonial Indian Theme of Redemption Through Suffering.” *The Scroll*, December 13, 2016.

⁶¹ Priya Chacko. “The right turn in India: Authoritarianism, populism and neoliberalisation.” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 4 (2018): 541-565

⁶² Ordinances, though objected to by the nationalist leadership during the colonial era, were incorporated into the constitution of independent India as a temporary emergency measure that allows governments to introduce policies when parliament is not in session (Chacko, “The right turn in India: Authoritarianism, populism and neoliberalisation”).

⁶³ Chacko. “The right turn in India: Authoritarianism, populism and neoliberalisation.”

counterfeiting, terror funding, and black money. The very next day, RBI accepted the advice and that same evening Modi went on national television to announce the move. According to Vaishnav,⁶⁴ either the RBI was used by the government or it genuinely backed the half-baked measure. Either way, the institution's stature stood diminished—a position further supported by the foibles associated with the policy's sloppy implementation. To make matters worse, RBI then prevaricated when it came to informing the public how much old currency had come back into the system post November 8. It was finally forced to disclose in its August 2017 annual report that 99 percent of the notes that had ceased to be legal tender wound up in Indian banks—an embarrassment to the government.

Impact of Populist Measures on Democratic Governance

Democratic governance is the range of processes through which a society in pursuit of justice, equality, welfare, and environmental protection reaches a consensus on and implements regulations, human rights, laws, policies, and social structures. In this sense, democratic governance brings to the fore the question of how a society organizes itself to ensure equality of opportunity and equity (social and economic justice) for all citizens.

In the light of the aforementioned case studies narrating specific measures of populist practices in contemporary Indian politics, this section examines its impact on India's democratic governance from the perspective of equality of opportunity and equity. This section also analyzes the positive and negative implications of the populist practices mentioned above.

Positive Implications of Populist Measures

1. One of the most important aspects of MGNREGS is that villagers can rightfully demand employment. The authority is responsible for providing employment in response to demand or providing an employment allowance in the cases where it has failed to meet the employment demand. According to Alam and Alam, it has made a dent in poverty by increasing employment opportunities.⁶⁵ During the first year of implementation (2006-2007), in 200 districts, 21 million households were employed and 905 million person days were generated. In 2016-2017, in 686 districts 51 million households were provided employment and 2.35 billion person days were generated. In 2017-2018, 51 million households have been provided employment and 2.3 billion person days have been generated across the country.
2. According to Narayan, for recipient families, 32 percent of their poverty decline comes from MGNREGA alone.⁶⁶ On a more positive front, 40 percent of households employed under the law are impoverished *Dalits* and *Adivasi*, even without any explicit targeting. The IHDS-II⁶⁷ attributes 38 percent and 28 percent of

⁶⁴ Milan Vaishnav. "India's Elite Institutions Are Facing a Credibility Crisis." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 20, 2018.

⁶⁵ Md. Alam & Mohammad Alam. "Good Governance and Employment Generation through MGNREGA." *International Journal of Economics Commerce and Management*, no. 11 (2014).

⁶⁶ Swati Narayan. "Half Full, Half Empty: 10 Years of NREGA." *IndiaSpend*, February 9, 2016.

⁶⁷ The India Human Development Survey-II (IHDS-II), 2011-2012 is a nationally representative, multi-topic survey of 42,152

reduction in poverty in employed *Dalit* and *Adivasi* homes, respectively, to MGNREGA alone. As many as 55 percent of MGNREGA workers in 2014-2015 were women, and their participation has soared to 38 percent over the last decade. Tamil Nadu has employed 60,000 sanitation workers under MGNREGA across three-fourths of villages. The Act stipulates that wages will be equal for men and women. It is also committed to ensuring that at least 33 percent of the workers shall be women. By generating employment for women at fair wages in villages, MGNREGS has played a substantial role in economically empowering women. It has laid the foundation for greater independence and self-esteem by ensuring gender parity of wages, and led to an increase in women's control over their earnings from MGNREGA.⁶⁸

3. MGNREGA has been referred to as an “Act of the people, by the people, and for the people.” From the perspective of social justice, the Act emphasizes that the nature of the work will be determined in *Palli-Sabha* through participatory people's plans, approved in *Gram Sabha*, and accordingly the shelf of activities will be prepared. The Act also empowers ordinary people to play an active role in the implementation of employment guarantee schemes through *Gram Sabhas* (village assemblies under Panchayati Raj Institutions), social audits, participatory planning, and other means.
4. Amma canteens are primarily run by SHG women, generating employment opportunities for them. All of the SHG members were trained by the Chennai Corporation in catering, managing the different activities of the canteen and servicing the customers. According to Nandhi,⁶⁹ many locally recruited SHGs and their members are currently working as employees of the Chennai Municipal Corporation and each woman earns a monthly remuneration of Rs. 9000 (plus food).
5. Amma Canteens are community kitchens which can be seen as part of a truly social democratic tradition because they are an important piece of the food security puzzle.⁷⁰ Along with the destitute – for whom it serves as a lifeline – it is crucial for working people, especially in the informal sector, in urban areas. In fact, such initiatives are equally important for working people in urban areas (from rickshaw pullers to delivery boys who are on the road the whole day) as a source of inexpensive and nutritious food.
6. Amma's canteens serve as a price stabilization measure at times of high inflation. According to Khera,⁷¹ the Hageman and Maragatham survey⁷² in Salem reported that private eateries had to reduce their prices due to Amma canteens.

households in 1,503 villages and 971 urban neighbourhoods across India. Citation: Sonalde Desai and Reeve Vanneman. India Human Development Survey-II (IHDS-II), 2011-2012. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2018-08-08.

⁶⁸ Sonalde Desai and Reeve Vanneman. India Human Development Survey-II (IHDS-II), 2011-2012.

⁶⁹ Mani Arul Nandhi. “Cooperative Management, Food Security and Amma Unavagam - A Case Study from the Indian State of Tamil Nadu.” November 16, 2015.

⁷⁰ Reetika Khera. “Community kitchens: An idea Whose Time Has Come.” *The Scroll*, January 22, 2016.

⁷¹ Khera. “Community kitchens”

⁷² A 2013 survey by academics S Thangamani and M Maragatham on Amma Canteens in Salem found that 75 percent of customers were satisfied with food quality, 44 percent with drinking water, and 58 percent with the cleanliness of the canteens.

7. Amma canteens have an important – if not immediately obvious – gender dimension. The canteens are primarily run by women, generating employment opportunities for them. The availability of inexpensive, hygienic, and nutritious options like the Amma canteens relieves women of domestic drudgery. As pointed out by Khera,⁷³ Amma canteens create democratic spaces that are surely required in our deeply divided society. There is nothing like sharing a meal with people from diverse backgrounds to foster a spirit of togetherness.

Negative Implications of Populist Measures

1. Despite many positive outcomes of the MGNREGA, it has been criticized for its poor implementation and leakages. Under the MGNREGA, which was promulgated in 2005, each household is guaranteed 100 days of work every year. On average, each household received only forty-five days of work over the last decade – less than half the guarantee.⁷⁴ The IHDS-II surveys report that up to 70 percent of interested poor households did not receive any MGNREGA work between 2004-2005 and 2011-2012. Unemployment allowance has rarely been paid.
2. It was argued that MGNREGA would not only increase the income of the poor, but also the asset creation through the process of employment would generate a much-needed productive infrastructure for poverty alleviation and economic justice on a permanent basis.⁷⁵ However, there has been no significant increase in the number of assets created each year, with last year recording the worst statistics of a 23 percent drop from 2014-2015. Doubts have been raised about the durability of the assets. According to Mathur & Bolia,⁷⁶ currently the law says that 60 percent of funds should be spent on wages and 40 percent on materials, which results in a preponderance of labor-intensive work rather than structures that require more and better material.
3. The budget outlay for the Amma Canteens is a huge opportunity cost. The fiscal impact of distribution and subsidy programs leave little for the state to spend in productive and long-lasting investments that could transform the economy. While acknowledging that the objective of the scheme was laudable, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) pointed to a lack of surveys to identify beneficiaries such as wage laborers in each area of the city. The CAG said the food was “provided to all people” at subsidized rates in Amma Canteens. Even as the state government claimed that the scheme was a social welfare measure, the CAG said the reply was not acceptable as the expenditure was incurred without providing funds for such a scheme in the budget passed by the municipal corporations such as Chennai.

⁷³ Reetika Khera. “Why We Need to Open 'Amma Canteens' All Over India.” *The Wire*, December 8, 2016.

⁷⁴ Swati Narayan. “Half Full, Half Empty: 10 Years of NREGA.” *IndiaSpend*, February 9, 2016.

⁷⁵ Md. Alam & Mohammad Alam. “Good Governance and Employment Generation through MGNREGA.” *International Journal of Economics Commerce and Management*, no. 11 (2014).

⁷⁶ Shobit Mathur and Nomesh Bolia. “Worst Year Ever For MGNREGA, 23% Drop In Assets Created.” *The Wire*, April 30, 2016.

4. Amma Canteens can be seen to be simultaneously promoting political patronage. Lack of intervention by the state to address social and economic inequities cannot be simply wished away by patronage. Patronage and personality-driven politics also bring along with them the problem of corruption. This reduces the electorate to passive recipients of welfare, who use elections as sites for transactions (social bribes).
5. The UP Free Laptop scheme cannot overcome the negative impact of a bad teacher or poor school; neither can it make children smarter in the absence of electricity, water, toilets, or playgrounds. As mentioned earlier, there is no evidence to say that free laptops can provide an equal opportunity to achieve a quality education. Yet, the government persists in handing out laptops.
6. The original objectives of demonetization were to ensure economic justice and accountability by eliminating fake currency; inflict losses on those with black money; and disrupt terror and criminal activities. According to Rai,⁷⁷ a study by the National Investigation Agency and the Indian Statistical Institute in 2016 estimated that fake Indian currency notes in circulation have a face value of Rs. 400 crore.
7. More than 90 percent of shops accept only cash or very short-term credit. Large numbers of laborers and small value suppliers are paid in cash. The sudden ban led to disruptions in consumption and production. As reported by Business Today, barely six months after demonetization, India's GDP growth rate had slumped down to 6.1 percent in the January-March period, the lowest in more than two years.⁷⁸ The cost of demonetization was disproportionately borne by the poor. According to the IFMR LEAD study covering 2200 households across six states, this episode had a severe adverse impact on the economic and financial lives of the poor.⁷⁹ Participants reported a 20 percent drop in their income immediately after demonetization and faced significant difficulty in finding employment. Many also reported delays in their wage payments due to the liquidity crunch caused by demonetization and heavy reliance on cash-based transactions in the informal sector.⁸⁰ In terms of welfare implications, these costs matter a lot more than the impact on GDP. Tax paying working class people, going about their lives, were suddenly asked to bear a burden associated with the project of imposing costs upon people who have unaccounted wealth.
8. The credibility of the Reserve Bank took a hit in the wake of demonetization. The ruling party has maintained that demonetization was a call made by the RBI, although facts suggest an alternative narrative. On November 7, 2016, the government advised the RBI Central Board that it ought to consider withdrawing Rs. 500 and Rs. 1,000 notes to mitigate the triple threat of counterfeiting, terror funding, and black money. The very next day, RBI accepted the advice and that same evening Modi went on national television to announce

⁷⁷ Suyash Rai. "The Demonetization Decision: Event, Impact, Narrative and Meaning." *The Wire*, December 4, 2016

⁷⁸ "PM Modi's Demonetisation Brings GDP Down to 6.1 percent: Top Economists Stand Vindicated." *Business Today*, June 2, 2017.

⁷⁹ This study, conducted by IFMR LEAD, attempted to contribute to the ongoing debate of the short-term and long-term effects of demonetization on low income households who, although being formally financially included, are most prone to adverse effects of demonetization policy owing to their socioeconomic, demographic, and occupational profiles.

The study is available at <http://ifmrlead.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/IFMR-LEAD-Demonetization-Study-Final-Report.pdf>

⁸⁰ Misha Sharma, Shambavi Shrivastava, and Anisha Singh. "Hitting the bottom." *Businessline*, December 13, 2017.

the move. According to Vaishnav,⁸¹ either the RBI was used by the government or it genuinely backed the half-baked measure. Either way, the institution's stature stood diminished—a position further supported by the foibles associated with the policy's sloppy implementation. To make matters worse, RBI then prevaricated when it came to informing the public how much old currency had come back into the system post November 8.

9. Demonetization reflected the centralization of power in the PMO. Bypassing Parliament, Prime Minister Modi announced the decision through a televised public address and refused opposition calls for a parliamentary vote and formal debate. Instead, legislation related to demonetization was introduced through ordinances that allow the government to avoid the need for parliamentary approval. Ordinances are a legacy of colonial governance.

Conclusion

Populism does not oppose the democratic system per se; on the contrary, the democratic system needs its support and tools (e.g. elections). As analyzed in this paper, not all forms of populism are necessarily corrosive to democracy. In an unequal society where politics are governed by the interests of the political elite, populism plays an important role in balancing power by introducing citizen participation.

As Kaur quoted Mr. Pavan Verma, “populism is an essential part of democracy but also poses a threat to it. Political parties are incentivized to chase short-term goals in order to keep winning elections and to deflect from their unfulfilled long-term promises. This, in turn, leads to a devaluing of democracy. It reduces democracy to the lowest common denominator – who can tell the biggest lie.”⁸² Parties then are forced to continually deflect attention away from their old promises, and they do this by appealing to people's emotions over their socioeconomic concerns.⁸³ Hence it can be said that populist measures which are redistributive in nature maybe questioned from the perspective of political motives when they are introduced. Nevertheless, these measures need to be better implemented. Along with this, the aspect of good fiscal governance remains to be addressed through better targeting to avoid bad allocative consequences while initiating these measures. Populists, due to their plebiscitary view on democracy, inevitably become victims of being motivated by public opinion and mood, and therefore populist decisions can become more responsive and at the same time more irresponsible. In favoring quick decisions over patient negotiations, they diminish the quality of the decision-making process.⁸⁴ As found in the study, some of the cases exemplified fiscal imprudence as the cost for short-term political gains and the creation of political patronage.

Such patronage is promoted by the populist leader through hostility towards intellectual economic and political elites. Populism as an anti-pluralistic ideology, if in power, can seriously threaten the fundamental rules

⁸¹ Milan Vaishnav. “India's Elite Institutions Are Facing a Credibility Crisis.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 20, 2018.

⁸² Nehmat Kaur. “Populism Threatens Democracy, but Is It Also Essential to It?” *The Wire*, December 15, 2017.

⁸³ Kaur. “Populism Threatens Democracy.”

⁸⁴ Decker. “The populist challenge to liberal democracy.”

of democratic systems. The same applies to the populist theory of voting, which can lead to the tyranny of the majority. Institutes of direct democracy can rarely capture the complexity of public opinion.

Populism thrives on splitting society along the lines of a majoritarian pure versus the minority of corrupt elites. Civil society needs to engage with the citizens, particularly with the youth, to create a counternarrative which promotes the practice of liberal democratic values. Active citizenship can counter majoritarian populism. Adult education must play an important role in engaging citizens through popular media to sensitize them about active citizenship.

In order to counter populism effectively, civil society requires strategies which are well-structured, long-term, and which transcend the current project logic which hinders decisive impacts. The key for civil society is learning how to communicate with the distinct social groups which hold populist ideals. In order to combat populism, particularly that which has a right-wing tilt, civil society needs a base for cooperation: right-wing populist groups have a strong common identity, yet communities often want to counter them from very different angles. Civil society therefore needs a common agenda and a common base from which to fight against populism.

Civil society groups are usually the first to witness happenings and patterns of action in societies and hence, they can effectively put forth propositions and protest. It is also in the best interests of politicians to engage civil society, as they need popular support in order to survive elections.

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