

**Populism and Governance: A Study of West Bengal Politics  
from 1991-2016**

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the  
Degree of Doctorate of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University, Kolkata

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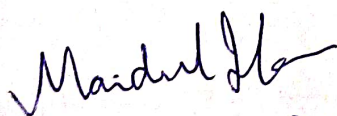
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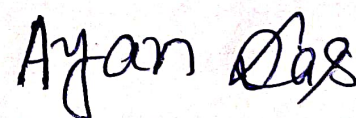
**Populism and Governance: A Study of West Bengal Politics from 1991-2016, submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University, is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of Prof. Maidul Islam, Professor of Political Science, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.**

And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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# **Populism and Governance: A Study of West Bengal Politics from 1991-2016**

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the nature of populist politics and governance strategies during the erstwhile Left Front and the present Trinamool Congress regimes in the Indian state of West Bengal. It employs discourse theory and a discursive-performative approach to analyse populism, state populism, and institutionalism.

The researcher posits that ‘populism’ is a polarised and antagonistic discourse. It uses vertical spatial metaphors, such as the down vs. up axis, to construct ‘people’ and ‘establishments’ into two distinct articulatory chains of equivalence in an antagonistic manner. Additionally, populists advocate for popular demands, identities, and interests against the establishment, representing marginalised people in terms of power and status. Institutional discourse serves as a clear reflection of governance in action. The thesis argues that state populism and institutionalism mirror the essence of governance. State populism denotes populism in power. It is primarily a populist tendency within an institutional discourse. The researcher posits it as ‘state populism’ when a power bloc institutionalises and strengthens the conflict between the underprivileged and the elite; uses state power to disrupt the existing hegemonic structure and establish a new one; revives democratic institutions; unites the people against the elite; and implements various redistributive programmes and democratic reforms.

To uncover their divergent populist tendencies, an inquiry was conducted into the articulatory and discursive practices of the two regimes, their leaders’ performative practices, ideological positions, governance strategies and affective and symbolic dimensions of discursive practices. Finally, this thesis investigates whether the Left Front and TMC’s polarised, populist discourse threatened democracy or served as a corrective measure that consolidated popular democracy.

**Keywords: Populism, Institutionalism, State Populism, Discourse Theory, West Bengal**



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## Introduction

This thesis examines the nature of populist politics and institutional strategies during the erstwhile Left Front and the present Trinamool Congress regimes in the eastern Indian state by applying the Laclauian approach to populism to the case of West Bengal. It employs discourse theory and a discursive-performative approach to analyse populism, state populism, and institutionalism. Institutional discourse serves as a clear reflection of governance in action. We think that state populism and institutionalism mirror the essence of governance.

This study sheds light on the unique features of populist politics and institutional strategies in West Bengal. This thesis investigates the role of populism as a mode of opposition and the combination of populism and institutionalism, known as state populism, and institutionalism as a mode of governance in West Bengal from 1960 to 2016. To uncover their divergent populist tendencies, an inquiry was conducted into the articulatory and discursive practices of the two regimes, their leaders' performative practices, ideological positions, and governance strategies. Therefore, this study aims to demonstrate the impact of left-wing and centre-left populism as a mainstream political project in West Bengal, India.

### Academic Literature on Populism

***Discourse theory and a discursive-performative approach to populism:*** The term “populism” originates from the Latin word “populus,” which means “people”<sup>1</sup> and carries a democratic connotation. The presence of democracy often leads to the emergence of populism.<sup>2</sup> A classic approach to populism has been developed by Ernesto Laclau (1935–2014) and Chantal Mouffe (1943–), which can be described as discursive, discourse-theoretical, and post-Marxist. This approach has evolved into a distinct school, commonly called the “Essex School.” They are

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Decker, “The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy,” *International Politics and Society* 3 (2003): 2.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Canovan, “Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy,” in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, ed. Yves Mény and Yves Surel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 25–29.

inspired by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) and post-structuralist theories like Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction and Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis. Laclau and Mouffe use the concept of discourse from Foucault apart from complementing Saussure’s linguistics, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy and Heidegger’s phenomenology.<sup>3</sup> The theory is unique in that it views populism as a discourse that constructs people; additionally, the construction of a people is regarded as a fundamental aspect of politics.

Laclau’s work was shaped by Latin American populism. However, it was in 2005, with the release of his book *On Populist Reason*, that he presented a comprehensive theory of populism. This was a period marked by the rise of left-populist governments in Latin America, and this political wave deeply influenced his work. His ideas resonated with the movements of the time and served as a source of inspiration for political activists in his home country of Argentina. Mouffe employs Laclau’s theory of populism to advocate for populism as a left-wing strategy, specifically in Europe, where she has actively collaborated with Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise and Spain’s Podemos.

Ernesto Laclau constructed the concept of “the political” by incorporating the notion of “antagonism.”<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that antagonism is a friend/foe relation which is ‘the limit of all objectivity’<sup>5</sup> where a rational resolution between the parties in conflict is impossible. Laclau asserts that populism is the prevailing form of politics in modern democratic societies. Establishing specific ways of representation—“floating” and “empty” signifiers—that may serve as sites of subjective identification, populism focuses on constructing equivalent links

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<sup>3</sup> See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* [1985] 2nd edn. (London: Verso, 2001), 105–113.

<sup>4</sup> Razmig Keucheyan, “Ernesto Laclau: Constructing Antagonisms,” Verso (blog), London, 13 February 2015, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1856-ernesto-laclau-constructing-antagonisms-by-razmig-keucheyan> accessed on 24th August 2024. Also see Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); ‘Towards a Theory of Populism’ Chapter 4, in Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. xiv, 122.

between scattered social and political demands.<sup>6</sup> Populist rhetoric and praxis appeal directly to the political component of social connections. Although the ‘political’ relates to confrontation and the creation of diverse social ties, populism entails dividing society into opposing camps in the never-ending battle for hegemony.<sup>7</sup> According to Laclau, populism is caused by “a situation in which a plurality of unsatisfied demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them differentially coexist.”<sup>8</sup>

The theory of populism, as conceptualised by Laclau, follows a formal approach. His concept of populism does not refer to a specific substance of populist discourse, such as an agricultural foundation or anti-immigrant rhetoric. Laclau, on the other hand, identifies specific discursive structures that define a discourse as populist. He also describes these discursive structures as a logic differentiating populism: ‘a particular logic of articulation of those contents—whatever those contents are.’<sup>9</sup> Laclau approaches populism as ‘by populism, I do not understand those referential contents but, rather, a way of constructing the political on the basis of interpellating the underdog to mobilise against the existing status quo’<sup>10</sup> This method has the benefit of being adaptable. Its definition encompasses various geographical, historical, and political occurrences.

Aligned with the performative approach to forming collective identities, Laclau does not begin with the people but instead examines how the people are constructed. When analysing populism, it is important to recognise that it goes beyond simply depicting or distorting the people and their interests. Instead, it actively shapes the concept of the people. Laclau

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in David Howarth, ed., *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, Populism and Critique* (London: Routledge, 2015), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Howarth, *Ernesto Laclau*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 37–38.

<sup>9</sup> Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?”, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Howarth, *Ernesto Laclau*, 266.



constructs his theory by starting with ‘demands,’ which he considers the fundamental building block.<sup>11</sup> A demand is made to the institutional authority, such as a local government or the state. Once the demand is placed before a power bloc, we are confronted with an institutional logic or a logic of difference. The very existence of a demand being presented to the institutions indicates that the institutional order is considered legitimate. Suppose the demand gets satisfied or absorbed within the institutional order or accommodated by the state or corporate entity to which the demand(s) was/were placed. In that case, that is the end of the matter, as the possibilities of any politics through further populist mobilisation are closed. Suppose a demand is not satisfied and other demands remain unsatisfied. In that case, the distinct unsatisfied demands may establish connections with each other, forming a chain of equivalence. For instance, concerns about corruption and the allocation of school funds may be linked to the issue of bus fares. There is no inherent need to connect these various demands into a chain of equivalence; they do not represent a common identity, such as that of the people. Instead, the interconnection of multiple demands forms a chain of equivalence. My starting point is an ensemble of diverse demands, which Laclau describes as heterogeneous. However, it is through their integration and alignment that these demands become representative of the people’s desires. Furthermore, even when expressed as equal, demands retain their individual characteristics. Therefore, it is essential to consider the chain of equivalence as a combination of difference and sameness. Hence, this thesis focuses on equivalence rather than identity.

Thomassen asserts that using an empty signifier favourably symbolises the concept of equivalence, while an antagonistic frontier symbolises it negatively.<sup>12</sup> The empty signifier might refer to several entities, such as a political leader, a slogan, or simply the concept of ‘the

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<sup>11</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 74.

<sup>12</sup> Lasse Thomassen, “Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and the discursive approach,” in *Research handbook on populism*, ed. Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2024), 144.

people'. The concept of the empty signifier is a demand inside the chain of equivalence. It lacks any specific meaning or substance, allowing it to symbolise and reflect the entire chain.

The equivalence is further highlighted by the antagonistic relationship that all components of the chain have towards a shared adversary, such as a local governing body or the state. All the demands express this antagonism, but it is important to note that the disparities between the demands do not entirely vanish. Consequently, the antagonism, much like the emptiness, is somewhat inherent. The concepts of equivalence, empty signifier, and antagonism are intricately intertwined and interdependent. Considering the formal definition of populism, it is important to note that various identities can represent both sides of the opposing divide. For example, one side may be characterised as 'the people' or 'the underdog,' while the other may be seen as 'the elites' or 'the establishment.' The defining characteristics of a discourse labelled as populist are- the level of equivalence, emptiness, and antagonism. This definition encompasses populist discourses with varying ideological content, such as right- and left-wing populism. The greater the presence of equivalence, emptiness, and antagonism, the more populist a discourse becomes.<sup>13</sup> Populist discourse stands in contrast to institutional discourses prioritising the logic of difference.

Laclau does not consider populism to be an ideology in the same sense as socialism; instead, it is a method of articulating various demands, some of which may be ideological in the conventional sense. Mouffe provides an example that highlights the difference between Le Pens' right-wing populism, which is characterised by xenophobia and exclusion, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's left-wing populism, which promotes inclusivity. Both discourses revolve around the concept of 'the French people'; however, the Front National/National Rally defines the people regarding their ethnic and racial identity, while the Front de Gauche/France Insoumise

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<sup>13</sup> Thomassen, "Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and the discursive approach," 145.

defines the people as the disadvantaged, which includes immigrant groups.<sup>14</sup> One unifies the French population via neoliberal and protectionist economic strategies, while the other unifies the French population through socialist economic policies. While some demands or signifiers may overlap across the two discourses, it is not the demands or signifiers themselves that define the populism of these discourses. The two discourses are populist due to the process by which they articulate the demands and signifiers: they create a chain of equivalence, their leaders serve as empty signifiers, and they establish an antagonistic frontier that separates French society.

De Cleen contends that populism is not the only instance where the signifiers “the people” and “the elite” are prevalent.<sup>15</sup> The organisation of populism follows a vertical, down/up axis that signifies authority, status, and hierarchical position.<sup>16</sup> The bottom end of this axis places ‘the people’ as a large and impotent group, while the upper end places ‘the elite’ as a tiny and influential group. This power is frequently political but can also be applied to socioeconomic and sociocultural status. Populist rhetoric frequently employs the terms “the people” and “the elite” to refer to these positions or identities, as well as a variety of other labels (e.g., “ordinary people” and “common people” in contrast to “the establishment” and “the caste,” and so on).

The existence of a conflict between the people and the elite is not sufficient to define populism. Populism is essentially an assertion about representing the people. According to populists, the existing illegitimate “elite” promises to represent “the people,” but in reality, it

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<sup>14</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 121- 123.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin De Cleen, “The Populist political logic and the analysis of the discursive construction of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite,’” in *Imagining the Peoples of Europe Populist discourses across the political spectrum*, ed. Jan Zienkowski and Ruth Breeze (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019), 30-31.

<sup>16</sup> Torben Bech Dyrberg, “Right/Left in Context of New Political Frontiers: What’s Radical Politics Today?,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 2, no. 2 (2003): 339–342.

looks down on them, ignores their needs, and doesn't represent "the people."<sup>17</sup> Populists appeal to citizens as People-as-Underdog, giving them the subject position of identifying with this group. Along this vertical down/up axis, the antagonism between "the people" and "the elite" distinguishes populism from other discourses and logics built around the term "people." Nationalist politics revolve around the idea of representing the people as a nation. This concept entails a sovereign and unique community with a specific identity rooted in a particular territory and history. Its contrast with members of other nations facilitates the construction of this identity.<sup>18</sup>

Although Laclau says that populism is defined by the "construction of political frontiers through the interpellation of the underdog",<sup>19</sup> he also uses the word "populism" to refer to politics in a broader sense, meaning that any form of politics that aims to create a radical alternative to the current political order is populist.<sup>20</sup> This description exclusively concentrates on politics that establishes a political boundary along the vertical axis of power, differentiating between the powerless and the powerful and classifying them as populist. Establishing a political boundary between a group of people identified by their nationality and others not part of this group is not inherently populist. Laclau had closely linked the emergence of populist politics to a "crisis of representation".<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Moffitt<sup>22</sup> and Stanley<sup>23</sup> have presented arguments that challenge Laclau's perspective. They suggest that populist politics go beyond simply tapping into existing frustrations with the 'power bloc' (although this certainly enhances their chances of success). On the contrary, they proactively create a perception of

<sup>17</sup> Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–563.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis, "Distinctions and Articulations. Discourse Theory and the Study of Populism and Nationalism," *Javnost – The Public* 27, no. 4(2017): 301–319.

<sup>19</sup> Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?", 32-39.

<sup>20</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 67.

<sup>21</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Moffitt, "How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism," *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 2 (2015): 189–217.

<sup>23</sup> Ben Stanley, "The Thin Ideology of Populism," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 1 (2008): 97-98.

crisis and deliberately encourage dissatisfaction with ‘the elite’ for impeding various demands, interests, or identities. Once again, the nature of this ‘crisis’ and the individuals deemed responsible is contingent upon the political agenda of the populists involved.

Moffitt opines that populism is a form of discourse that creates a dichotomy between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’.<sup>24</sup> The understanding of what a discourse is varies to some extent. Several scholars, such as Panizza,<sup>25</sup> Stavrakakis and Katsambekis,<sup>26</sup> adhere to the Essex School of Discourse Analysis. This approach, influenced by Laclau and Mouffe, encompasses poststructuralism and Gramscian theories of hegemony. This perspective considers discourses as attempts to establish and solidify meanings and identities within the context of power struggles. Scholars aligned with the Essex School generally adhere to a theoretical framework developed by Laclau and Mouffe. This framework posits that politics is fundamentally a struggle for hegemony and that all objects are subject to interpretation through discourse.<sup>27</sup> Some scholars adopt the critical discourse analysis approach, drawing inspiration from Wodak and Meyer, as well as Wodak and Fairclough. This approach delves into the linguistic aspects and ideological impacts of discourse. What brings all these approaches together is a central emphasis on populism as a distinct form of discourse that profoundly shapes the structure and functioning of politics and political identity.<sup>28</sup>

Some scholars have expanded the concept beyond the purely linguistic-verbal level to include non-verbal or performative features. In politics, populism is defined by Ostiguy as the

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<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Moffitt, *Populism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 19-37.

<sup>25</sup> Francisco Panizza, “Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy,” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 1-18.

<sup>26</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis & Giorgos Katsambekis, “Left-wing populism in the European periphery: The case of SYRIZA,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 119– 142.

<sup>27</sup> David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, “Introducing discourse theory and political analysis,” in *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*, ed. David Howarth, Aletta Norval and Yannis Stavrakakis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Moffitt, *Populism*, 28- 29.



“flaunting of ‘the low’.”<sup>29</sup> He introduces the concepts of “high” and “low” in politics, as well as the high-low dimension, which refers to the various strategies used to engage with people based on sociological differences. Politicians at the high exhibit a sense of decorum and adhere to proper etiquette and institutional protocols. Politicians in Low tend to exhibit less refinement and are more grounded, unrefined, and personalistic in their behaviour. It is also the way how their institutions operate. According to Ostiguy, “High and low have to do with ways of relating to people; as such, they go beyond “discourses” that would be understood as mere words, and they include issues of accents, level of language, body language, gestures, ways of dressing, etc. As a way of relating to people, they also encompass the way of making decisions.”<sup>30</sup>

Ostiguy<sup>31</sup> integrates politico-cultural elements (including personalism, powerful leadership, and “immediacy” in decision-making) alongside more performative socio-cultural elements (including the use of the regional vernacular, expressive behaviour, and “colourfulness”). In his opinion, combining both aspects results in a uniquely populist approach to interacting with “the people”—a term sociologically defined as the non-elite. This approach is personal and personalistic, unlike a more technocratic or bureaucratic approach. It is informal, occasionally crude, coarse, improper, and “street-wise.” In contrast to the methods of technocrats, Eurocrats, administrators, and other “proper” crats, this specific mode is intentionally exposed and antagonistically flaunted.

Moffitt defines populism as “a political style that features an appeal to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’, ‘bad manners’ and the performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat”<sup>32</sup>. In this

<sup>29</sup> Pierre Ostiguy, “Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 73–97.

<sup>30</sup> Pierre Ostiguy, “The High and the Low in Politics: A Two-Dimensional Political Space for Comparative Analysis and Electoral Studies,” *Kellogg’s Foundation Working Paper* 360 (2009): 5.

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Ostiguy and Benjamin Moffitt, “Who Would Identify With An “Empty Signifier”?: The Relational, Performative Approach to Populism” in *Populism in Global Perspective A Performative and Discursive Approach*, ed. Pierre Ostiguy, Francisco Panizza, and Benjamin Moffitt (New York: Routledge, 2021), 51.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism Performance, Political Style and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 45.

context, political style is defined as “the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life.”<sup>33</sup> According to Moffitt,<sup>34</sup> this particular emphasis on the performative and stylistic aspects of populism seeks to provide a fresh conceptual framework for analysing populism, with a focus on the individuals operating it, the people it resonates with, the platforms it takes place on, and the overall presentation of the phenomenon. This vocabulary succinctly captures the dramatic nature of modern populism while also shedding light on the methods used to represent populist ideas. The focus is redirected from forms of representation to practical methods of representation: televised shows, demonstrations, addresses, the wearing of certain clothes, the use of common language, and other things. By emphasising the significance of presentation in representation, this work highlights its often-overlooked role in interpellating or “rendering-present” the collective. It aims to shift analytical attention towards understanding how this activity actually takes place.

Moffitt argues that some scholars, like Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser,<sup>35</sup> in comparative politics have dismissed Laclau’s work on populism as overly abstract or obscure. However, those who embrace the performative turn and the discursive approach have found them intellectually stimulating and valuable sources of insight. Their research has applied Laclau’s theories on leadership, representation, affect, and the formation of “the people” to various cases. Laclau’s work highlights the significance of performative aspects in forming popular identities and constructing “the people” in a populist configuration. His assertion that naming plays a critical role in shaping popular identities, as well as his argument

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<sup>33</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism Performance, Political Style and Representation*, 38.

<sup>34</sup> Ostiguy and Moffitt, “Who Would Identify With An ‘Empty Signifier’?”, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. “Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis,” in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.

about the performative nature of populism's constitution of "the people," emphasise the importance of identity in this phenomenon.<sup>36</sup>

It has been observed that Ernesto Laclau serves as the theoretical beacon for numerous authors in this group. Laclau, in collaboration with his partner and co-author, Chantal Mouffe, developed a theory of populism that aimed to transcend "mainly sociological categories, which address the group, its constitutive roles, and its functional determinations, to the underlying logics that make these categories possible".<sup>37</sup> Laclau explicitly focuses on the actual creation of groups like 'the people' and 'the elite', in contrast to conventional ideas of group identity commonly used in the study of populism, which may unintentionally assume that these groups already exist or have a well-defined sociological foundation. According to Laclau, constructing 'the people' in opposition to 'the elite' is the essence of populism. Therefore, while other methods may explore the identity of people by examining the demographic traits of voters who support populist parties or individuals who hold populist beliefs, the discursive-performative approach would instead focus on the process of constructing the notion of "the people." This highlights the explicit social/socio-constructivist ontology that forms the foundation of this approach. The idea is that political identities are not inherently predetermined but must be meticulously constructed by political agents.

***The Ideational Approach to Populism:*** Moffitt asserts that the ideational approach to populism is widely considered and is the most frequently employed approach in the current academic literature.<sup>38</sup> This approach conceptualises populism as an ideology, including a specific set of ideas and a comprehensive worldview. Mudde describes it as "a thin-centred ideology that

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<sup>36</sup> Ostiguy and Moffitt, "Populism in Global Perspective A Performative and Discursive Approach," 52.

<sup>37</sup> Ernesto Laclau, "Foreword", in *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*, ed. David Howarth, Aletta Norval and Yannis Stavrakakis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), x–xi.

<sup>38</sup> Moffitt, *Populism*, 22.

considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.’<sup>39</sup> Stanley,<sup>40</sup> Albertazzi and McDonnell,<sup>41</sup> and Rooduijn<sup>42</sup> have developed similar perspectives on populism as a ‘thin-centred’ ideology. Although they may not explicitly use the term ‘thin’, their implication suggests that populism is not an independent ideology but is always intertwined with other ideologies. Müller has a similar understanding of the phenomenon. Although he doesn’t explicitly label populism as an ideology, his definition characterises it as “a way of perceiving the political world that sets morally pure and fully unified—but...ultimately fictional—people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior.”<sup>43</sup> This definition closely aligns with Mudde’s definition. Both emphasise (a) the distinction between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ and (b) ‘the people’s’ homogeneity, unity, and moral ‘purity’.

According to ideational theorists, populism is considered a thin-centred ideology, similar to nationalism, feminism, and green politics. It is not classified as a thick ideology like liberalism and socialism. The concept of populism being described as ‘thin’ or ‘thin-centred’ was first introduced by Mudde and Fieschi and then expanded upon by Stanley. Those who belong within the framework of ideational tradition have often come to accept this as a given. According to these researchers, the advantage of this method lies in its ability to elucidate populism’s capacity to coexist alongside other, more encompassing ideologies.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, it is essential to note that populism often aligns itself with other ideological components that

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<sup>39</sup> Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” 543.

<sup>40</sup> Ben Stanley, “The thin ideology of populism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 1 (2008): 95–110.

<sup>41</sup> Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, “Introduction: The sceptre and the spectre,” in *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 15–29.

<sup>42</sup> Matthijs Rooduijn, “The nucleus of populism: In search of the lowest common denominator,” *Government and Opposition* 49, no. 4 (2014): 572–598.

<sup>43</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 19–20.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley, “The thin ideology of populism,” 100.

play a vital role in garnering support from a wider audience.<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to envision a purely populist ideology without considering its coexistence with other ideologies. The division between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ only gains significance when supplemented with the principles of different ideologies. Otherwise, it lacks a definite theoretical premise.

***The Strategic Approach to Populism:*** Scholastic literature frequently discusses another approach to populism, which involves viewing it as a strategic manoeuvre. In contrast to those who employ the ideational approach, supporters of the strategic approach view populism as a form of political practice rather than an inherent characteristic of a political actor. Jansen argues that we should not view populism as an object of study but rather as a mode of political practice.<sup>46</sup> Kenny opines that “Populists, according to the strategic approach, are charismatic leaders who seek to establish unmediated links with otherwise unattached mass constituencies in their quest to gain and retain power.”<sup>47</sup> Populism, in this sense, is less a matter of what people supposedly believe than of what they, or rather their leaders, actually do.

Moffitt argues that scholars can vary in their characterisation of ‘populist practices’, which refer to the strategies, processes of organisation, and types of political mobilisation used by populists. However, what connects them is their primary interest in understanding how populists acquire and maintain power<sup>48</sup> instead of focusing on “what populists purport to believe (that is, in their ideology) or even in what they say or how they act (that is, in their discourse or political style).”<sup>49</sup> They are concerned with “the principal ways and means by

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<sup>45</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

<sup>46</sup> Robert s. Jansen, “Populist mobilization: A new theoretical approach to populism,” *Sociological Theory* 29, no. 2 (2011): 75.

<sup>47</sup> Paul D. Kenny, “The Strategic Approach to Populism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Populism in the Asia Pacific*, ed. D. B. Subedi, Howard Brasted, Karin Von Stokirch and Alan Scott (London: Routledge, 2021), 37.

<sup>48</sup> Moffitt, *Populism*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Kurt Weyland, “Populism: A Political–Strategic approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 50.



which a political actor captures the government and makes and enforces authoritative decisions.”<sup>50</sup>

This orientation is evident in the fundamental definitions employed in this approach. According to Weyland, populism is “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.”<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, Jansen defines populist mobilisation as “any sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people.”<sup>52</sup> Roberts,<sup>53</sup> Barr<sup>54</sup> and Urbinati<sup>55</sup> have all proposed similar definitions.

The strategic approach to populism is based on the importance of the leader. The ideational approach recognises that various actors may embrace populist ideas, whereas the strategic approach views populism as “a political strategy that revolves around an individual politician. Specifically, populism rests on personalistic leadership.”<sup>56</sup> An essential aspect of the strategic approach is the fact that populist leaders depend on unmediated, quasi-direct appeals to ‘the people’, aiming to circumvent traditional intermediaries like political parties as well as clientelist networks. Such a view observed that the media, namely television and social media, have played a crucial role in facilitating direct contact without intermediaries. Populist leaders can appear directly connected to their followers by using various media platforms, which

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<sup>50</sup> Weyland, “Populism: A Political–Strategic approach,” 55.

<sup>51</sup> Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a contested concept: Populism in the study of Latin American politics” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 14.

<sup>52</sup> Jansen, “Populist mobilization,” 82.

<sup>53</sup> Kenneth M Roberts ‘Populism, Political Mobilizations, and Crises of Political Representation’, in *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Carlos de la Torre (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 140–158.

<sup>54</sup> Robert R. Barr, “Populists, outsiders and anti-establishment politics,” *Party Politics* 15, no. 1 (2009): 29–48.

<sup>55</sup> Nadia Urbinati, “Populism and the majority principle” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 571– 589.

<sup>56</sup> Weyland, “Populism: A Political–Strategic approach,” 56.

enables them to communicate quickly and in multiple directions. However, research has demonstrated that, in actuality, a significant portion of this communication is still one-sided, with the leaders dictating the message.<sup>57</sup>

Describing populism as a form of ‘personalistic’ and ‘plebiscitarian’ leadership centred on a charismatic figure, Weyland emphasises the desire for unlimited power and its reliance on direct, unfiltered, and non-institutionalised popular support. According to him, “Populism revolves around supremely powerful personalities who claim to incarnate ‘the people’; and as authentic embodiments of popular sovereignty, they have every right—indeed, an uncontested duty – to act in whatever way they intuit the will of the people.”<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, their supporters firmly believe that politicians in power have fundamentally let them down by not accurately representing their needs and interests. However, these adherents know that they, as “the little people”, cannot independently promote those needs and interests through effective bottom-up initiatives. Ultimately, the immense diversity of ‘the people’ and the significant challenges in coordinating collective action, hinder their ability to empower themselves. As a result, supporters entrust this interest representation to the captivating leader, whom they perceive to embody the people’s will. As the leader naturally demonstrates on behalf of the people, representation becomes a form of identification. According to Urbinati, the supporters perceive the leader as an embodiment of themselves.<sup>59</sup> As the leader of Venezuela’s Bolivarian movement declared, ‘Chávez is the people, and the people is Chávez.’<sup>60</sup>

Populism, according to the concept of representation as embodiment and sameness, does not establish robust organisations with intermediate leaders. What truly matters is the

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<sup>57</sup> Silvio Waisbord & Adriana Amado, “Populist communication by digital means: presidential Twitter in Latin America,” *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 9 (2017): 1330-1346.

<sup>58</sup> Kurt Weyland, “Populism as a political strategy” in *Research Handbook on populism*, ed. Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2024), 156.

<sup>59</sup> Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 125- 126.

<sup>60</sup> Urbinati, *Me the People*, 126.

direct connection between the leader and the followers, forged by the leader's compelling appeals and the followers' passionate, unwavering loyalty and commitment. Based on these strong personal connections, populist connections intentionally eschew middlemen and the establishment of bureaucratic organisations that could impede and weaken the intense personal contact between the leader and their followers. Andrews-Lee<sup>61</sup> demonstrated that charisma resists routine or standardization. On the contrary, the leader consistently campaigns to ensure that the followers remain mobilised, enthusiastic, and deeply dedicated. Specifically, the leader intentionally seeks out perilous adversaries to maintain the followers in a state of emotional turmoil; nothing is more effective than a perceived menace to incite 'the people' to unite behind their leader and provide unwavering support to this self-proclaimed champion of the people.

According to Urbinati,<sup>62</sup> followers identify with the leader and are thankful that their leader speaks on their behalf, expressing and pursuing needs, interests, problems, and grievances that they were unable or afraid to express themselves. As a result, the adherents unwaveringly support the leader throughout both prosperous and challenging times. Consequently, they do not impose stringent performance standards to hold the leader accountable, contrary to the principles of liberal democracy concerning representation. Instead, their role in leading a valiant effort for redemption and facing allegedly wicked and perilous adversaries grants the leader significant discretion. Given the possibility of obstacles on this challenging journey, what really matters is the leader's significant effort to sincerely advance the long-overlooked needs of the people.

Previous studies on populism can trace the origins of the strategic approach. In Ionescu and Gellner's 1969 book, Wiles characterises populism as 'loosely organised and ill-

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<sup>61</sup> Caitlin Andrews-Lee, *The Emergence and Revival of Charismatic Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 202- 204.

<sup>62</sup> Urbinati, *Me the People*, 165.

disciplined: a movement rather than a party.’<sup>63</sup> He acknowledged the presence of ‘great leaders in mystical contact with the masses’ as one of the two fundamental characteristics of this method. During the same time period, di Tella’s<sup>64</sup> and Smith’s<sup>65</sup> studies on Latin American populism emphasised the significance of strong leaders in establishing multiclass coalitions in the name of the common masses. Weyland suggests that the political-strategic approach draws its theoretical motivation from Weber’s insightful analysis of charismatic authority.<sup>66</sup> Exploring various periods of human history, the renowned sociologist developed the concept of charisma as one of three fundamental forms of legitimate authority, alongside traditional and rational-legal.<sup>67</sup> Rules guide the other two types of leadership, both empowering and constraining leaders, while charisma stems from an individual superiority that surpasses established norms. A leader who is perceived as possessing extraordinary, supernatural abilities and capacities, which are bestowed through the grace of God, garners the devotion of a diverse array of supporters who abandon conventional ties or formal organisational obligations and passionately perpetrate themselves to the massive, revolutionary cause that the leader has proclaimed. The leader endeavours to build up an exclusive circle of devoted disciples who dutifully execute all of the leader’s wishes and desires while simultaneously instilling unconditional faith among his supporters and claiming to pursue a redemptive mission through the force of personality.<sup>68</sup> Charismatic authority represents an unlimited ability to act, with a desire for unrestricted control and ultimate power. As a result, it disregards rules and institutions, including long-standing traditions and formal constitutional provisions, considering them to be illegitimate constraints on the leader's will and ability to bring about

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<sup>63</sup> Peter Wiles, “A syndrome, not a doctrine: Some elementary theses on populism,” in *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, ed. Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), 169.

<sup>64</sup> Torcuato S. di Tella “Populism and reform in Latin America,” in *Obstacles to Change in Latin America*, ed. Claudio Véliz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965) 47–73.

<sup>65</sup> Peter H Smith “Social mobilization, Political Participation, and the Rise of Juan Perón,” *Political Science Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (1969): 30–49.

<sup>66</sup> Weyland, “Populism as a political strategy,” 155.

<sup>67</sup> Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1976), 140–148, 654–668

<sup>68</sup> Caitlin Andrews-Lee, *The Emergence and Revival of Charismatic Movements*, 23–50.

change. Therefore, charisma is not just opposed to tradition and reason but also opposed to institutions. The charismatic authority enables the leader to rule without encountering traditional or institutional constraints or resistance. People trust the leader to have a deep understanding of the fate of the people and their journey towards salvation. The leader condemns any opposition to his actions as a threat to the proclaimed salvation and an abandonment of the national objectives and vision.

### **Literature on Populism in Opposition and Power**

After reviewing the appropriate sources, it becomes apparent that there are three main approaches to examining the complex relationship between populism and power.<sup>69</sup> One commonly accepted perspective argues that when populist parties come into power, they often fail to fulfil their promises and end up being assimilated by the existing state institutions, eventually becoming part of the mainstream political landscape.<sup>70</sup> This hypothesis predicts that once populists gain power, their radical and antagonistic nature will normalise as their political or ‘revolutionary’ aspect diminishes. Politics consequently becomes ‘business as usual’, and the populist promises are compromised. Mény and Surel adopted this perspective and claimed that ‘populist parties are by nature neither durable nor sustainable parties of government. Their fate is to be integrated into the mainstream, to disappear, or to remain permanently in opposition.’<sup>71</sup> Their perspective is consistent with the views of Taggart, who regards populism as a transient phenomenon with restricted potential and a limited lifespan.<sup>72</sup> Canovan similarly argued that once the populist actor "actually gains power," its inability to fulfil its promises

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<sup>69</sup> Giorgos Venizelos, *Populism in Power: Discourse and Performativity in SYRIZA and Donald Trump* (London: Routledge, 2023).

<sup>70</sup> Cas Mudde, *SYRIZA: The Failure of the Populist Promise* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>71</sup> Yves Mény and Yves Surel, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 18.

<sup>72</sup> Paul Taggart, “Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, no. 3 (2004): 269–288.



will become evident.<sup>73</sup> Populists' (in)ability to fulfil their electoral promises, particularly in the context of policy execution, frequently refers to failure.<sup>74</sup> Heinisch posits that 'significant structural weaknesses inherent in populist parties pose nearly insurmountable problems that make their long-term success in government questionable.'<sup>75</sup>

The belief that populism is inherently incompatible with democratic governance-related institutions appears to be based on conceptualising populism as potentially and inherently an opposing force rather than a force involved in governing. The prevailing theoretical frameworks establish a correlation between populism and political figures who are not a part of the established political system, as well as with parties that question the status quo and movements that express dissent.<sup>76</sup> According to Venizelos and Markou,<sup>77</sup> the prevailing political discourse regards populism as a symbol of opposition to traditional politics. The emphasis on the anti-elitist aspect of populism often overshadows its people-centric dimension, which is its capacity to engage and form collective identities. It is crucial to note that viewing populism solely as a characteristic of the opposition overlooks the numerous instances of populist governments throughout history, particularly in Latin America. It is possible for populist leaders in positions of power to struggle with executing their policies yet still manage to retain their positions. The inability to attain their objectives may not be inherent to their populist nature. External factors, such as political events of a national or international scale,

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<sup>73</sup> Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47 (1999): 2–16.

<sup>74</sup> Nicole Loew and Thorsten Faas, "Between Thin- and Host-Ideologies: How Populist Attitudes Interact with Policy Preferences in Shaping Voting Behaviour," *Representation* 55, no. 4 (2019): 493–511.

<sup>75</sup> Reinhard Heinisch, "Success in Opposition – Failure in Government: Explaining the Performance of Right-Wing Populist Parties in Public Office," *West European Politics* 26, no. 3 (2003): 92.

<sup>76</sup> Mattia Zulianello, "Varieties of Populist Parties and Party Systems in Europe: From State-of-the-Art to the Application of a Novel Classification Scheme to 66 Parties in 33 Countries," *Government and Opposition* 55, no. 2 (2020), 327 – 347.

<sup>77</sup> Giorgos Venizelos and Grigoris Markou, "In opposition and in government" in *Research Handbook on Populism*, ed. Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2024), 360- 363.

can create unique opportunities that impact the strategies of populist leaders in government. In addition, this principle can be extended to non-populists as well.

Some studies suggest that populists can adapt to and endure the challenges of governing, which may involve organisational adjustments and ideological compromises.<sup>78</sup> Generally, populism tends to become more moderate after it gains power. However, a drawback of this approach is that it primarily examines the ideological aspect of populism, specifically its association with socialism, rather than its structures. Mudde and Kaltwasser<sup>79</sup> refer to this as the ‘thin ideology’ of populism, which centres on people centrism and opposes elitism.<sup>80</sup> Another perspective is that the presence of populism in governance leads to the establishment of an authoritarian regime. Müller, a notable advocate of such a view, contends that ‘populists can govern as populists.’<sup>81</sup> From his perspective, ‘populist governance exhibits three features: attempts to hijack the state apparatus; corruption and “mass clientelism”; (trading material benefits or bureaucratic favours for political support by citizens who become the populists’ “clients”), and efforts to systematically suppress civil society.’<sup>82</sup> Müller argues that populist governance centres around seizing control of the state and using intimidation tactics against political adversaries.<sup>83</sup> In the same vein, Pappas posits that ‘without exception, populists in office have tried to enlarge the state and fill government jobs with political supporters in order to expand both, the populist leader's and party's control over crucial institutions.’<sup>84</sup> Pappas suggests that ‘populism may turn into outright autocracy.’<sup>85</sup> Political theorist Nadia Urbinati

<sup>78</sup> Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, *Populists in Power* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>79</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>80</sup> Giorgos Venizelos and Yannis Stavrakakis, “Bound to Fail? Assessing Contemporary Left Populism,” *Constellations* 30, no. 3 (2023): 290–308.

<sup>81</sup> Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 4.

<sup>83</sup> Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 45.

<sup>84</sup> Takis S. Pappas, “Populists in Power,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 2 (2019): 73.

<sup>85</sup> Pappas, “Populists in Power,” 74.

shares a similar perspective, suggesting that ‘once elected, the leader feels authorised to act unilaterally and make decisions without meaningful institutional consultation or mediations.’<sup>86</sup>

Some perceive populism as a threat to liberal democratic regimes. According to Taggart, ‘populism is hostile to representative politics.’<sup>87</sup> This perspective is based on the understanding that populism is inherently ‘illiberal’, leading to devaluing other centres of power, such as the judiciary.<sup>88</sup> Some scholars argue that there is a connection between populism and fascism. According to Finchelstein, populism falls within the spectrum of liberalism and fascism.<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, Žižek aligns with liberal anti-populists and argues that populism is akin to fascism, referring to it as the contemporary opium for the masses.<sup>90</sup> According to Venizelos and Markou,<sup>91</sup> it is crucial to acknowledge the significant differences between populist and fascist politics without minimising their occasional interactions. Initially, it is worth noting that fascism often garners popular support, yet once it assumes power, it swiftly abolishes elections. The governing system operates through hierarchical top-down processes, effectively nullifying the collective will of people. On the other hand, populists aim to establish their legitimacy by engaging in democratic and participatory methods, such as referendum and thorough vote counting, to demonstrate that the election of a populist leader or party is a result of the people’s will.<sup>92</sup> In general, it is imperative to acknowledge the fact that the connection between populist and liberal democracy is ambivalent in nature, with the possibility that both

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<sup>86</sup> Urbinati, *Me the People How Populism Transforms Democracy*, 120.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Taggart, “Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics,” in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, ed. Yves Mény and Yves Surel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 66.

<sup>88</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 17.

<sup>89</sup> Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 247.

<sup>90</sup> Giorgos Venizelos, Antonis Galanopoulos, Thomás Zicman de Barros, “Is There a Leftwing Anti-Populism? Meet Slavoj Žižek,” *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 13, no. 3 (2019): 0–10.

<sup>91</sup> Venizelos and Markou, “In opposition and in government,” 362.

<sup>92</sup> Ostiguy, “Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach,” 83.

could have positive impacts on the polity, including the inclusion of excluded groups in the social, economic, and political spheres and increased participation in the democratic process.

Some accounts emphasise that the connection between populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism is based on negative interpretations of populism by certain theorists.<sup>93</sup> In academic, political, and public discussions, populism is often portrayed as conflicting with pluralism and democracy. In mainstream discourse, it is often portrayed as having a moralistic and monistic perspective. Müller views it as promoting a homogenised identity of a 'pure' people.<sup>94</sup> However, a strong emphasis on the European context, where radical right populism is prominent, tends to shape explanations of populism. Numerous progressive and democratic expressions of populism operate outside of Europe; unfortunately, most Euro-American scholars overlook such trends.<sup>95</sup> According to Aslanidis, there is a tendency to mistakenly promote region-specific manifestations of populism as having universally applicable defining properties.<sup>96</sup>

Another approach strives to analyse populism from different perspectives, such as discursive, performative/stylistic, and socio-cultural.<sup>97</sup> The aforementioned paradigms, even though distinct, have a common basis for rejecting essentialism. Instead of focusing on a specific normative interpretation of populism, which is often negative, and anticipating its adverse effects on democratic structures, policymaking processes, and society (as discussed earlier), these perspectives examine its function as a force that interpolates and mobilises

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<sup>93</sup> Benjamin De Cleen and Jason Glynos, "Beyond Populism Studies," *Journal of Language and Politics* 20, no. 1 (2021): 178–195; Yannis Stavrakakis and Grigoris Katsambekis, "The Populism/Anti-Populism Frontier and Its Mediation in Crisis-Ridden Greece: From Discursive Divide to Emerging Cleavage?," *European Political Science* 18, no. 1 (2019): 37–52.

<sup>94</sup> Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 81.

<sup>95</sup> Enrico Padoan, *Anti- Neoliberal Populisms in Comparative Perspective: A Latinamericanization of Southern Europe?* (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>96</sup> Paris Aslanidis, "Avoiding Bias in the Study of Populism," *Chinese Political Science Review* 2, no. 3 (2017): 268.

<sup>97</sup> Pierre Ostiguy, Francisco Panizza, and Benjamin Moffitt, ed., *Populism in Global Perspective: A Performative and Discursive Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

collective identities. Therefore, if we consider populism in opposition as a way of politically identifying with ‘the people’ through various performative, stylistic, and discursive actions, “then populism in power should be connected with an actor’s ability to continue pursuing these antagonistic practices, cultivating and deepening affective bonds, and ultimately maintaining (political and cultural) hegemony.”<sup>98</sup> Biglieri and Cadahia use the word ‘populist institutionality’ to refer to the potential of adopting a contentious equivalential approach as a governing logic.<sup>99</sup>

According to Biglieri and Cadahia, ‘the state (and institutions) become another antagonistic space in the dispute between those on the bottom and those on the top.’<sup>100</sup> Venizelos opines that ‘the primary focus of analysis for discursive-performative approaches is the capacity of populists to pursue or maintain anti-establishment repertoires from institutional positions by convincingly presenting themselves as outsiders and simultaneously interpellating a collective popular subject of the excluded, often through effective conditioning.’<sup>101</sup>

The discursive/performative approach diverges from previous methods of describing populism in power, primarily considering its impact on the polity or its effectiveness in implementing policy. Instead, this approach emphasises the fundamental criteria of people-centrism and anti-elitism, interpreting them not only as rhetorical tools but also as unconventional, stylistic, and performative techniques observed in language, social cues, body language, and the overall behaviour of a political figure.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Venizelos and Markou, “In opposition and in government,” 362.

<sup>99</sup> Paula Biglieri & Luciana Cahadia, *Seven Essays on Populism: For a Renewed Theoretical Perspective* (Medford: Polity Press, 2021).

<sup>100</sup> Biglieri and Cadahia, *Seven Essays on Populism: For a Renewed Theoretical Perspective*, 67.

<sup>101</sup> Venizelos and Markou, “In opposition and in government,” 363.

<sup>102</sup> Venizelos, G. (2022) ‘Donald Trump in Power: Discourse, Performativity, Identification’, *Critical Sociology* 49, no. 4-5 (2023): 647-667.

## Theorising Populism: Discursive, Socio-Cultural, and Performative Approaches

According to Markou,<sup>103</sup> Laclau's theory of populism is crucial and valuable for comprehending the present surge of populism. Unlike many localised interpretations of populism, his theory is applicable in various situations and provides a high level of theoretical complexity without falling into idealism or intellectual reductionism.<sup>104</sup> Laclau's study posits that populism arises during periods of crisis. Laclau describes populism as a political ideology that divides society into two opposing factions: the people and the elites in power. We can identify the structural aspects of populism as the production of 'equivalences, popular subjectivity, the dichotomic construction of the social around an internal frontier', and the 'discursive construction of an enemy.'<sup>105</sup>

According to Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is a complex system of meaning that encompasses both language and non-language components.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, research that aligns with their theoretical approach should not only examine the rhetoric of a politician, such as speeches, texts, and political manifestos, but also analyse the leader's political style and performance. To effectively analyse the rhetorical and stylistic aspects of a particular populist discourse, Markou<sup>107</sup> combines Laclau's methodological insights with two complementary alternative approaches that specifically examine these elements of populism: Pierre Ostiguy's sociocultural approach<sup>108</sup> and Benjamin Moffitt's performative approach.<sup>109</sup> Laclau defines populism as consisting of three interconnected components: '(1) the formation of an internal

<sup>103</sup> Grigoris Markou, "Populism in Government: The Case of SYRIZA (2015–2019)" in *Populism in Global Perspective A Performative and Discursive Approach*, ed. Pierre Ostiguy, Francisco Panizza, and Benjamin Moffitt (New York: Routledge, 2021), 179–181.

<sup>104</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, "Religion and Populism in Contemporary Greece" in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 235.

<sup>105</sup> Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?," 38–39.

<sup>106</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 107–108.

<sup>107</sup> Markou, "Populism in Government: The Case of SYRIZA (2015–2019)," 179.

<sup>108</sup> Pierre Ostiguy, "Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach," 73–97.

<sup>109</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism Performance, Political Style and Representation*.

antagonistic frontier separating the “people” from power”; (2) an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the “people” possible; and (3) ‘the unification of these various demands’ around ‘the people’ as an empty signifier.”<sup>110</sup>

Ostiguy defines populism as “characterized by a particular form of political relationship between a leader and a social basis, established and articulated through ‘low’ politico-cultural appeals which resonate and receive positive reception within particular sectors of society for social-cultural reasons.”<sup>111</sup>

Table 1: Ostiguy’s High-Low Spectrum<sup>112</sup>

	Social-cultural	Political-cultural
<b>High</b>	Well behaved Well mannered Composed Rationalist Ethical Stiff/rigid/boring	Impersonal Procedure-driven Formal, impersonal Legalistic/rational Institution-mediated Restrained
<b>Low</b>	Slang/swearing Demonstrative Raw/popular tastes More colourful	Personalistic Strong leadership Closer to ‘the people’ Decisive action Immediate

Source: Pierre Ostiguy, “The High-Low Political Divide: Rethinking Populism and Anti-Populism,” *Political Concepts: Committee on Concepts and Methods Working Paper Series 35* (2009), 7.

He asserts a notable differentiation between populists and anti-populists in their distinct approaches to ‘being’ and ‘doing’ politics. He argues that there is a significant distinction

<sup>110</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 74.

<sup>111</sup> Pierre Ostiguy, “Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach,” 73.

<sup>112</sup> Pierre Ostiguy, “The High-Low Political Divide: Rethinking Populism and Anti-Populism,” *Political Concepts: Committee on Concepts and Methods Working Paper Series 35* (2009), 7.

between populists and anti-populists in their respective ways of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ politics. Populists often use informal language and are more expressive and vivid in their physical or facial gestures. Furthermore, they claim to be far more connected to ‘the people’ than the impersonal politicians at the high end of the political spectrum. Anti-populist politicians depict themselves as respectable and well-behaved, and they frequently use rationalist and technocratic discourse while simultaneously defending formal and institutionally mediated modes of authority.<sup>113</sup>

Moffitt identifies three significant characteristics of a populist performance, illustrating the same political logic that emphasises the mediated nature of contemporary politics. The context identifies three main concepts: 1) appeal to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elites’; 2) bad manners; and 3) crisis, breakdown, or threat.<sup>114</sup> According to Moffitt, it is crucial to emphasise the aesthetic and theatrical aspects of a populist performance to grasp how the rivalry between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ is formed. Therefore, it is necessary to look for a particular set of political elements to classify a political performance as populist. These elements include the stage, which could be a crisis or the media; the performer, which could be a leader or a party; the audience, which is, of course, the people; and how the actors perform their roles, which could range from displaying bad manners, which is a performance of ordinariness, to embodying the people, which is a performance of extraordinariness.<sup>115</sup> Moffitt’s analysis of how populists handle crises is intellectually stimulating, especially in their attempt to streamline complex problems by offering clear-cut answers, focusing on identifying the culprits behind the catastrophe, and strategically using the media to amplify the crisis.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Pierre Ostiguy, “Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach,” 77- 78.

<sup>114</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism Performance, Political Style and Representation*, 29.

<sup>115</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism Performance, Political Style and Representation*, 7- 10.

<sup>116</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism Performance, Political Style and Representation*, 121.



Considering the integration of similar methodologies, I view populism as a ‘political discourse (logic)’ and a ‘performative political style’, illustrating how an adversarial relationship between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ organises politics and society. I use the following components of these approaches to analyse the case of West Bengal: 1) The struggle between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ or ‘the establishment’. 2) Populist claims to represent ordinary people/plebs; 3) the leader’s socio-cultural and politico-cultural appeal (the style of being and the way they do politics); and 4) the dramatic and aesthetic elements of populism (such as displaying unconventional behaviour or bad manners and embodying the people), along with the portrayal of a crisis. Moreover, this understanding of populism has the potential to be integrated with any ideology and economic framework. These theoretical and analytical techniques do not intend to provide positive or negative characterisations of the populism of the Left Front or that of the Trinamool Congress (TMC). Instead, it aims to elucidate how the party constructs a popular subject through discourse and divides society into two opposing groups (people vs. elites). It also examines how the party embodies people and differentiates itself from anti-populist politicians in the ‘high’ spectrum through its populist performance. Finally, it examines how the Left Front and the TMC parties use the ‘stage’ of crisis at different times to target their adversaries and advance their political, social, cultural, and economic agendas.

### **Rise of Populism: the construction of ‘the people’**

This sub-section seeks to comprehend and examine the formulation of the equivalential articulation of the popular subject, namely ‘the people’. Using Laclau’s formal approach, this research attempts to posit the construction of the popular identity as the primary foundation of populism. Rather than concentrating on the substance of ideologies or their class foundations, Laclau articulated a formal theory of populism as well as its underlying logic. The notion of

populism, as articulated by Laclau, is fundamentally formal, as its features are solely tied to a particular mode of articulation—the dominance of equivalential logic over differential logic—regardless of the specific contents being articulated.<sup>117</sup> So, what does Laclau mean by the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference? The logic of equivalence describes a scenario or a moment in which various demands, despite their unique characteristics, come together to create what we may call an equivalential chain.<sup>118</sup> This relates to the articulation of the demands and identities of diverse social groups into a unified hegemonic political initiative. This simplifies the social and political landscape into two opposing factions that are engaged in conflict with each other. This phenomenon manifests in pre-revolutionary contexts, where various groups, in pursuit of their specific demands, face significant frustration against a common regime and unite to challenge and dismantle it.<sup>119</sup> Laclau and Mouffe assert that a fundamental principle of their book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, is the need to establish a chain of equivalence across diverse democratic movements in opposition to various types of subordination.<sup>120</sup> The logic of equivalence lays the foundation of populism by discursively constructing the popular subject. This logic of equivalence, which serves as the foundational logic of populism, is solely a political logic. Conversely, the logic of difference reigns when social groups, their demands, and identities occupy distinct positions within the discourses that form the social fabric.<sup>121</sup> This occurs when a regime has the ability to either meet or ignore the demands of various social groups without fostering a connection among those groups against the regime.<sup>122</sup> I will refer to the social logic operating within the institutionalised differential model as the logic of

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<sup>117</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What's in a Name?”, in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 44.

<sup>118</sup> Laclau, “Populism: What's in a Name?”, 37.

<sup>119</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis, “Distinctions and Articulations”, 6.

<sup>120</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001), xviii.

<sup>121</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, xiii.

<sup>122</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis, “Distinctions and Articulations”, 6.

difference. They assume the absence of social division and the ability to address all legitimate demands through non-antagonistic administrative means.<sup>123</sup>

Now, I will try to understand how the logic of equivalence discursively constructs popular subjects, namely 'the people'. According to Laclau, assuming that the power bloc has received a request from a group on a particular matter but has rejected the demand without taking any action will undoubtedly lead to social dissatisfaction. However, if only one demand goes unmet, it will not substantially alter the circumstances. If, for whatever reason, there is a more extensive array of unmet demands, this collective discontent will give rise to fundamentally distinct social dynamics. For instance, if a collective of individuals in the vicinity, discontent with their unfulfilled requests for enhanced transportation, learns that their neighbours share grievances concerning security, water supply, housing, education, and other issues, they will cultivate a sense of solidarity, recognising the unaddressed nature of their demands. The demands possess a negative aspect that transcends their positive distinction.<sup>124</sup> Laclau posits that a social scenario where demands consistently reassemble around the common thread of dissatisfaction is the primary, though not exclusive, prerequisite for the political phenomenon we identify as populism.<sup>125</sup> In each of the two situations, the subject of the demand is distinct; the first case is an example of the logic of difference, while the second is an instance of the logic of equivalence. In the first instance, the demand was prompt, and its subject was likewise punctual. Examining through the lens of unique differences, we may refer to demand as a democratic subject. In the alternative scenario, the subject will expand in scope as its subjectivity results from the equivalential articulation of numerous unfulfilled democratic

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<sup>123</sup> Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?", 36.

<sup>124</sup> Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?", 36-37.

<sup>125</sup> Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?", 37.

demands. A subject based on this logic will be considered a popular subject. This illustrates the conditions that influence the rise or decline of popular subjectivity:

When the institutional system absorbs democratic demands differentially, the equivalential links weaken, making it unlikely to lead to the emergence of popular subjectivity. Conversely, a populist rupture is likely to occur when numerous demands remain unmet and the institutional system is unable to accommodate them in a differentiated manner.<sup>126</sup> The rise of popular subjectivity necessitates the establishment of an internal frontier. The internal frontier emerges solely from the functioning of the equivalential chain, indicating that these two aspects represent a singular condition. It is crucial to understand that the equivalential chain possesses an anti-institutional nature; also, it undermines the specific and differential aspects of the demands. The equivalential demands directly challenge the representation of a particular equivalential moment. The equivalences exist in relation to a pervasive absence which necessitates identifying the origin of social negativity. Popular discourses categorise society into two distinct groups: those in power and the underdog.<sup>127</sup> Laclau suggests that the existence of populism is inherently linked to the discursive creation of an enemy, be it the regime, the oligarchy, the elite, the establishment, or any other entity.<sup>128</sup> It is crucial to recognise that the development of popular subjects is contingent upon the discursive production of empty signifiers. They aim to establish equivalential uniformity in a highly heterogeneous reality; however, they can only accomplish this by minimising their individualised content.<sup>129</sup> The empty signifier unifies the equivalential chain, and sometimes, this technique involves a single name—the leader's name—performing the homogenising role.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?", 37-38.

<sup>127</sup> Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?", 38.

<sup>128</sup> Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?", 39.

<sup>129</sup> Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?", 40.

<sup>130</sup> Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?", 40.

In Laclau's understanding, populism represents a strategy for politics that fosters the development of popular political subjects.<sup>131</sup> According to Laclau, "we only have populism if there is a series of politico-discursive practices constructing a popular subject, and the precondition of the emergence of such a subject is, as we have seen, the building up of an internal frontier dividing the social space into two camps. But the logic of that division is dictated, as we know, by the creation of an equivalential chain between a series of social demands in which the equivalential moment prevails over the differential nature of the demands. Finally, the equivalential chain cannot be the result of a purely fortuitous coincidence but has to be consolidated through the emergence of an element which gives coherence to the chain by signifying it as a totality. This element is what we have called empty signifier."<sup>132</sup>

Laclau's formal approach profoundly influences this work. However, any discourse articulating and constructing the people and their enemy through an equivalence logic and dividing society into two antagonistic camps relies on a horizontal spatial metaphor of in-group vs out-group. From our understanding, it may not be a quintessential populist discourse. An example of such discourse is nationalist, ethnic and racist discourses. Simply articulating the people through an equivalential logic does not transform a discourse into a populist one. The role of the people as the central empty signifier or as a nodal point of such discourse is not primary but merely peripheral and secondary. This discourse frames people as 'integral members of a nation or a race' instead of 'marginalized underdogs.'<sup>133</sup> In such discourse, the signifier for the people is far from 'emptiness'. It sets a clear and defined meaning for the term 'people', complete with a specific signified interpretation. Moreover, this discourse constructs people through a closed-ended chain of equivalence. In their article, De Cleen and

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<sup>131</sup> Carlos de la Torre, "Is left populism the radical democratic answer?," *Irish Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 1 (2019): 65.

<sup>132</sup> Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?", 43-44.

<sup>133</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis, "Distinctions and Articulations", 12.

Stavrakakis<sup>134</sup> use the post-Marxist and post-structuralist discourse theories, developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to differentiate between populism and nationalism. They argue that these concepts serve as unique frameworks for discursively constructing and asserting representation of ‘the people’, where populism embodies the underdog and nationalism represents the nation. We can pinpoint and emphasise the variations in the construction of ‘the people’ by analysing the architects of populism and nationalism. These two frameworks depend on contrasting arrangements of socio-political antagonisms organised along the down/up and in/out axis, respectively. Some contend that discourse theory provides a methodological basis for distinguishing between populism and nationalism and is grounded in their distinct discursive claims.<sup>135</sup> Thus, populism and nationalism may be seen as two distinct discourses.<sup>136</sup>

### Understanding of populism in this study

I do not consider populism to be ‘synonymous’ with politics, contrary to Laclau’s assertions in his later publications on that issue.<sup>137</sup> Stavrakakis questions how to theoretically distinguish an equivalent discourse centred around ‘the people’ when populism becomes synonymous with politics, and any signifier could potentially serve as the focal/nodal point for a populist discourse.<sup>138</sup> He argues that the concern here is that populism loses its conceptual originality as a tool for specific political analysis.<sup>139</sup> In their analysis,<sup>140</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis provided a definition of populism that, although influenced by Laclau, is also distinct from his later work. They suggest that Laclau ultimately conflates populism with

<sup>134</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis, “Distinctions and Articulations”, 2.

<sup>135</sup> Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, “Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis,” 3.

<sup>136</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis, “Distinctions and Articulations”, 5.

<sup>137</sup> Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?”, 47; Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 67.

<sup>138</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, “Antinomies of Formalism: Laclau’s Theory of Populism and the Lessons from Religious Populism in Greece,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, no. 3 (2004): 263.

<sup>139</sup> Stavrakakis, “Antinomies of Formalism”, 263.

<sup>140</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis, “Distinctions and Articulations”, 10.

politics, which prompts a critical examination of how one might distinguish between these two notions. In contrast to Laclau's perspective, they regard populism in this context as a distinct form of political engagement- "Populism is a dichotomic discourse in which "the people" are juxtaposed to "the elite" along the lines of a down/up antagonism in which "the people" is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to "the elite" conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group. Populist politics thus claim to represent "the people" against an "elite" that frustrates their legitimate demands and presents these demands as expressions of the will of "the people."<sup>141</sup> They argued that populism is organized along a vertical axis, indicating a down/up, high/low dimension that pertains to 'power, status, and hierarchical socio-cultural or socioeconomic position'. Their analysis<sup>142</sup> indicates that the down/up framework serves as a distinguishing feature of populism, setting it apart from other discourses that also engage with the concept of 'the people' but interpret it differently, 'such as democracy (the people-as-demos) and nationalism (the people-as-nation).' Leveraging the groundbreaking contributions of Ernesto Laclau, Team POPULISMUS has adopted a methodical yet malleable approach that differentiates populist discourses from their non-populist counterparts. The study has therefore sought to address methodological shortcomings, advocating for a minimal criteria approach. Specifically, these should include: (1) significant mentions of 'the people' (or similar indicators, such as the 'underdog') and the 'popular will', emphasising the necessity for actual representation; and (2) an antagonistic perspective within the social and political contexts that are split between 'the people/the underdog' and 'the elite/establishment.'<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis, "Distinctions and Articulations", 10.

<sup>142</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis, "Distinctions and Articulations", 11.

<sup>143</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, Alexandros Kioupiolis, Giorgos Katsambekis, Thomas Siomos, and Ioanna Garefi, Background Paper from the International Conference (Greece: Populism and Democracy international conference, School of Political Sciences, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2015), 6.

In my view, populism is a polarised and antagonistic discourse. It uses vertical spatial metaphors, such as the down vs. up axis, to construct people and establishments into two distinct articulatory chains of equivalence in an antagonistic manner. Additionally, populists advocate for popular demands, identities, and interests against an establishment and represent those marginalised in terms of power and status. The approaches of the Essex School of Discourse Analysis significantly shape this view. I am aware of nationalist, ethnic, and racist discourse. All these discourses emphasise elements of antagonism and present society and politics as divided into two antagonistic groups. Their interpretation places the people on one side of society and its enemies on the other. This discourse also tries to construct the people and their enemy discursively in two separate chains of equivalence. Right-wing populism primarily explains such discourses.

We must remember that such discourses often only construct the people and their enemies on a horizontal axis. In-group versus out-group identifies the people and their enemies. All these discourses specifically revolve around the concepts of nationalism, ethnicity, or racism, with populism occupying a peripheral position. Furthermore, the master signifiers of those discourses that represent the people are not empty. It is a signifier that conveys a specific meaning. In other words, this type of discourse does not articulate people through an open-ended chain of equivalence. Rather the discourse articulates people in a very close-ended chain of equivalence. It primarily offers individuals a position as a member of a nation, ethnic group, or race, rather than as part of an underprivileged group. Consequently, we do not categorize those types of discourses as quintessentially populist. These discourses are predominantly nationalist, ethnic, or racist, with a peripheral populist character. At times, there exists a convergence between populism and nationalism, with each influencing the other within the



political discourse found on both the far right<sup>144</sup> and left.<sup>145</sup> Not all discourses equally incorporate these two elements. We can characterise discourses incorporating these elements as populist nationalism or nationalist populism.<sup>146</sup>

### Discourse Theory in Populism Research

Discursively examining social reality, the discourse theory scrutinises various discourses, allowing for their analytical differentiation: “Each of these discourses is a [specific] social and political construction that establishes a system of meaningful relations between different objects and practices while providing subject positions with which social agents can identify.”<sup>147</sup> According to Cleen and Stavrakakis, populism and nationalism may be distinct discourses.<sup>148</sup> At the most formal level, the term discourse encapsulates the discursive nature of discourse theory, which views the social as a discourse.<sup>149</sup> Discourse in discourse theory refers to a ‘horizon of meaningful practices and significant differences’,<sup>150</sup> a context that gives rise to distinct identities across all objects and subjects and enables individuals to engage with their living world.<sup>151</sup> In this context, ‘discourse’ transcends words and ideas; it encompasses all ‘systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects’<sup>152</sup> through creating antagonisms and delineating political boundaries. Consequently, discourse transcends

<sup>144</sup> Gijs Lambrechts and Benjamin De Cleen. “Farmers as Symbol of ‘the People’: Nationalism and Populism in Vlaams Belang’s Discourse about Farmers,” *Journal of Language and Politics* (2024): 6-18.

<sup>145</sup> Jacopo Custodi, “Nationalism and Populism on the Left: The Case of Podemos,” *Nations and Nationalism* 27, no. 3 (2021): 705–20.

<sup>146</sup> Michaelangelo Anastasiou, “Of Nation and People: The Discursive Logic of Nationalist Populism,” *Javnost-The Public* 26, no. 3 (2019): 330–45; Michaelangelo Anastasiou and Jacopo Custodi, “The populism–nationalism nexus,” in *Research handbook on populism*, ed. Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2024), 23–31.

<sup>147</sup> Howarth and Stavrakakis, “Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis”, 3.

<sup>148</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis, “Distinctions and Articulations”, 5.

<sup>149</sup> Benjamin De Cleen, Jana Goyvaerts, Nico Carpentier, Jason Glynos, and Yannis Stavrakakis, “Moving discourse theory forward: A five-track proposal for future research,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 20, no. 1 (2021): 22–46.

<sup>150</sup> David Howarth, *Discourse* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>151</sup> Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: SAGE, 2002), 30–34.

<sup>152</sup> Howarth and Stavrakakis, “Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis”, 3–4.

the boundaries of linguistic and extra-linguistic elements, taking on an inherently performative role.<sup>153</sup>

Discourse theory perceives politics as a contest for hegemony, wherein various discourses shape political identities and vie for portraying political aspirations.<sup>154</sup> Laclau and Mouffe assert that the distinct identities of individuals and groups emerge from dependent discursive processes, positioning them within the broader context of an ongoing discursive struggle.<sup>155</sup> Some critics, like Norman Geras, have interpreted Laclau and Mouffe's theory as questioning the existence of reality due to their primacy in discourse. This appears to be an oversight. Like other discourse analytical perspectives, Laclau and Mouffe's framework acknowledges the presence of social and physical entities. However, the interpretative frameworks that manifest through discourses invariably influence our understanding of these entities. Physical objects inherently lack meaning; it is through our discourse that we attribute significance to them. To illustrate this point, Laclau and Mouffe highlight that a stone exists irrespective of social structures; however, its interpretation as either a projectile or a work of art is contingent upon the discursive context within which it is placed.<sup>156</sup> They argue that 'discourse forms the subject position of the social agent.'<sup>157</sup> Discourse analysis involves the systematic process of documenting, delineating, and elucidating processes which, in a constantly adversarial and volatile environment, aim to 'partially fix the identities of subjects and objects through discursive articulation.'<sup>158</sup> This discourse theory terminology encompasses

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<sup>153</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, Alexandros Kioupkiolis, Giorgos Katsambekis, Thomas Siomos, and Ioanna Garefi, *Methodological Orientation Internal Technical Report* (Greece: School of Political Sciences, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2014), 16.

<sup>154</sup> Jacob Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe, and Žižek* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 40-41.

<sup>155</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 35.

<sup>156</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without apologies," in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, ed. Ernesto Laclau (London: Verso, 1990), 101.

<sup>157</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without apologies," 101.

<sup>158</sup> Stavrakakis, Kioupkiolis, Katsambekis, Siomos, and Garefi, *Methodological Orientation Internal Technical Report*, 16.

terms that include ‘signifier, articulation, dislocation, nodal point, demand, logics, constitutive outside, and subject position’—each reflecting an engagement through the discursive construction of identities, the structural organisation of discourses (the interrelations among elements within discourse as well as the dependency of their significance on that structure), and the interrelations among discourses (for instance, how varying discourses ascribe different interpretations to the identical signifier).<sup>159</sup>

Unlike linguistic-based discourse analysis methods, discourse theory generally refrains from employing the word discourse to denote segments of spoken, written, or other types of texts. Beyond these terminological distinctions, discourse theory scrutinizes a diverse range of texts with the aim of identifying the discourses (as a framework/structures of meaning) that different writings utilize, replicate, alter, and question.<sup>160</sup> Interest pertains to the manner in which discourses are ‘embodied in a range of texts, speeches, and signifying sequences of all sorts.’<sup>161</sup> Discourse theory fundamentally embodies a discursive methodology. The discourse is presented as a framework/structure of meaning. The emphasis is on the dynamics of discourses in society rather than functioning as a method for analysing texts.<sup>162</sup> Articulation is the essential procedure describing how discourses are created and expressed. In the words of Laclau and Mouffe, “[W]e will call articulation any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call discourse. The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, we will call

<sup>159</sup> De Cleen, Goyvaerts, Carpentier, Glynos, and Stavrakakis, “Moving discourse theory forward”, 22-46.

<sup>160</sup> De Cleen, Goyvaerts, Carpentier, Glynos, and Stavrakakis, “Moving discourse theory forward”, 22-46.

<sup>161</sup> David Howarth, “Applying discourse theory: The method of articulation” in *Discourse Theory in European Politics*, ed. David Howarth and Jakob Torfing (London: Palgrave, 2005), 336.

<sup>162</sup> De Cleen, Goyvaerts, Carpentier, Glynos, and Stavrakakis, “Moving discourse theory forward”, 22-46.

moments. By contrast, we will call element any difference that is not discursively articulated.”<sup>163</sup>

To identify the particularities that a discourse presents to its audience, it is necessary to examine the ‘subject positions’. Laclau and Mouffe, drawing from the works of Althusser and Foucault, explore ways in which discourses provide citizens with certain subject positions for identification. Discourses facilitate this interpellation process, which shapes individuals as subjects.<sup>164</sup> This interplay of interpellation and identification fosters a sense of collective identity through the acknowledgement of differences. For instance, the formation of a particular group is contingent upon the delineation of an opposing group. The process of identity building heavily relies on the identification of ‘constitutive outsides.’ This arises from the inherent dialectic of identity and difference that is present in the processes of identity formation and the characteristics of emotional investment in these identities.<sup>165</sup>

### **Institutionalism as a manifestation of governance**

Institutionalist discourse serves as a clear reflection of governance in action. Institutionalism mirrors the essence of governance. Institutionalism,<sup>166</sup> as conceptualized by Laclau<sup>167</sup> and elaborated upon by Griggs and Howarth,<sup>168</sup> entails the strategic formulation of demands that establishes a primarily non-conflict relationship between those making the demands and those receiving them. This framework aligns with the typical nature of institution-operated politics, where demands revolve around a centre of authority without causing a divisive rupture. When taken to an extreme, institutionalism may lead to a complete rejection

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<sup>163</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 105.

<sup>164</sup> Howarth and Stavrakakis, “Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis,” 12-13.

<sup>165</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis, “Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism,” 7.

<sup>166</sup> Seongcheol Kim, *Discourse, Hegemony, and Populism in the Visegrad Four* (London: Routledge, 2022), 39.

<sup>167</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*.

<sup>168</sup> Steven Griggs and David Howarth, “Populism, Localism and Environmental Politics: The Logic and Rhetoric of the Stop Stansted Expansion Campaign,” *Planning Theory* 7, no. 2 (2008): 129-130.

of the necessity for political struggle, what Mouffe calls ‘post-politics’.<sup>169</sup> However, political conflict reemerges whenever a collective identity forms in opposition to a shared external force.

In my opinion, we can apply three logics to understand the institutional discourse as a reflection of governance. The first is the logic of differences, which allows those in the power bloc to selectively accept specific democratic demands separately from each other. The second is the logic of governance, while the third is the logic of accountability.<sup>170</sup> I will now delve into the three logics of institutionalism in greater detail.

***Logic of Difference:*** Laclau based his theory on the most fundamental unit, ‘demand’.<sup>171</sup> A demand is placed on the institutional order, such as a local authority or the state. At this stage, we are dealing with an institutional logic or a logic of difference, and the fact that a demand has been placed before the institutions implies that the institutional order is considered legitimate.<sup>172</sup> The power block seeks to maintain its popular support base by accepting democratic demands through specific accommodative strategies at the bureaucratic level. Laclau’s logic of difference can be interpreted as a strategy that sequentially addresses democratic demands.

The state consistently faces a multitude of democratic demands. However, the ruling power bloc isolates some democratic demands and accommodates them while ignoring others; this corresponds to the logic of difference posited by Laclau. The logic of difference means that the power bloc can accommodate particularistic democratic demands differentially, ‘each in isolation from others.’<sup>173</sup> The failure to fulfil these demands creates an equivalent chain of

<sup>169</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>170</sup> Ayan Das and Debajit Goswami, “Populism and Governance: A Study of West Bengal Politics, 1975–2016,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 16, no. 2 (2022): 61.

<sup>171</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 67–125.

<sup>172</sup> Thomassen, “Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and the discursive approach,” 144.

<sup>173</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 73.

popular demands. Generally, the state responds to demands individually. An example of this Laclauian logic of difference could be the accommodationist tactic of selectively accepting the demand for backward caste reservation in public services. Laclau's logic of difference refers to democratic demands that can be addressed separately from other democratic demands if presented to the power bloc. Put simply, the power bloc, which includes the state, can only meet certain sector-specific demands of the people after such demands are clearly expressed.

***Logic of Governance:*** We could cite numerous examples of implementing state-sponsored welfare programmes that are not a product of popular demand. The bureaucracy and technocrats meticulously curate such policies, not waiting for the articulation of democratic demands in the first place but designing them from the outset to obstruct the aggregate of democratic demands. These policies align with a logic of governance in which the leader and ruling party implement programmes that fulfil the public's desire for social welfare while avoiding direct accommodation of democratic demands.

These welfare programmes result from specific governance strategies implemented by a well-organised government apparatus and bureaucracy. Nevertheless, the people were deeply moved by the targeted welfare programmes due to the apparent lack of certain services and goods within the population. Therefore, the execution of welfare programmes is fundamentally distinct from the logic of difference. Consequently, we can classify the operation and upkeep of welfare programmes as the logic of governance, which differs from the logic of difference. Thus, implementing welfare programmes is practically distinct from the logic of difference. According to Islam, implementing and maintaining welfare policies can be considered a distinct form of governance that differs from the logic of difference. This is because, while

Laclau's logic of difference is essentially an accommodationist strategy, the logic of governance is primarily an implementationist strategy.<sup>174</sup>

Therefore, it would be fair to say that the creation and implementation of various schemes, such as *Khadyasathi*, which offers rice and wheat for Rs. 2 per kg, and *Kanyashree*, which provides financial incentives for girls to continue their school education, are examples that follow a logic of governance and not a logic of difference. As a result, the power bloc not only accommodates specific democratic demands but also formulates and implements policies even before the generation of democratic demands.

According to Islam, Laclau's definition of populism and the academic literature on populism is thus different from the current state of populism in West Bengal. The theoretical concept of 'populism' was based on the logic of people coming together around an opposing frontier. However, state populism employs the state apparatus to confront a perceived enemy. In West Bengal, under the Trinamool Congress (TMC) regime, the role of the state apparatus and bureaucratic machinery in constructing and implementing affirmative policies provided for the mitigation of anti-establishment upsurges as the logic of governance successfully thwarted the accumulation of democratic demands. Although populism in Laclau's writings employs a dual logic of equivalence and difference, Islam asserts that the essence of state populism in West Bengal employs a triad of logics: equivalence, difference, and governance.<sup>175</sup>

If we delve deeply into the matter, we will discover that the government has implemented various schemes, programmes, and policies primarily to cater to its voter base or

<sup>174</sup> Maidul Islam, *Political Theory and South Asian Counter-Narratives* (London: Routledge, 2022), 183.

<sup>175</sup> Maidul Islam, "Electoral Democracy and the Nature of State Populism in West Bengal" (unpublished working paper), presented at the conference in Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata on September 1, 2019. Published in Bangla as 'Protinidhimulok Gonotontro Ebong Poschimbonge Rashtriyo Lokbader Prokriti' [Representative Democracy and Nature of State Populism in West Bengal] in Sibaji Pratim Basu and Rajat Ray (ed.), *Populism: Bharote Jonopriyotabadi Rajnitir Utthan* [*Populism: The Rise of Populist Politics in India*] (Kolkata: Sampark Publications, 2020), pp. 46-71.

the political community it established prior to assuming power to fulfil the diverse needs of its accountable stakeholders. The power bloc's benevolence does not motivate these actions. If the power block's benevolence drove these actions, we would observe the government adopting policies or schemes that benefit all communities and groups within society. However, this is not the case. The creation of most policies and schemes prioritises the needs of the party's voting base. The ruling party designs its policies, schemes, and programs to sustain its support base. Consequently, we perceive the power bloc's responsibility to its electorate, manifested through numerous policies and programs that benefit its support group, as a logic of accountability rather than an expression of the logic of governance. We regard schemes and policies that aim to benefit all citizens as the essence of the logic of governance. Although the policies that are being implemented as an expression of the political accountability of the power bloc—i.e., those public policies implemented to fulfil their electoral promises—cannot be explained through the logic of governance.

***Logic of Accountability:*** We aim to introduce a new logic known as the logic of accountability in addition to Ernesto Laclau's logic of difference and Maidul Islam's logic of governance. Political parties engage in electoral contests by often bringing together various groups to form a coalition or popular frontier. After coming to power, they tried to meet the unfulfilled democratic demands by adopting multiple public policies. Political parties' electoral manifestos reflect their willingness to implement unmet democratic demands from various groups. Political parties participate in elections, highlighting their commitments declared in the manifesto. In a sense, a political party's solidarity with the unfulfilled democratic demands of various groups before coming to power and their subsequent fulfilment of these demands through adopting different public policies after coming to power exemplifies the electoral accountability of the power bloc. This governance strategy differs from Laclau's logic of difference in that the demands of multiple groups they meet after gaining power are not new



demands proposed to them; instead, they meet those demands as an expression of their electoral accountability. By fulfilling them, they attempt to keep their electoral pledges. It differs from Islam's logic of governance because fulfilling the demands stated in the election manifesto is a manifestation of electoral accountability on the part of the power bloc, which may not be interpreted as political benevolence. The power bloc tries to strengthen and expand its support base and establish its hegemony by striving to fulfil electoral promises after coming to power.

Political party pamphlets, leaders' pre- and post-election speeches, election manifestos, and other similar sources all provide evidence of electoral promises. To demonstrate their accountability and credibility, the democratically elected parties in each country periodically release report cards to the citizens. These report cards detail how the parties have fulfilled or delivered their electoral promises. The logic of accountability in question diverges significantly from Laclau's logic of difference and Islam's logic of governance. Many government schemes, programmes and policies, such as the Land Reforms Policy<sup>176</sup> adopted by the Left Front government or schemes and policies run by the Trinamool government in West Bengal, have been implemented directly following the electoral promises of these political parties. Since the landmark Land Reforms Policy, there have been many such schemes, such as the Health Insurance Scheme.<sup>177</sup> The Swasthya Sathi scheme is a group health insurance scheme that provides basic health coverage for secondary and tertiary care. The scheme's main features include up to Rs. 5 Lakhs of health coverage for a family for secondary and tertiary care and treatment and the student credit card scheme.<sup>178</sup> The Student credit card is an effort to empower the youth of Bengal. An initiative has been introduced for all eligible students, offering student credit cards with a credit limit of up to ₹10 lakh at an affordable interest rate of 4%. The West

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<sup>176</sup> Jyoti Basu, "1977 First Left Front Government: Jyoti Basu Exclusive" GC media, Video Courtesy Zee 24 Ghanta, Jun 21, 2017, 1min., 56 sec to 2 min., 12 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irk48gR8PEs>

<sup>177</sup> All India Trinamool Congress, "Election Manifesto," 2011, 56; All India Trinamool Congress, "Election Manifesto," 2014.

<sup>178</sup> All India Trinamool Congress, "Election Manifesto," 2021, 15.

Bengal *Lakshmir Bhandar* Scheme provides monthly basic income support to female heads of 1.6 crore households in Bengal: ₹500 per month for families in the general category (totalling ₹6,000 annually) and ₹1,000 per month for families belonging to SC/ST categories (totalling ₹12,000 annually).<sup>179</sup> The West Bengal *Taruner Swapna* Scheme<sup>180</sup> provides financial assistance of Rs. 10,000/- to purchase tablets, PCs, or smartphones, enabling students to supplement their academic pursuits with technology. Maa canteens<sup>181</sup> that provide 75 crore subsidised meals are offered at ₹5 through 2,500 ‘Maa’ canteens in 50 cities.

An elected government adopts a range of public policies resulting from electoral promises stated in its election manifesto. It is difficult to explain this strategy of governance within the logic of institutionalism, either through the logic of equivalence or governance, and this is where we may think of a new logic, namely the logic of accountability. Such a logic of accountability is present in other contexts, too. For example, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez undertook the ‘Bolivarian missions’<sup>182</sup> in 2003. Chávez launched the Bolivarian Missions—a set of social programs created to improve the living conditions of excluded groups in Venezuela by fighting illiteracy, providing access to education, supplying food at lower prices, and providing medical services to the poor, among other efforts. The Affordable Care Act (ACA)<sup>183</sup>, also known as the ACA, PPACA, or ‘Obamacare,’ is the comprehensive health care reform law that U.S. President Barack Obama signed in March 2010. We can explain all these projects, policies, and interventions through the logic of accountability, whereas we may not be able to explain them through the logic of difference and governance. All these policies exemplify the political accountability of the democratic representation of the power bloc. The question now arises: to whom does this responsibility belong? This responsibility mainly

<sup>179</sup> All India Trinamool Congress, “Election Manifesto,” 2021, 7.

<sup>180</sup> All India Trinamool Congress, “Election Manifesto,” 2021, 36.

<sup>181</sup> All India Trinamool Congress, “Election Manifesto,” 2021, 17.

<sup>182</sup> Ryan Brading, *Populism in Venezuela* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 77, 96- 97.

<sup>183</sup> “Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act,” Public Law, Vol. 111, March 23, 2010.

belongs to their supporters or their vote bank. The power bloc has primarily implemented a variety of schemes, programs, and policies to cater to its voter base or the political community it established prior to assuming power, intending to fulfil the diverse needs of its accountable stakeholders. Many policies and schemes are developed with the needs of the party's voting base in mind. The ruling party designs its policies and programs to sustain its support base. Therefore, we view the power bloc's accountability to its electorate, as evidenced by a range of policies and programs that benefited its support group, as a logic of accountability.

We do not assume that a democratically elected government is only accountable to its voters. In addition to their supporters, ruling parties adopt a variety of public policies for different segments of the larger population in accordance with their electoral promises. We define the logic of accountability as those actions and policies that derive from the accountability of democratic representation. They are accountable to the people and their electoral pledges, which they gave before coming to power. They also attribute this responsibility to their support group. It was through their support that the party secured its power. The power block took action to alleviate the representational crisis faced by all these groups. They acknowledge the democratic demands of these groups and effectively advocate for their interests through the exercise of state power. The party that has a stronger connection with the people, one that shares their joys and sorrows in daily life, is better equipped to understand their needs. The power bloc's integral bond with the public stems from their accountability toward the people. And this accountability creates a bond between them. This integral relationship aids the ruling group in maintaining its hegemony. Perpetuates their rule. Whether a power bloc lasts depends on their level of accountability. If a party is accountable to the people, popular interest and popular demands, it is more likely to come to power and stay there.

We believe that within the two logics—namely the logic of governance and difference—a remnant of the neoliberal sense of governmentality remains. A power bloc that does not challenge the preexisting hegemony uses these logics to govern. They make certain minimal reforms within an existing hegemonic structure. Still, they do not transform the existing hegemonic structure (socio-economic, socio-cultural, or overall). These reforms do not significantly alter the overall power structure of the society and economy. Such measures do not implement any redistributive programmes or democratic reforms. Instead, they undermine the notions of transformation while discreetly maintaining power. A non-populist party's governing strategy follows this style, but a populist party's governing strategy may not always follow the same pattern. The logic of difference, or the logic of governance, cannot explain the attempt of the power bloc to transform the established hegemonic structure using state power. Populist parties, particularly left-wing and, to a lesser extent, centre-left populist parties, usually employ state power to transform established hegemonic structures and power dynamics. We can easily explain these efforts through the logic of accountability. When a left-wing populist party comes to power, it does not restrict itself to a neo-liberal style of governance. Upon attaining power, the party generally utilise its authority to take down the prevailing hegemony or existing regime. They typically implement various decisions, policies, initiatives, and projects, keeping their electoral pledges while aiming to expand their support base, potentially contesting and transforming the existing hegemonic structure and revitalising the democratic institution.

Additionally, we seek to integrate politics and administration. We believe administration is not free from politics, but politics determines most administrative decisions. The administration's decision depends on the ruling party's ideology and support base. Once in power, the extent to which a political party can transform the established power structure depends on the composition of its support base. The established hegemonic structure's total or

partial transformation is conceivable if the popular subject comprises socio-economically and socio-culturally marginalised, oppressed, and disempowered groups against an establishment.

### **The Concept of State Populism within Institutional Discourse**

According to Islam, ‘state populism’<sup>184</sup> in India entails accommodating democratic demands via state policies. A popular example of such an accommodationist strategy would be the demand for the reservation of seats for backward castes in public employment, which corresponds to the Laclauian logic of difference. We can cite numerous examples of how state-sponsored welfare programmes are delivered regardless of public demand. The bureaucracy and technocrats carefully curate these policies, not only to prevent the aggregation of democratic demands but also to prevent their articulation. Such policies correspond to a logic of governance in which the populist leader (and party in power) executes programmes that satisfy the people’s imagination of welfare without admitting democratic demands. Forming an ‘us versus them’ rhetoric, which positions an external enemy against the state and its people, is another manifestation of state populism. Populist politics mobilise the people against a neighbouring state, a terrorist organisation, or even political coalitions and radical groups within the state, portraying them as the embodiment of anti-people or anti-national elements responsible for the underdevelopment and exploitation of the populace. Whereas Laclau’s definition of populism is based on a dual logic of equivalence and difference, Islam claims that the core of state populism in West Bengal is based on a triad of logics: equivalence, difference, and governance.

State populism denotes populism in power. It is a combination of populism and institutionalism. It is primarily a populist tendency within an institutional discourse. We want

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<sup>184</sup> Islam, *Political Theory and South Asian Counter-Narratives*, 183–84.

to introduce another logic here, the ‘logic of equivalence’, essentially the logic of populism and state populism. We attempt to locate the precise role of this logic within the institutional discourse to uncover its populist tendencies. We do not consider the logic of equivalence to be the logic of institutionalism but rather as a vital logic of state populism. The logic of equivalence, a key logic of state populism, highlights the populist tendencies of institutional discourse. As a logic of populism, it possesses an anti-institutional character.<sup>185</sup> This specific function of this logic is not found in the discourse of state populism. Instead, we emphasise how this logic articulates various elements through an equivalential chain and constructs a political subject. However, we emphasise the anti-establishment role of this logic. After coming to power, a populist power bloc presents itself as a legitimate power holder to the public. They use their state power to uproot the entrenched interests of the illegitimate elite or oligarchy, i.e., the establishment, and try to fulfil the unmet democratic demands and interests of the people as promised before coming to power. Upon assuming power, they aim to demonstrate that true power lies not with them but rather with the elite or oligarchy or the political forces that serve the interests of that elite. They use their state power to subvert the vested interests of illegitimate elites or oligarchy and present themselves as representatives of the struggling masses. Even after achieving power, they perceive society as divided into two distinct antagonistic groups on a vertical down/up axis. On the one hand, there is ‘the elite’, a small but influential faction; on the other, there is ‘the people’, a vast and impotent collective. This vertical axis represents ‘power, status, and hierarchical position.’<sup>186</sup> This power is primarily political but may also relate to socio-economic, socio-cultural, and hierarchical status.<sup>187</sup> They use state power against these elites to promote the people’s interests. Laclau explains the

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<sup>185</sup> Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?”, 38.

<sup>186</sup> Dyrberg, “Right/Left in Context of New Political Frontiers”, 339–342.

<sup>187</sup> Benjamin De Cleen, “The Populist political logic and the analysis of the discursive construction of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite,’” in *Imagining the Peoples of Europe Populist discourses across the political spectrum*, ed. Jan Zienkowski and Ruth Breeze (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019), 30.

concept of state populism in this sense in his book *On Populist Reason*.<sup>188</sup> Laclau asserts, 'In Latin America, for instance, populist movements were essentially state populisms, trying to reinforce the role of the central state against landowning oligarchies.'<sup>189</sup>

The populist power bloc tries to establish that their government is essentially a people's government. The people's government is a tool to bolster the people's ongoing struggle against the elites. This struggle is against those illegitimate elites who undemocratically hold economic, political, and social power in society and are solely responsible for marginalising the people. They pit themselves against the previously illegitimate elites, from whom they have wrested power and established popular sovereignty. They endeavour to change the previous elite-orientated democracy into a participatory and radical one. In this way, they continue to construct the two categories of elites and people discursively, uniting the people against 'the elite' even after assuming state power. By dismantling the vested interests of the elites, they prioritise the people's interest, fulfil the unmet democratic demands of the people, and strive to fulfil the promises they made to the political community that they constructed before they came to power—even in the face of the elite's opposition. They acknowledge the people's interests and advocate for democratic demands against the elite, even after gaining power. Upon attaining power, a populist power bloc delineates 'the people' in opposition to an elite through its political and administrative strategy. We call it 'state populism' when a power bloc institutionalises and strengthens the conflict between the underprivileged and the elite; uses state power to disrupt the existing hegemonic structure and establish a new one; revives democratic institutions; unites the people against the elite; and implements various redistributive programmes and democratic reforms.

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<sup>188</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 192-193.

<sup>189</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 192.

In this way, populists strive to transform their government into a people's government and ensure its perpetuation. It is also possible that they can discursively construct a new group as an elite or establishment after assuming power and uniting the people against them. The power bloc portrays them as the enemy of the people, illegally occupying power and creating difficulties in fulfilling the democratic demands of the people.

After explaining the populist dimension of state populism, we now deal with the institutional aspect of state populism. The logic of accountability can subtly explain why a populist regime, once in power, uses its state power to dismantle existing hegemonic structures, establish new ones, and implement various redistributive programs. This logic emphasises the political aspect of state power as a logic of institutionalism. The power bloc attempts to satisfy the unfulfilled democratic demands of the people by dismantling the entrenched interests of the elite in society through the use of state power. Fulfilling these unfulfilled democratic demands is an expression of the power bloc's political accountability to ensure democratic representation. It is this responsibility toward the political community that they have discursively constructed against the elites before coming to power. Their support fuelled the power bloc's rise to power. They promised to restore equality, justice, and democracy by overturning the existing hegemonic power structure. The ruling party continues to divide society into two opposite, antagonistic poles. They utilise state power to uphold the interests of the people against the elites, thereby uniting the people against them. They portray their government as a tool in the people's struggles against the elite. Their oppositional politics before assuming power precisely mirrored this. State populism is referred to as such a process when the power bloc institutionalises and reinforces the antagonism between the underprivileged and the elite while fulfilling electoral promises and democratic demands through state power, dismantling the existing hegemonic structure, establishing a new one, and revitalising democratic institutions. The logic of accountability perfectly explains this



transformation from populism in opposition to populism in power. A power bloc's strategic deployment of state power to dismantle and reconstruct hegemonic structures stems from its fundamental accountability to the political community it mobilised during its ascent to power. This accountability manifests through the systematic fulfilment of pre-electoral commitments, which explicitly encompass the transformation of existing sociopolitical configurations. This accountability extends to the people, their supporters, and the implementation of the election promises they made. Because of this accountability, the power bloc leverages state power to overthrow the existing hegemonic structure and establish a new one. The main objective of this strategy is to advance democratic reforms and implement various redistribution programs. They further use state power to establish equality, democracy, justice, and popular sovereignty. We define this responsibility and accountability as the logic of accountability.

A populist political party implements policies and programmes that alter the existing hegemonic structure as part of its obligation to the political community it established before gaining power. The previous hegemonic structure failed to meet the diverse democratic demands of the people, instead serving to protect vested interests, resulting in the non-fulfilment of a large section of the people's demands. This responsibility manifested through the logic of accountability enables the ruling party to challenge the existing hegemonic structure and take the initiative to address the unfulfilled demands of the people. Through this accountability of state power to 'the people', populist discourse seamlessly integrates with institutional discourse. We capture these aspects using the 'logic of accountability'. In other words, the logic of equivalence affects the logic of accountability as a whole. We consider this populist tendency of institutional discourse as state populism.

The state populist regime expresses its political accountability through multiple actions, including the implementation of various reformative programs and redistributive policies.

Simultaneously, they either fulfil or reject the democratic demands presented before them. Laclau's logic of difference easily explains this governance strategy. Simultaneously, the power bloc implements numerous welfare policies and schemes to fulfil the people's diverse needs. The people may not demand these welfare policies; however, the power bloc employs its bureaucratic machinery to empower them through various welfare initiatives. The bureaucracy and technocrats meticulously curate such policies in isolation from the articulated demands but design them from the outset to prevent the aggregation of democratic demands. Islam's logic of governance easily explains this institutional strategy.

As a combination of populism and institutionalism, we can assert that state populism presents four distinct logics. Firstly, both populism and state populism adhere to the logic of equivalence. Three types of logic define institutionalism: the logic of difference, the logic of governance, and the logic of accountability. We have identified state populism as a specific type of populist regime in practice, as we can use this term to explain a particular kind of populist regime. The crucial question is whether we can classify all populist regimes as state populism. Perhaps not. We cannot categorise all populist regimes as state populism. It qualifies as 'state populism' when a power bloc institutionalises and strengthens the conflict between the underprivileged and the elite, uses state power to disrupt the existing hegemonic structure, establishing a new one, revives democratic institutions, unites the people against the elite, and implements various redistributive programmes and democratic reforms. We aim to label those populist regimes that exhibit all these characteristics as state populism. Interpreting all populist regimes as state populism completely eliminates the specificity of this concept. We aim to clarify the two essential concepts, specifically populism and state populism, within a discursive methodological framework.

### **Consolidations of populism in West Bengal politics**

A consolidated populist discourse propelled the Left Front and Trinamool Congress (TMC) to rise to power in West Bengal. Populist practices from the dichotomous platforms were constructed when the alternative political project against the then-hegemonic power bloc emerged in the late 1960s and mid-1970s by the Left Front and from 2006-07 onwards by the TMC. The Left Front and the TMC, by creating an underdog sentiment that constitutes a pro-poor and pro-people project, led to the inclusion of the erstwhile excluded sections of the population. By blaming people's misfortunes on the previous regime, illegitimate economic, political, and cultural elites, and so on, these discourses rearticulated the "us" versus "them" frontier that emerged in the 1960s, 1970s and late 2000s. During times of crisis, such mechanisms were used to reproduce the nodal point of the Left Front's and TMC's projects of mobilising popular support.

**Justification of the Time Frame:** Before 1990, the Left Front used its state power to uproot the vested interests of Bengali society. Various radical and democratic reformist steps were taken, which immensely helped empower the marginalised people. However, since 1990, it can be observed that the populist character of the Left Front has gradually eroded, and they have withdrawn from taking various populist steps. After 1990, the middle, upper middle, and upper classes took precedence over the interests of the lower, lower middle, and lower classes during the Left Front regime till 2011. Also, antagonism between the people and the elite was no longer noticeable in their political and institutional discourse. During this time, the Left Front adopted a technocratic and managerial style of governance instead of populist institutionalism. Also, the partisan mentality of the CPI(M), the arrogance of staying in power for a long time, and the party-led oppression made a large section of the rural belt frustrated with the Left Front. Mamata Banerjee united these frustrated groups under the promise and protectorate of the

Trinamool Congress, and slowly, a counter-hegemony against the left in the rural and urban areas began to emerge in the late 1990s.

During the 2000s, various democratic struggles against the Left Front gradually emerged. Since the Left Front's hegemony has eroded, they used state power to suppress multiple movements. I identify the year 1991 as a starting point. This period was marked by the gradual decline of Left Front populist politics and the emergence of the populist politics of Mamata Banerjee, first as a youth Congress leader and later as the prominent leader of the Trinamool Congress. The Trinamool Congress was in opposition before 2011 and took power in West Bengal in 2011. In my discussion, I look at the first five years of the Trinamool Congress's rise to power to see if a populist party truly institutionalises its claimed level of populism. Although a full-fledged account of the second Trinamool government from 2016 to 2021 was unavailable when the research started its journey in 2017, I have tried to incorporate as many details as possible from the second Trinamool government's period to theorise about the consolidation of state populism in West Bengal.

### **Research Gaps**

Using the post-Marxian lens, I will examine populism as a logic of equivalence. This logic creates the popular frontier, as popular demands confront challenges from antagonistic forces and hegemonic power blocs. Three different viewpoints might elucidate the approach of 'governance as institutionalism.' The first is the logic of difference, where the power bloc can simultaneously accommodate particularistic democratic demands differentially, 'each in isolation from others.' The non-fulfilment of these demands creates an equivalent chain of popular demands. Because there is no equivalent chain within marginalised groups, it becomes difficult for them to articulate popular demands against the existing hegemonic order or power bloc. The second logic of institutionalism is governance, and the third is accountability.

Scholars have not extensively worked on studying populism vis-à-vis governance in West Bengal through the lens of post-Marxism. My analysis of Bengal politics from a post-Marxian perspective will be an original contribution to this context.

### **Research Questions**

I have tried to address the following research questions in this thesis.

1. Is the Left Front's discourse, before its decisive majority in West Bengal, populist? If it is a populist discourse, what spatial metaphor was used to distinguish between the positions of the people and the elite/establishment? What kind of chain of equivalence did they use? Was the chain of equivalence open-ended or closed-ended?
2. Is the Trinamool Congress's discourse, prior to its achieving state power in West Bengal, populist? If the discourse is populist, what spatial metaphor was used to distinguish the positions of the people and the elite/establishment? What type of chain of equivalence did they use? Was the chain of equivalence open-ended or closed-ended?
3. What role was played by Populism as a mode of opposition and Institutionalism and by State Populism as a mode of governance in West Bengal politics from 1991 to 2016?
4. Once in power, do populist parties relinquish their anti-establishment rhetoric and policy positions?
5. Can Populism solve the problem of the crisis of representation of the underprivileged sections of the people?

### **Research Objectives**

I shall employ Ernesto Laclau's theoretical approach to Populism and determine to what extent the case of West Bengal constitutes instances of populist politics in both the Left Front and TMC regime. I intend to use both case studies to provide a more profound understanding of the events of Populism and locate it in the West Bengal context. Here, I will investigate the key factors that caused the emergence and reproduction of Populism and differentiate between

Populism as a mode of opposition and Institutionalism and State Populism as a mode of Governance for both regimes. I want to discover the similarities and differences between these regimes' appealing and governing logic. Also, I want to see how the logic of equivalence is sustained, expanded, and transformed as a State Populism when the previous antagonistic frontier was in power. I want to analyse whether there has been a shift between equivalent and differential articulations of the antagonistic frontier during different periods, one as an opponent and another as the power bloc and how the new power bloc creates the new logic of equivalence to start a new populist configuration against the different type of frontiers. We shall examine how the power bloc manages the construction of an equivalent chain of various demands and groups by accommodating particularistic democratic demands differentially, 'each in isolation from others', to stop the populist mobilisation against the power bloc.

### **Research Methodology**

This study will use the post-foundational discourse analysis method as a methodology. According to Howarth and Stavrakakis,<sup>190</sup> discourse analysis is the process of seeing empirical raw materials and data through a discursive lens. This implies that discourse researchers regard a diverse array of linguistic and non-linguistic data—including speeches, reports, manifestos, historical events, interviews, policies, ideas, as well as organisations and institutions—as “texts” or “writing” in the Derridean sense of “there is nothing outside the text.”<sup>191</sup> They view empirical data as sets of signifying practices that form a “discourse” and its “reality”, thereby creating the conditions necessary for subjects to experience ‘the world of objects, words, and practices.’<sup>192</sup> This allows discourse theorists to incorporate and refine various techniques and methods in linguistic and literary theory that are consistent with their ontological

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<sup>190</sup> Howarth and Stavrakakis, “Introducing discourse theory and political analysis”, 4-5.

<sup>191</sup> Jacques Derrida, “But, beyond... (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon),” *Critical Inquiry* 13, no.1 (1986): 165.

<sup>192</sup> Howarth and Stavrakakis, “Introducing discourse theory and political analysis,” 4.

presumptions. Multiple approaches and theories have been influential in the field of discourse analysis, such as Derrida's deconstruction method, Foucault's archaeological and genealogical methods of discourse analysis, the concept of rhetoric and tropes, Saussure's differentiation between the paradigmatic and syntagmatic aspects of language, the Jakobsonian notions of metaphor and metonymy, particularly as redefined by Lacan, and Laclau and Mouffe's logics of equivalence and difference.<sup>193</sup>

In this context, discourse analysis integrates various sources such as party programmes, leaders' speeches, party manifestos, party pamphlets, party documents, published interviews, electoral campaign slogans, broadcasts, and billboards. The objective is to comprehensively understand the populist discourse under examination. For analysis of institutionalism, I will examine expenditure-related data from various departments of the Government of West Bengal, budget data from the state and central governments, government report cards, and other relevant data.

This study also employs computer-assisted lexicometric analysis through NVivo data analysis software. It conducts a frequency analysis to determine the words most frequently used in the election manifestos of the Left Front and Trinamool Congress. It aims to elucidate the populist tendency within such texts and the partisan discourses. NVivo software aims to conduct qualitative and quantitative data analyses using text input. Lexicometric techniques<sup>194</sup> aim to examine the connections among lexical components quantitatively. Frequency analysis stands out as a key method in lexicometric approaches. Frequency analysis measures word frequencies within a designated segment of a particular body of texts. This tool identifies the words that appear most often and how frequently they occur. This inquiry is crucial for grasping

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<sup>193</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999), 57-59, 76-78.

<sup>194</sup> Stavrakakis, Kioupkiolis, Katsambekis, Siomos, and Garefi, Background Paper from the International Conference, 12.

the significance and frequency of words in the text, serving purposes such as pinpointing keywords and uncovering prevalent patterns. A lexicometric approach aligns with the Essex School of Discourse Analysis by setting aside presumed intentions in articulation and viewing meaning as constructed through the relationships among lexical elements.<sup>195</sup>

### Chapter Outline

After presenting the relevant literature review, pointing out the research gaps, asking the specific research questions, and elaborating on the research methodology, let me briefly outline the chapters and their central contents. The thesis consists of four main chapters, apart from the Introduction and Conclusion. As evident, the Introduction presents a broad overview of academic literature on populism and background literature on populism in opposition and power. It also delineates several approaches and theories of populism, institutionalism, and state populism and highlights the specific form of populist consolidation in West Bengal. It then justifies the time frame used in the thesis analysis, the gaps in extant academic research, the research questions, the research objectives, and the research methodology. It finishes with a brief outline of the thesis chapters.

Chapter One, ‘Left Front Populism,’ explains the rise of Left populism from 1950 to 1977. The chapter then continues the discussion with the consolidation of Left populism after the Left Front came to power in 1977. It mainly focuses on the populist initiatives the Left Front took from 1977 to 1991. Chapter Two, ‘Crisis of Left Front Populism,’ points out the cracks in the Left Front populist articulations. The timeline enquired for this subsection is from 1991 to 2006. Further, the chapter moves on to discuss the continuous decline of the Left Front governance from 2006 to 2011. Chapter Three, ‘Rise of Trinamool Congress Populism,’ looks at the emergence of Trinamool as the principal opposition force from 1998 to 2006. Moreover,

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<sup>195</sup> Georg Glasze “The Discursive Constitution of a World-Spanning Region and the Role of Empty Signifiers: The Case of Francophonía,” *Geopolitics* 12 (2007): 663-664.



it deals with the significant rise of the party as a populist opposition against Left Front governance from 2006 to 2011. Chapter Four, 'Ascendancy of Trinamool Congress Institutionalism,' tries to understand the consolidation of a centre-left populism of Trinamool in government while offering a series of welfarist schemes and populist doles.

Finally, the concluding chapter makes a comparison between the similarities and differences between the Left Front and Trinamool Congress populism in opposition. Similarly, it also compares the similarities and differences between the Left Front and Trinamool Congress institutionalism by studying the populist policies implemented by both regimes. At the same time, the concluding chapter interrogates whether there can be a radical possibility of populism in practice in contemporary West Bengal to alter the extant hegemonic order.

## Chapter One: Left Front Populism

### Left Front Populism in West Bengal

The Left Front and its government were not formed overnight. A protracted and unwavering battle, marked by significant sacrifices, preceded the current situation. Every significant transition has an accompanying context, which is also true for the Left Front. The Left Front government had emerged because of the opposition to the Congress regime's policies, which were seen as oppressive and detrimental to the people's interests after India's independence. The Communists played an important role in uniting the Left by advancing democratic movements, ultimately forming the Left Front Government in West Bengal. This is a long story of the conflict between various social classes and groups and the altruistic acts of numerous individuals sacrificed as martyrs.<sup>1</sup>

The Left in West Bengal advocated for democratic practices in the state and opposed the hegemonic system of the governing Congress regime since the 1950s. During this decade, the state's politics saw the emergence of many significant movements, including advocating for the release of political prisoners and those held without trial, the food movement, the struggle for land reforms, and so on.<sup>2</sup> The Marxist-left parties from Bengal in India differentiate themselves from the Indian National Congress and its various groups, each claiming its identity as revolutionary socialists. They advocated for the total nationalisation of industry, the appropriation of land devoid of any financial assistance, and the seizing of foreign capital.<sup>3</sup> In July 1953, communists and various Left parties spearheaded the movement against the increase in tram fares in West Bengal. The initiative was a response to a modest increase of one paisa

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<sup>1</sup> Jyoti Basu, Buddhadev Bhattacharya, Anil Biswas, and Mihir Bhattacharya, "Emergence of the Left Front: A Saga of Struggle," in *People's Power in Practice: 20 Years of Left Front in West Bengal*, ed. Jyoti Basu (Kolkata: National Book Agency, 1997), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Basu, Bhattacharya, Biswas and Bhattacharya, "Emergence of the Left Front", 2.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus F. Franda, "Electoral Politics in West Bengal: The Growth of the United Front," *Pacific Affairs* 42, no. 3 (1969): 285.

in the fares set by the British tram company at that time. The protests against the tram fare increase and the demand for the nationalisation of the foreign-owned Calcutta Tramways Company are noteworthy movements in this period. Although the upsurge spanned just one month, it significantly contributed to the revitalisation of numerous popular uprisings and communist organisations that had been emerging since 1952.<sup>4</sup> On March 13, 1953, the Communist Party mobilized a massive rally of 25,000 people in front of the assembly to voice their demands for food and implore for unemployment benefits.<sup>5</sup> Then, in February 1954, a significant movement among teachers arose, calling for higher salaries and better dearness allowances. This was the first unified movement of schoolteachers in post-independent India, where communists actively participated.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Bengali communists significantly contributed to the Goa liberation struggle of 1955 while also expressing their opposition to the proposal to merge Bihar and Bengal into a single state during the period 1955–1956. The significant concern over inflation prompted extensive strikes and demonstrations in June and July of 1956. In 1957, the Communist Party significantly influenced the countrywide strikes initiated by postal service employees, who were reacting to the creation of a second Pay Commission and the central government's refusal of short-term relief and assistance. In 1959, a significant food movement emerged, primarily driven by the relentless actions of communists; approximately eighty individuals lost their lives during this time as they struggled for rice accessibility in commercial markets and aimed to address escalating inflation. The food movement, the anti-tram fare rise movement, and recurrent anti-inflation protests in the 1950s established a popular political milieu centred on

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<sup>4</sup> Maidul Islam, "Communists and the Fulfilment of Secular Promises in West Bengal," *India International Centre Quarterly* 48, no. 3 & 4 (2022): 188.

<sup>5</sup> Jyoti Basu, *Jata Dur Mone Pore: Rajnaitik Atmakatha* (Kolkata: National Book Agency, 1998), 97- 99. (In Bengali)

<sup>6</sup> Basu, *Jata Dur Mone Pore: Rajnaitik Atmakatha*, 104-111.

class-based politics and issues of equality and distributive justice.<sup>7</sup> In the latter part of the 1950s and extending into the 1960s, there was notable involvement from communist parties in the initiatives aimed at rehabilitating and resettling the East Bengal refugees throughout various colonies located near Kolkata and in the adjacent districts of West Bengal.

During the 1960s and 1970s, fervent political discussions centred around a particular rural demographic, promoting the eradication of landlordism and the redistribution of agricultural land to the farming community. The matter of mobilising small farmers and agricultural workers in Bengal was consistently absent from the Congress agenda. Since its independence, the state Congress administration has only discussed land redistribution in rural areas and has prioritised agricultural growth. However, there was a noticeable absence of action in West Bengal regarding land redistribution. The various measures implemented in this context were riddled with inconsistencies, resulting in the persistence of unchanged conditions in rural areas. A 1971 study by the Directorate of Land Record and Surveys revealed that merely 9.5 per cent of the total agricultural land was formally vested with the government under the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act (1953), falling short of the ideal target of 37.3 per cent. The primary agenda of successive Congress administrations, through various justifications, had consistently been to safeguard the interests of wealthy landowners. The outcome was a significant setback in the agricultural sector.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, the Left Front took a distinctly constructive approach, actively advocating for the rights of sharecroppers facing eviction, promoting the equitable distribution of vested lands to the landless, and ensuring the repayment of minimum wages to agricultural labourers.

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<sup>7</sup> Islam, "Communists and the Fulfilment of Secular Promises in West Bengal," 189.

<sup>8</sup> Rakhahari Chatterjee, "Introduction: Political Change in West Bengal," in *Politics in West Bengal: Institution, Process, and Problems*, ed. Rakhahari Chatterjee (Calcutta: The World Press, 1985), 18-20.

Simultaneously, the communists, who had adopted this stance as early as the end of the 1950s during their opposition phase, expressed notable concerns about the inequities, unjust policies, unfair treatment and discrimination West Bengal faced from various central governments. Furthermore, during their brief collaboration in the two United Front administrations of 1967 and 1969 and subsequent leading of the state government from 1977 to 2011, they undertook significant efforts to address and critique the economic strategies of the central government. This included their positions on the freight equalisation policy, the suggestions the central finance commission put forth, and the disparities in power dynamics among the central government and state governments. In the 1980s, federalism, or the lack thereof in real-time centre-state power dynamics, emerged as a significant national concern, coinciding with and impeding the collaboration of communist parties and various regional parties.<sup>9</sup> Left mobilised various underprivileged groups like small and marginal peasants, agricultural labourers, factory workers, East Bengal refugees, and others. They also opposed the declaration of a national emergency and the exploitation of backward castes. While the state of emergency was formally in effect from June 25, 1975, to March 21, 1977, it is important to note that West Bengal had been experiencing authoritarian governance since 1972. The period following 1971 in West Bengal was marked by what the CPI(M) referred to as ‘semi-fascist terror’ during its party Congress in Madurai in 1972; it also cautioned that this atmosphere of fear could potentially engulf all of India.<sup>10</sup> During that period, those aligned with communist ideologies faced the harsh consequences of state-sponsored violence. Consequently, their struggle for democratic principles within the anti-emergency movement represented a steadfast dedication to the tenets of parliamentary democracy.

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<sup>9</sup> Islam, “Communists and the Fulfilment of Secular Promises in West Bengal,” 190.

<sup>10</sup> Ross Mallick, *Indian Communism: Opposition, Collaboration, and Institutionalization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 156.

In the 1977 West Bengal Assembly elections, the Left Front formed the first Left Front government by contesting the elections alone rather than creating an alliance with the Janata Party. They secured 46.34 per cent of the vote and won 230 out of 294 seats.<sup>11</sup> The Communist Party of India CPI(M) achieved an outright majority by capturing 178 seats.<sup>12</sup> It supported the struggles of workers, peasants, refugees, students, teachers, and rural and urban populations. Consequently, the Left Front's victory in 1977 represented the triumph of numerous neglected, repressed, and destitute people who were economically, socially, politically, and culturally marginalised at the time. Populist slogans such as 'Left Front as the weapon of struggle' and 'the Left Front as the government of the people' helped popularise the Left Front's rule in West Bengal during its initial years. In the period after 1977, the Left Front achieved a notable series of victories in seven successive elections, maintaining governance for an impressive duration of 34 years, concluding in 2011. This was the longest tenure of a democratically elected Communist government in history. West Bengal's first Left Front government (1977–82) was a pioneering Left Front State Populist regime. During this period, the Left Front aimed to build counter-hegemony by deepening, broadening, and fulfilling democratic demands and values to establish a liberal and pluralistic democracy in the state.

Adhikari<sup>13</sup> stated that from 1954 to 1964, the Communist Party had gained prominence as the primary opposition party, advocating for the interests of the working class and promoting a coalition between workers and peasants. It was committed to advocating for the rights of all segments of the oppressed and exploited masses to establish a comprehensive national democratic front. He added that the objective was to conclude the ongoing revolution

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<sup>11</sup> Atul Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India: The Politics of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 107.

<sup>12</sup> Basu, Bhattacharya, Biswas, and Bhattacharya, "Emergence of the Left Front", 11.

<sup>13</sup> Gangadhar Adhikari, ed., *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, vol. I, 1917-1922* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1971), xi.

successfully, counteract the inclination towards capitalist progress and monopolistic expansion and promote an alternative trajectory of development that would have steered the nation towards national democracy and socialism.

Mouffe stated, “a left-populist strategy aims at federating democratic demands into a collective will to construct a ‘we’, a ‘people’, confronting a common adversary: the oligarchy. This requires the establishment of a chain of equivalence among the demands.... Such a chain’s objective is to create a new hegemony that will permit the radicalisation of democracy.”<sup>14</sup> Mouffe also asserted that the fundamental goals of the left-wing populist approach should be to gain power via a popular majority inside a liberal democratic framework and build progressive hegemony to achieve justice, liberty, and equality for all. This notion allows us to view the Left Front’s efforts in West Bengal as a struggle to establish an alternative hegemony through the growth and extension of democratic ideals and values to establish a liberal and pluralistic democratic state.

### **A Concise Overview of Left Politics in West Bengal**

West Bengal is an important state within the Indian Union, boasting a population of around 91 million, according to the 2011 national census. Notably, this state, along with Kerala and Tripura, had been a stronghold for the Indian Left parties. However, the same level of stability did not characterise the political landscape in other left-ruled states. Das<sup>15</sup> argued that several radical movements from the 1920s linked to the state had progressively laid the groundwork for a consistent political shift towards the left throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Several notable movements took place during different decades. These movements included

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<sup>14</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018), 24.

<sup>15</sup> Ritanjan Das, *Neoliberalism and the Transforming Left in India: A Contradictory Manifesto* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 26- 27.

Anushilan and Jugantar in the 1920s, the nationalist movement led by Subhash Chandra Bose around the 1930s, Tebhaga in the latter part of the 1940s, and Naxalbari in the 1970s. Furthermore, with the increasing prevalence of Leftist ideology, the Congress Party, despite being the only prominent national party then, was unable to gain a foothold in Bengal, thereby contributing to the continued growth of the communist movement.

M. N. Roy established the Communist Party of India (CPI) in the Soviet Union in 1921.<sup>16</sup> The CPI maintained a degree of unity without significant splits until 1964 when the CPI(M) separated from the founding organisation due to differing views on Communist strategies. The CPI was the second-largest party within the West Bengal Legislative Assembly until 1964, when it ceded this status to the CPI(M).<sup>17</sup> Mallick asserted that the Indian Communist Party did not establish a significant presence within the nation until the 1930s.<sup>18</sup> The Indian Communist Party could not resolve the debate between Lenin and M.N. Roy at the second Communist International Congress. The debate was about whether Communists should support national elites fighting colonialism, which Lenin had supported, or oppose them as essentially reactionary, as Roy had desired. In 1964, the section that had been most aligned with Roy's initial stance against collaborating with the Congress Party decided to break away from the party and established the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)].

Franda opined that Communism in West Bengal had consistently shown elitist characteristics.<sup>19</sup> The leadership of the movement comprised individuals from affluent, significant, and esteemed Bengali families, while its most steadfast supporters were mostly from socially established groups. Efforts had been made to garner support from the impoverished, the lower castes, and the uneducated. However, all existing evidence suggested

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<sup>16</sup> Adhikari, ed., *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, vol. I, 1917-1922*, 231.

<sup>17</sup> Franda, "Electoral Politics in West Bengal", 284.

<sup>18</sup> Ross Mallick, *Development Policy of a Communist Government: West Bengal since 1977* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 11- 12.

<sup>19</sup> Marcus F. Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1971), 6.



that the Communists in West Bengal had failed to elevate individuals from these marginalised groups to positions of leadership within the party or to secure their unwavering support. In contrast to the communist movements in other regions of India, the Communists in West Bengal had achieved power via the leadership of elites. They had garnered support mainly from the elite class. In India, the Communist Party has only gained significant influence in Kerala's state ministry. However, this success in Kerala has relied on substantial backing from marginalised groups, particularly the Ezhava caste. As a result, the Communist Party in Kerala has secured a greater share of the vote compared to its counterparts in West Bengal. The leadership of the Bengali Communist and Marxist Left parties and a significant portion of their supporters came from the Bengali *bhadralok*, an exclusive elite situated in the Bengali-speaking region. The *bhadralok*, also known as the 'respectable people' or 'gentlemen,' are a privileged minority primarily consisting of individuals from the highest castes (Brahmins, Kayasthas, and Baidyas). They are typically landowners or professionals in clerical occupations. They fiercely protected their social status by adhering to caste and ritual restrictions and avoiding manual labour. The *Bhadraloks* are highly educated and take enormous pride in their language, literacy, and history. They possess exceptional skills in maintaining communal harmony through a sophisticated institutional framework that has demonstrated remarkable adaptability.<sup>20</sup>

In the state of Bengal, the communists' previous lack of organisational strength and limited influence in civil society was offset by their development during the period from the 1957 and 1962 State Assembly elections. The communists had expanded their influence in rural regions, transitioning from mostly an urban party to one with a more solid foundation in rural communities. Most of their support had come from the sharecroppers, whose land rights

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<sup>20</sup> Franda, *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, 7.

gradually fell within the jurisdiction of state laws. The communists had notable success securing seats in regions where they had organised insurrections from 1948 to 1950. These regions include Bankura, Burdwan, Midnapore, Howrah, and the 24 Parganas.<sup>21</sup> In 1956, the Central Committee of the Unified Communist Party of India (CPI) appealed to other parties with similar ideologies to establish a Front that would include ‘all socialist, democratic, patriotic, and progressive forces.’ In West Bengal, the then Provincial Committee of the CPI emphasised the importance of fostering unity among Left parties, promoting and uniting collective mass movements, and encouraging broader participation in these democratic endeavours. Before the 1957 general elections, the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Praja Socialist Party (PSP), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), the Forward Bloc (FB), and the Marxist Forward Bloc (MFB) agreed to the allocation of seats. During that period, establishing a government in West Bengal without affiliation with the Congress party was not feasible. However, in Kerala, the Communist Party of India (CPI) obtained a majority in the Kerala Legislative Assembly election in 1957. This marked the initial challenge to the Congress Party’s prevailing authority. In West Bengal, the Left Parties won 81 seats out of 253, with the CPI emerging as the victor in 46 constituencies. The outcome not only demonstrated the significant progress made by democratic forces, but it also solidified the Communist Party as the primary component of the democratic front. Subsequently, the Party implemented specific measures to enhance its membership and expand its support among the general population. These efforts yielded results during the extensive post-election popular agitation, particularly the 1959 Food agitation. The Left took the lead in these movements.<sup>22</sup>

The communists’ performance at the state level was hindered due to ideological disparities that emerged at the national level. During the early 1960s, the internal splits within

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<sup>21</sup> Manali Desai, *State Formation and Radical Democracy in India* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 124-125.

<sup>22</sup> Basu, Bhattacharya, Biswas and Bhattacharya, “Emergence of the Left Front”, 3.

the CPI became more apparent. The twentieth conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) suggested a non-violent approach to achieving socialism. This proposal influenced a resolution passed by the Communist Party of India (CPI) at its fifth convention in Amritsar in 1958. The resolution advocated for keeping the struggle between classes within the boundaries set by the Indian Constitution. This caused a significant internal division that was clear at the sixth Congress of the CPI, ultimately leading to the party's split just before its seventh conference in 1964. The schism was also based on ideology and tactics, with one group advocating for the continuation of mass battles under the 'leadership of the working class'. In contrast, the other group believed that a broader class coalition and a parliamentary approach were more effective paths to progress. Subsequently, these distinctions resulted in the division among the CPI and CPI(M). The CPI pursued forming alliances with the 'progressive section' of the Indian bourgeoisie, embodied by the Congress Party, as part of their class alliance strategy. On the other hand, the CPI(M) emphasised grassroots mass movements and rejected any collaboration with the Congress Party. In Bengal, the CPI(M) persisted in its previous approach of spearheading mass movements in rural regions, specifically upholding the interests of sharecroppers and urban workers.<sup>23</sup>

Bhattacharyya expressed the view that at least four differences formed the basis for the split in the CPI.<sup>24</sup> The early stages were characterised by conflicts regarding accepting the Soviet Union's plan of a 'peaceful transition to socialism'. Additionally, the Communist Party faced internal divisions regarding whether to back the Sino-Soviet rivalry or to adopt a neutral stance. The 1962 Indo-China border clash also underscored divisions within the party. Furthermore, there was a lack of consensus on classifying the Indian rich and powerful class,

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<sup>23</sup> Desai, *State Formation and Radical Democracy in India*, 125.

<sup>24</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3.

or Congress, during Nehru's tenure. The CPI aimed to unite two primary groups: a 'conservative' right and a 'radical' left—the right-wing aligned with Soviet perspectives, backing nationalist narratives and parliamentary methods through the Congress party. In contrast, the left-wing maintained ideological independence, emphasising the working class and peasantry—not the national bourgeoisie—as the primary revolutionary forces. Additionally, they kept the possibility of engaging in non-parliamentary struggles while participating in institutional democracy. The right-wing faction exhibited a more extensive yet limited presence throughout the nation. In contrast, the left-wing faction, including the centrists, had robust establishments in three significant states: Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and West Bengal. The right-leaning group decided to remain within the CPI, whereas the left-leaning faction chose to break away and establish the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. The CPI(M) eventually evolved into the central point of three coalition governments in West Bengal: The United Front governments of 1967 and 1969 and the Left Front government since 1977.<sup>25</sup>

The democratic movement in West Bengal experienced an unprecedented surge from 1962 to 1967. West Bengal emerged as a hub of ongoing mass struggles in the mid-60s, aimed at securing the release of political prisoners and opposing the increasing cost of essential commodities. The challenges the poor and working class faced gradually distanced Congress from the populace. In this context, the Left movement and Left unity gained renewed momentum. Since achieving independence, West Bengal has seen a notable increase in mass movements. In 1967, the Fourth General Elections took place against that backdrop. That was the first election in which the CPI(M) participated. Although the CPI(M) and other like-minded parties made sincere efforts, they could not establish a unified, broadly based anti-Congress electoral platform. Two fronts contested the elections: the United Left Front (ULF), a seven-

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<sup>25</sup> Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 4.

party coalition comprising the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), Marxist Forward Bloc (MFB), Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCI), Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP), Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), and Workers Party of India (WPI). The dissident Congress leader Ajoy Mukherjee, who quit Congress just prior to the elections, led the Progressive United Left Front (PULF), another group. This group comprised parties such as the Communist Party of India (CPI), All India Forward Block (AIFB), and the Bangla Congress.<sup>26</sup>

The 1967 General Elections marked a significant shift for the then ruling Congress party. Up to eight states established non-Congress governments, including Kerala, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh. The CPI(M) assumed leadership of the government in Kerala. The Congress experienced a significant decline in West Bengal, resulting in its status as a minority party for the first time. It secured only 127 seats from a total of 280. The Left's performance did not correspond to expectations. The ULF obtained 68 seats; the CPI(M) achieved 43 seats independently. In contrast, the PULF garnered 65 seats, within which the Bangla Congress and CPI secured 34 and 16 seats, respectively.<sup>27</sup> The results reflected that the people of West Bengal saw the CPI(M) as the most effective vanguard against the Congress and entrenched societal interests. In the face of persistent criticisms, the electorate in West Bengal had assessed the CPI (M) as the leading party representing the Left ideology.

***The First United Front Government:*** In light of the significant anti-Congress sentiment expressed by the electorate, the ULF and PULF collaboratively came together following the 1967 elections to establish the first United Front government (UF), guided by a comprehensive 32-point programme. This marked the inaugural non-Congress administration in West Bengal.

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<sup>26</sup> Basu, Bhattacharya, Biswas, and Bhattacharya, "Emergence of the Left Front", 4.

<sup>27</sup> Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 4.

In numerous respects, it emerged as a significant milestone in the historical narrative of this state. Ajoy Mukherjee assumed the role of Chief Minister within the United Front government. While the CPI(M) has positioned itself as the predominant party in the State Assembly, it would have been appropriate for its nominee to assume leadership of the new cabinet. However, the CPI(M) decided to forgo that position as Chief Minister to maintain the overarching unity against the Congress. Jyoti Basu, the party's leader and politburo member, graciously accepted the position of Deputy Chief Minister, taking on the independent responsibilities associated with finance and transport.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, the land reform and refugee rehabilitation portfolios were entrusted to two esteemed CPI(M) leaders, Harekrishna Konar and Niranjan Sengupta. It is perhaps more suitable to view the United Front as an alliance of various parties that have united to create a formidable electoral challenge for Congress rather than classifying it as a single political party.<sup>29</sup>

Despite unfavourable conditions and a lack of cooperation from the Centre, the ephemeral United Front Government implemented a pro-people strategy and began democratic and transparent administrative operations. This was an unusual encounter for the residents of West Bengal. The state had reinstated the democratic rights of its citizens. The state discontinued the practice of police involvement on behalf of employers during industrial conflicts, thereby reinstating fundamental trade union rights. The United Front government took significant initiatives to advance the execution of land reforms, including the redistribution of 2.38 million acres of surplus ceiling land, particularly among agricultural workers and poor rural people. The government assured sharecroppers of their entitlement to a portion of the harvest from the land they worked. Furthermore, it had come to light that nearly

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<sup>28</sup> Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Franda, "Electoral Politics in West Bengal", 293.

10,000 acres of land, identified as *benami* plots, were set to be allocated for the benefit of underprivileged farmers. These measures did not align with the interests of the bourgeois-landlord classes. The first UF cabinet also assumed responsibility for managing the Calcutta Tramways. It made significant efforts to improve the circumstances of refugees who had arrived from the region of East Pakistan. Municipal regulations had been updated, leading to a reduction in rents for slum areas, alongside a hike in the dearness allowance for government employees.<sup>30</sup>

Anticlimactically, the coalition of fourteen members that assumed power in West Bengal began to unravel within a few months, primarily due to internal contradictions that constrained the more extreme elements of the CPM.<sup>31</sup> At that time, West Bengal, like many other regions across the nation, grappled with severe near-famine conditions, providing the communists with a crucial opportunity to demonstrate their ability to tackle the pressing crisis. Nevertheless, the Food and Agriculture Minister, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, expressed his dissent towards the communist approach of forcibly appropriating grains from landlords instead of seeking assistance from the central government for food supplies. The central government's prevailing tensions against the communist regime resulted in collecting only 70,000 tonnes of grain, falling short of the ambitious target of 200,000 tonnes.<sup>32</sup> The complexities inherent in a coalition government were evident—the approach favoured by the communists would have involved appropriating grain from the *jotedars*. Yet, they constituted the primary political foundation for the coalition allies. To compound the situation, there was a notable increase in industrial discontent, which resulted in extensive factory shutdowns. On

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<sup>30</sup> Basu, Bhattacharya, Biswas, and Bhattacharya, "Emergence of the Left Front", 6.

<sup>31</sup> Desai, *State Formation and Radical Democracy in India*, 125.

<sup>32</sup> Mallick, *Indian Communism*, 104.

20 February 1968, the central government, led by Congress, enacted the President's Rule following significant discord between the partners of the United Front.

***The Second United Front Government:*** The United Front, a coalition of 12 leftist parties operating under a common minimum programme, contested the intermediate election for the West Bengal State Assembly on 9 February 1969. A significant majority of the electorate, exceeding 70 per cent, participated in the electoral process, undeterred by the looming threat of Naxalite interference to undermine the elections. In this Assembly election, the citizens of West Bengal responded decisively to the Congress's strategies to undermine the first United Front government. Among the 280 Assembly seats, the United Front achieved a significant victory with 214 seats, while the Congress had diminished to 55 seats. The CPI(M) secured 83 of the 101 contested seats. The election represented significant public support for the CPI(M).<sup>33</sup>

In a significant development for West Bengal, the CPI (M) has achieved the distinction of being the single largest party in terms of the number of seats secured and the percentage of votes garnered. Once more, the CPI(M) extended the opportunity for Chief Ministership to Ajoy Mukherjee, demonstrating a notable commitment to maintaining harmony within the United Front. Jyoti Basu was appointed Deputy Chief Minister. On February 25, 1969, the second cabinet of the United Front took their oaths of office.<sup>34</sup> According to a multitude of sources from this era, the communists' hegemony was significantly influenced by their use of violence.<sup>35</sup> In practical terms, this indicated that the subsequent years were characterised by a more radical approach to mass mobilisation, spearheaded by Harekrishna Konar; their efforts were mainly concentrated on the challenges faced by rural sharecroppers rather than those within the industrial sector. Instead of allowing government representatives to act as

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<sup>33</sup> Basu, Bhattacharya, Biswas, and Bhattacharya, "Emergence of the Left Front", 7.

<sup>34</sup> Basu, Bhattacharya, Biswas, and Bhattacharya, "Emergence of the Left Front", 8.

<sup>35</sup> Desai, *State Formation and Radical Democracy in India*, 126.



intermediaries in land acquisition, the peasants proactively took the initiative.<sup>36</sup> There were several violent land grabs, with approximately 1,000 cadres creating a rural volunteer corps of five to 10 militant peasants each.<sup>37</sup> The increasing population vis-à-vis the land-to-person ratio in West Bengal had reached a critical point, with less than a third of an acre per individual. Konar's approach involved the integration of widespread mobilisations alongside land-redistribution initiatives already stipulated by state legislation. Agricultural workers, sharecroppers, and small farmers were encouraged to pinpoint land owned by absentee proprietors or benami holdings—unlawful surpluses—and responded enthusiastically as witnesses. This grassroots initiative allowed the cadre to establish strongholds in rural areas, effectively displacing the prevailing elite that supported the Congress. Impoverished and dispossessed farmers, equipped with bamboo poles, axes, and spears, were organised to take control of the land.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, within the West Bengal CPI(M), divisions began to emerge between the parliamentary 'centrists' and the Maoist revolutionaries, commonly referred to as Naxalites, who initiated a peasant uprising in the regions of Naxalbari, Kharibari, and Phansidewa in the state of West Bengal. This resulted in an unusual scenario whereby a left-wing government in power engaged in conflict with a section within its party and employed the police and paramilitary forces to suppress it. The Naxalites were the rebels who initiated agrarian uprisings throughout West Bengal, where groups of revolutionaries equipped with bows, arrows, and spears embarked on a forceful campaign targeting landlords, police, and government representatives.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Mallick, *Indian Communism*, 131.

<sup>37</sup> Sajal Basu, *Politics of Violence: A Case Study of West Bengal* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1982), 87.

<sup>38</sup> Kheya Bag, "Red Bengal's Rise and Fall," *New Left Review*, no. 70 (2011).

<sup>39</sup> Desai, *State Formation and Radical Democracy in India*, 126.

The second United Front government lasted for a brief thirteen months, concluding on March 9, 1970.<sup>40</sup> During this brief period, the government worked to complete the initiatives initiated in the previous term. The government focused on land reforms, implementing the Trade Union Bill, and ensuring access to free primary education. The CPI(M) emphasised the need for the government to advance class struggle. The Bangla Congress was resolute in ending the prevailing turmoil and disorder. Chief Minister Ajoy Mukherjee engaged in a 72-hour fast, urging his government to reflect on its role in promoting ‘hatred and violence’.<sup>41</sup> In the course of events, Ajoy Mukherjee submitted his resignation on March 16, 1970. West Bengal eventually came under the President’s rule on March 19, 1970.

***The last few years of the Congress party’s ascendancy in West Bengal:*** During the sixth midterm Assembly Elections in March 1971, the ongoing political instability in West Bengal prompted various competing political parties to reconsider and reshape their coalition strategies. The United Front had undergone a split, resulting in the establishment of the United Left Front (ULF), led by the CPI (M), and the formation of the United Left Democratic Front (ULDF), mainly controlled by the CPI. The growing disparity between the CPI and the CPI(M) may account for these phenomena. This divergence can be traced back to the CPI’s growing alliance with the Indian National Congress during Indira Gandhi’s tenure, who was noted for her effective military initiatives in the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 and the consequent liberation of Bangladesh and her populist socialist policies. Under Ajoy Mukherjee’s leadership, the INC, the CPI, the Forward Block, and several other Left parties came together to establish a coalition government in West Bengal. In this election, the CPI (M) emerged as the leading party, obtained 113 seats and garnered the highest vote share at 37.42%, thus establishing collaboration with various affiliated Left parties. The coalition government was, indeed, relatively brief in its

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<sup>40</sup> Basu, Bhattacharya, Biswas, and Bhattacharya, “Emergence of the Left Front”, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 6.

existence. The government commenced its term on April 2, 1971, but fell shortly after on June 25, 1971, leading to the imposition of the third President's Rule in the state since 1968.<sup>42</sup>

During the seventh Assembly Election in 1972, the Indian National Congress (INC) achieved a remarkable victory by securing 216 seats. In contrast, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) experienced a notable decline, securing just 14 seats, a sharp drop from the 113 seats they held at the preceding election.<sup>43</sup> The CPI (M) charged the INC with extensive intimidation and electoral manipulation, prompting a five-year boycott of the assembly. Siddhartha Shankar Ray from the Indian National Congress (INC) took office as the Chief Minister of West Bengal on March 20, 1972. During the Ray government (1972–1977), massive state brutality began, reaching its highest point during the national emergency.<sup>44</sup> The violent oppression was initiated against CPI(M) and CPI (ML) militants, as well as trade unionists, peasant organisers, and radical students.<sup>45</sup> As of 1973, the number of individuals detained for political reasons in the jails of West Bengal approached 18,000. The measures taken were so severe that the forceful actions during the Emergency period, enacted by Indira Gandhi from 1975 to 1977, appeared to be simply an extension of a persistent campaign against dissent led by the Congress Party.<sup>46</sup> The state suppressed all forms of opposition, not just the CPI (M) or the Left parties that opposed the INC. Notably, the CPI continued to align itself with the INC throughout this period.

### **Formation of the First Left Front Government in West Bengal**

In January 1977, the Emergency withdrawal led to the establishment of the Left Front.<sup>47</sup> The six forming parties of the Left Front, namely the CPI(M), the All-India Forward Bloc, the

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<sup>42</sup> Jyotiprasad Chatterjee and Suprio Basu, *Left Front and After: Understanding the Dynamics of Poriborton in West Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage, 2020), 30.

<sup>43</sup> Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After*, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Bag, "Red Bengal's Rise and Fall".

<sup>46</sup> Bag, "Red Bengal's Rise and Fall".

<sup>47</sup> Biman Basu, "West Bengal: How the Left Front and Its Government Emerged," *People's Democracy* XXXI, no. 25 (2007).

Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Marxist Forward Bloc, the Revolutionary Communist Party of India, and the Biplabi Bangla Congress, had come together to form a unified program. The Left Front and the Janata Party collaborated in the 1977 Lok Sabha election.<sup>48</sup> During the 1977 Lok Sabha election, the Left Front strategically engaged in 26 of the 42 constituencies in West Bengal. The CPI(M) presented candidates for 20 seats, while the RSP and AIFB each put forth candidates for three seats. The CPI(M) secured 17 seats, while the AIFB and RSP each obtained three seats. The total votes garnered by the Left Front in West Bengal amounted to 5,049,077, representing 33.4% of the overall votes cast in the state.<sup>49</sup>

Following the sixth Lok Sabha election in India, which took place in March 1977, the Indian National Congress (INC) government in the centre, headed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, was defeated by a significant margin. The people made it quite apparent that they opposed Mrs. Gandhi's national emergency declaration. Morarji Desai became Prime Minister after the Janata Party came to power. The Janata Party promptly enforced the President's rule in nine INC-ruled states after assuming power, resulting in the dissolution of their legislatures. West Bengal was one of them.

Basu suggests that Congress' defeat in the Lok Sabha elections revived the spirit of democracy in Bengal and invigorated diverse mass movements.<sup>50</sup> They started navigating the stifling atmosphere that the Congress administration had established. In the subsequent elections to the state assembly, the Janata Party misjudged the Left Front, viewing it as a lesser partner, and firmly insisted on contesting 60 per cent of the constituencies. After extensive dialogues among the leaders of the Janata Party and the Left Front, an agreement was reached wherein the Left Front proposed to contest 48 per cent of the seats. In comparison, the Janata

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<sup>48</sup> Basu, "West Bengal".

<sup>49</sup> Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Elections, 1977 to the Sixth Lok Sabha Volume I* (New Delhi: Nirvachan Sadan, 1978), 107-108.

<sup>50</sup> Basu, "West Bengal".

Party concentrated on 52 per cent. However, the Janata Party was resolute in its demand for no less than 56 per cent of the seats, leading to a breakdown in negotiations. Given the evolving circumstances, the Left Front has decided to field candidates in all 294 assembly constituencies. The 1977 Assembly Election manifesto of the Left Front in West Bengal articulated 36 specific points. During a press conference, the late Promode Dasgupta, the chairman of the Left Front, urged the public ‘to defeat both the authoritarian Congress and the anti-unity Janata Party, making the Left Front victorious in establishing democracy and democratic rights for the people.’<sup>51</sup>

In June 1977, during the eighth Assembly Election in West Bengal, the CPI(M)-led Left Front achieved a remarkable triumph, securing 231 out of the total 294 seats in the assembly.<sup>52</sup> In this context, the CPI (M) secured 178 seats.<sup>53</sup> The count of the INC has diminished to a modest 20 seats. Like the voting trend observed during the sixth parliamentary election, the assembly elections of West Bengal in 1977 may also be understood as an expression of the electorate’s will, opposing the authoritarian governance of the Siddhartha Shankar Roy-led INC government, especially against its aggressive curtailment of the democratic rights of the citizens. Jyoti Basu, the leader of the CPI (M), assumed the role of Chief Minister of the LF government on 21 June 1977, an office that he maintained for more than 23 successive years until his retirement on 28 October 2000, concluding his tenure as Chief Minister of West Bengal.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Basu, “West Bengal”.

<sup>52</sup> Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After*, 31.

<sup>53</sup> Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Election, 1977 to the Legislative Assembly of West Bengal*, 11.

<sup>54</sup> Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After*, 31.

### Rise of Left Populism in West Bengal: the emergence of ‘the people’

This research seeks to investigate and scrutinise the construction of the popular subject, referred to as ‘the people,’ by the Left Front in West Bengal from the 1950s till their decisive rise to power in 1977. This chapter employs Laclau’s formal approach to understanding the construction of popular subjects. This approach posits that the construction of people is an essential part of populism. De Cleen says, “There are many different approaches to populism, but only a few of them really put the discursive construction of ‘the people’ center stage.”<sup>55</sup> Despite the crucial role of the notion of ‘the people’ in various definitions of populism, certain frameworks, like ideational,<sup>56</sup> strategic,<sup>57</sup> and other approaches overlook its existence. However, none of these frameworks thoroughly examine how populists actively shape and construct the concept of ‘the people.’ Laclau and Mouffe’s interpretations of populism as a discourse or discursive political logic have increasingly acknowledged the strategic aspects of the process and the role of populists in shaping the concept of ‘the people.’ Various scholars endorse this perspective and it is further elaborated in notions of populism as a political style<sup>58</sup> that embodies the people, drawing inspiration from foundational works in the field.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Benjamin De Cleen, “The Populist political logic and the analysis of the discursive construction of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’,” in *Imagining the Peoples of Europe Populist discourses across the political spectrum*, ed. Jan Zienkowski and Ruth Breeze (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019), 24.

<sup>56</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–563; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis,” in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 1-26 ; Ben Stanley, “The thin ideology of populism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 1 (2008): 95–110; Margaret Canovan, “Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy,” in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, ed. Yves Mény and Yves Surel (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 25-44.

<sup>57</sup> Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a contested concept: Populism in the study of Latin American politics” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1- 22; Kurt Weyland, “Populism as a political strategy” in *Research handbook on populism*, ed. Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2024), 154- 165.

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin Moffit and Simon Tormey, “Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style,” *Political studies* 62, no. 2 (2014): 381–397.

<sup>59</sup> De Cleen, “The Populist political logic and the analysis of the discursive construction of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite,’” 24.

Katsambekis delves into populism's fundamental traits, emphasising its importance to 'the people' and its adversarial effect on societal dynamics.<sup>60</sup> He believes it challenges the ideational perspective, which posits that populism creates homogeneous and ethically superior people, potentially resulting in analytical and normative biases. In his article, Katsambekis explores the linguistic dynamics at play in the formation of 'the people' within the context of democratic modernity while also reevaluating the fundamental principles of ideational and discursive populist frameworks.<sup>61</sup> He argues that a discursive framework clearly explains how populism fosters cohesion among varied demands without inevitably leading to homogeneity while also critically examining moral interpretations.

The study attempts to elucidate the rise of Left Front populism within the political landscape of West Bengal through a discursive methodological lens. The Essex School of Discourse Analysis method guides this methodological framework. Laclau and Mouffe's work forms the foundation of this theoretical tradition. This study also employs computer-assisted lexicometric analysis through NVivo data analysis software, conducting a frequency analysis to determine the words that are most frequently used in the Communist Party of India's 1977 Lok Sabha Election Manifestos, aiming to elucidate the populist tendency within this text and their discourse.

The dichotomous discourse and practices of the Left Front before assuming power in West Bengal are defined by 'left-wing populism'. In the name of the people, these discourses and practices articulated diverse underprivileged groups, prioritising their democratic struggles for distributive justice, social justice and equality rather than exclusively considering working-class demands. The Left Front would have been unable to ascend to power without such

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<sup>60</sup> Giorgos Katsambekis "Constructing 'the People' of Populism: A Critique of the Ideational Approach from a Discursive Perspective," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 27, no. 1 (2020): 53.

<sup>61</sup> Katsambekis "Constructing 'the People' of Populism", 53.

dichotomy and polarised discourse. The Left Front populist discourse will be analysed through four parameters. This yardstick is derived from the works of De Cleen and Stavrakakis.<sup>62</sup> The initial concept is the ‘Nodal point of the chain of equivalence and claim to represent’. Secondly, the ‘subject position offered’ is examined; thirdly, the ‘external factors constitutive to the creation of a chain of equivalence/identity’ are considered; and fourthly, the ‘orientation of the relationship between the nodal point and the constitutive outside(s)’ is analysed. Furthermore, examining the affective and symbolic dimensions of this discursive practice is essential. I shall also explore how this discourse shapes the elite and people. Finally, this chapter examines whether the Left’s polarised, populist discourse threatened democracy or served as a corrective measure.

Luke March<sup>63</sup> explores the ideational factors in the election manifestos of several political parties in the United Kingdom from 1999 to 2015. He suggests that the basic core principles of populism are not found in the same fashion between the left, right, and mainstream populist parties, and the claims of populism differ between the left and the right. He considers two radical left parties, i.e., the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and Respect Party; two radical right parties, i.e., the British National Party (BNP) and UK Independence Party (UKIP); and two mainstream parties of the left and right, i.e., the more popular ones, the Labour Party and Conservative Party. Studying the operationalism and ideological positions of the parties mentioned above, March confirms that right-wing populism is based on the nativist approach, where antagonism is based on the exclusion of the outsiders and is exclusionary (demarcating key groups as outsiders). In contrast, left-wing populism is focused on economic, cultural, and political incorporation policies and is primarily inclusionary in nature. He further concurs that

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<sup>62</sup> De Cleen and Stavrakakis, “Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism,” 12.

<sup>63</sup> Luke March, “Left and right populism compared: The British case,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 2 (2017): 1–22.



left populism is based on socio-economic inclusion, while right populism is based on ethnic identities. Finally, the ideological underpinnings of populism between the two opposite ends of the political spectrum are also not the same, as populism is less ideologically crucial to the right than the left. Examining the ideational factors in manifestos through content analysis, the author hypothesises that the mainstream political parties demonstrate ‘demoticism,’ i.e., they resemble the ordinary ‘people’ without creating an antagonistic other. In contrast, the populism of the right-wing parties reflects a strong connection to the ideological core of nativity, indigenusness, nationality, heartland politics, and cultural racism, which cements their stronger inclination towards populist politics and exclusionary practices. Similarly, in the case of the left-wing populists, a disposition towards a core ideological base is found; however, the formation of a definite understanding of the ‘people’ and the ‘other’ is more flexible in the case of left parties, as their people centrism is based on underprivileged people, and it is more class-based. Thus, they are more particularistic in their articulations of their people and are essentially more diverse, tolerant, and inclusive. In this chapter, we will investigate whether the characteristics of left-wing populism identified by Luke March in the British context are also present in the case of Left Front populism in West Bengal.

As we saw earlier, the Left has engaged in the struggle of the working class against the big capitalist class. Simultaneously, they proposed confiscating land from large landowners and spearheaded a movement to redistribute it among small farmers and sharecroppers. In addition, they actively participated in favour of various democratic demands from socio-economically and culturally backward communities and groups. Occasionally, they initiated several mass movements themselves. Thus, aligning itself with various democratic movements, the Left successfully mobilised a significant portion of the underprivileged population against the then-ruling elites. The elites served as a representation of enduring interests. For instance, we can identify the *zamindar* and *jotedar* classes, the big capitalists, and their political

representatives, particularly the ruling Congress Party in then-West Bengal, as examples. The fundamental axes of these social struggles encompass critical domains of socioeconomic transformation: redistributive mechanisms, the pursuit of societal recognition, and the normative objectives of establishing substantive equality and procedural justice, thereby building a more extensive frontier of the ‘people’ against the ruling coalition.

I consider the rise of the Left Front to be the beginning point of populist politics in West Bengal. Such politics are rooted in the discursive construction of people and the elite, who have mutually hostile relations. This implies blaming the elite solely for the marginalisation of the people. In other words, populist discourse is characterised by an antagonistic tone. Here, the elite refers to those who seize power in the name of democracy to serve their vested interests and refuse to meet the legitimate democratic demands of the masses. This is the root cause of widespread dissatisfaction among the underprivileged. The Left had aligned itself with the fight for the democratic demands of multiple marginalised groups. Additionally, the Left Front’s history of initiating mass movements has played a crucial role in recognising the numerous legitimate demands of the underprivileged. The Left Front in West Bengal was thus able to mobilise the economically, socio-politically, and culturally backward underprivileged groups against the elite and build the frontier of the ‘people’. The general discontent of the underprivileged against the elite successfully united most of the underprivileged under the category of the people. By harnessing this discontent and advocating for politics of redistribution and recognition, the Left united all these underprivileged against the elite, effectively creating the ‘people’. The mass support of this underprivileged population helped the Left come to power in West Bengal politics—sometimes through coalitions, but eventually on its own.

The Left Front ideologically viewed the state as a bourgeois-landlord state. They aspired to transform the state into one that is democratic and people-centered. The Left Front

united the oppressed, deprived, and marginalised people from various sections of society against the landlords, *jotedars*, black-market traders, hoarders, big capitalists, and the Congress Party, who were perceived as an authoritarian and oppressive regime. Under the pretext of an emergency, the Congress Party curtailed democratic rights and took brutal steps against various opposition parties, particularly the CPI(M).<sup>64</sup> The Left Front, by consolidating the various unfulfilled democratic demands of these marginalised people, constructed a popular subject, namely the people. They constructed a popular subject for restoring democracy in the state, advocating for the people's democratic rights, including the right to land and livelihood. Their discourse categorised the social and political landscape into two segments using a vertical spatial metaphor. It established two opposing frontiers: the people as an underprivileged, powerless mass and the establishment as a few but powerful groups of illegitimate elites. They employed an open-ended chain of equivalence to define the people based on their socio-economic, socio-political, hierarchy, and power status. They used a vertical axis to place the establishment/elite and the people/underprivileged as an up/down spatial metaphor. The elite represents an upward group, while the underprivileged represent a downward group. This discourse gives the citizens a subjective position as members of 'the people.' It articulated the underprivileged as part of these people. This discourse gave a new identity to the diverse multitudes of that period as a collective subject, or 'us', and pitted those collective subjects against the elite/establishment. Constructing an establishment or elite as a common adversary played the role of a constitutive outsider in forming this chain of equivalence. In this discourse, the relationship between the nodal point and the constituent outside was vertical.

We may note that the concept of 'people', which the Left had constructed before coming to power, did not refer to specific groups or identities. Instead, the idea of people was

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<sup>64</sup> Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 10.

open. In their populist discourse, the word ‘people’ served as an empty signifier. Empty signifier means signifier without signified, which represents the collective subject. The left discursively constructed a category of people that encompassed various underprivileged groups, all of whom were dissatisfied and resentful of the establishment and power bloc. In other words, the people for whom the Left advocated against the elite were not pre-given. The Left Front united various disaffected groups against the power bloc to build a popular community. The Left Front constructed the people as an open-ended signifier without any specific meaning. The Left Front articulates the voices of the marginalised, oppressed, underprivileged, and exploited—whose democratic demands were not met by the power bloc. The Left Front articulated the interests of those facing economic and social challenges at that time. They articulated various groups in an open-ended chain of equivalence that included agricultural workers, sharecroppers, small farmers, landless peasants, and middle- and small-scale cultivators; the organised and unorganised labour class; the lower middle class; various lower-ranking government service holders; school, college, and university teachers who were demanding decent pay; various underprivileged communities; women; students; and others. The Left Front was able to unite all these groups against the then-ruling power bloc in the fight to restore democracy in the state, secure democratic rights for the citizens, and eliminate authoritarian rule. In other words, the Left departed from the narrow notions of representing the traditional organised working class. Instead, it emerged as a voice for all marginalised, disenfranchised, and disaffected groups in West Bengal. Not only did the leftists construct the people, but they also discursively constructed the establishments or elite. The populist discourse of the Left Front revealed a clear presence of the ‘autonomy of struggles’ articulated by Laclau and Mouffe, seamlessly integrated into the Left Front’s hegemonic political project. The central point for the diverse collective of the Left Front was their shared opposition to a common political and economic adversary: the landed class, the *jotedars*, big capitalists,

hoarders, and their political successors, which included the so-called unresponsive, authoritarian, and undemocratic Congress party in the state and the centre.

According to Venizelos, the political identities referred to as ‘the people’ are shaped through affective processes, where the act of ‘naming’ transcends mere rhetoric and takes on a performative role.<sup>65</sup> The Left Front sparked a flurry of emotions in creating popular subjects, namely the people. They effectively rallied those who felt overlooked, underprivileged, sidelined, and inadequately represented in the then-political landscape. This discourse challenged the establishment and galvanised emotions of ‘injustice,’ ‘frustration,’ ‘indignation,’ and ‘anger,’ transforming these ‘generic’ sentiments into focused discontent aimed at ‘the political and economic elites’ of that time. Furthermore, the populist rhetoric of the Left Front leadership endeared them to the marginalised people. This pertains to an electoral address by veteran CPIM leader Jyoti Basu in 1977. He was appealing to the people by saying that the “Left Front represents the interests of the poor. The Left Front is the party of the poor. The party is the voice of the working class, peasants, middle class, and toiling masses. Cast your vote for us to secure a majority in the Assembly...”<sup>66</sup> The Left Front perceived itself as the representative of the struggling masses. They aimed to acquire power to advocate for the underprivileged, specifically the working class, peasants, lower socioeconomic groups, and toiling masses. This populist sentiment was also evident in their slogans. Slogans such as ‘We are not neutral; we advocate for the toiling masses.’ The unadorned lifestyle of their leaders significantly resonated with the people. People believed that these leaders were genuinely integral to their community. Empowering the left genuinely entails enhancing their agency. The CPI(M) party’s official symbols, the hammer, stars, and sickle, also attracted significant

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<sup>65</sup> Giorgos Venizelos, *Populism in Power: Discourse and Performativity in SYRIZA and Donald Trump* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 199.

<sup>66</sup> Jyoti Basu, “Marxist Leader Jyoti Basu addressing election rally in a suburb of Calcutta” AP Archive, June 6, 1977, 28 sec to 1 min 1 sec, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4Gg6zuM350>

segments of the peasantry, labourers, toiling masses, and underprivileged and marginalised sections towards the left. Furthermore, the Left Front used this symbol as a nodal point or empty signifier to articulate for a diverse range of people. The ordinary and unsophisticated life of the leftist leaders made them acceptable representatives of the toiling masses. Their life was not much different from that of the toiling masses. As such, they could mingle closely with the marginalised people very quickly. The people thought that the leftists were one of them. Empowering the left means empowering themselves. As there is no difference between the life experience of the leftist leaders and the life experience of the marginalised people, the latter thought that the leftists would help change their conditions. In this way, the leftists were able to keep a large part of the marginalised people attached to them for many years and act as an embodiment of the people whom they were representing.

The Left Front populist discourse positioned people as part of the underprivileged. That is to say, those living on the margins were economically backward, dissatisfied, and against the ruling group. This group cannot include only the elite. In this context, the elite and the establishment act as constitutive outsiders. People were constructed against them. The power bloc and the establishment affect or dissatisfy every group of popular subjects in one way or another. The elite's indifference to the interests of the people and their desire to secure their eternal vested interests separate them from the masses. This construction of a popular subject in West Bengal, which started around the 1950s, was primarily done by the Left Front, a cadre-based coalition of left and communist parties. This coalition created a large and massive popular uprising against the then-ruling class.

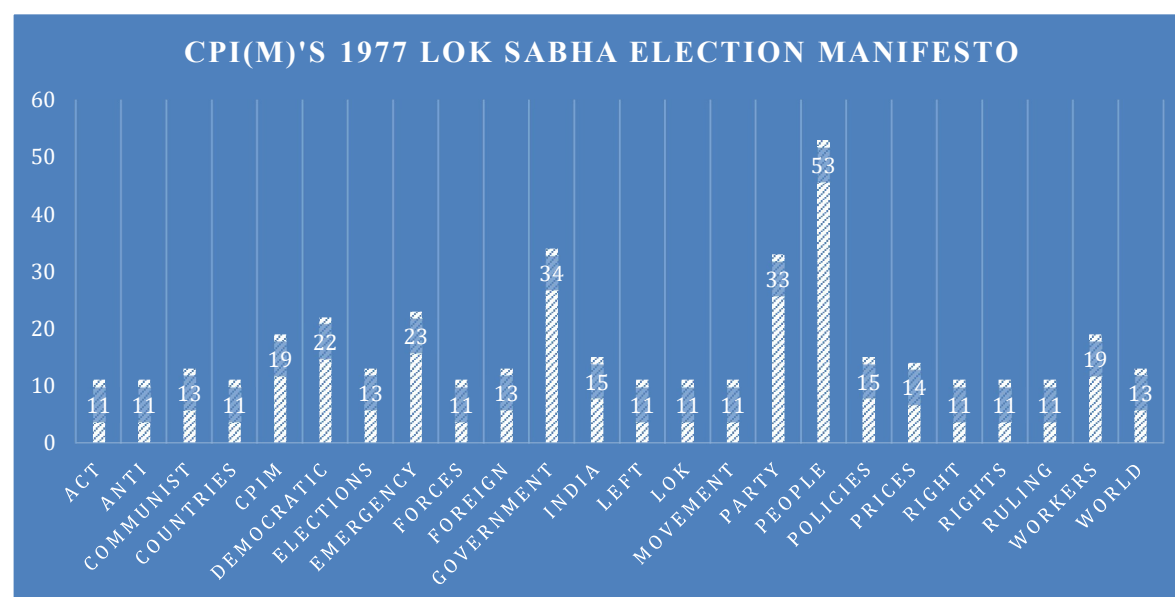
The Left Front's call to restore democracy and uproot the authoritarian power bloc was a nodal point in 1977. This facilitated the unification of diverse disgruntled factions against the then-Congress Party, all in the name of democracy. All those committed to democracy and opposing the establishment united under the Left's call, ousting the power bloc. The Congress

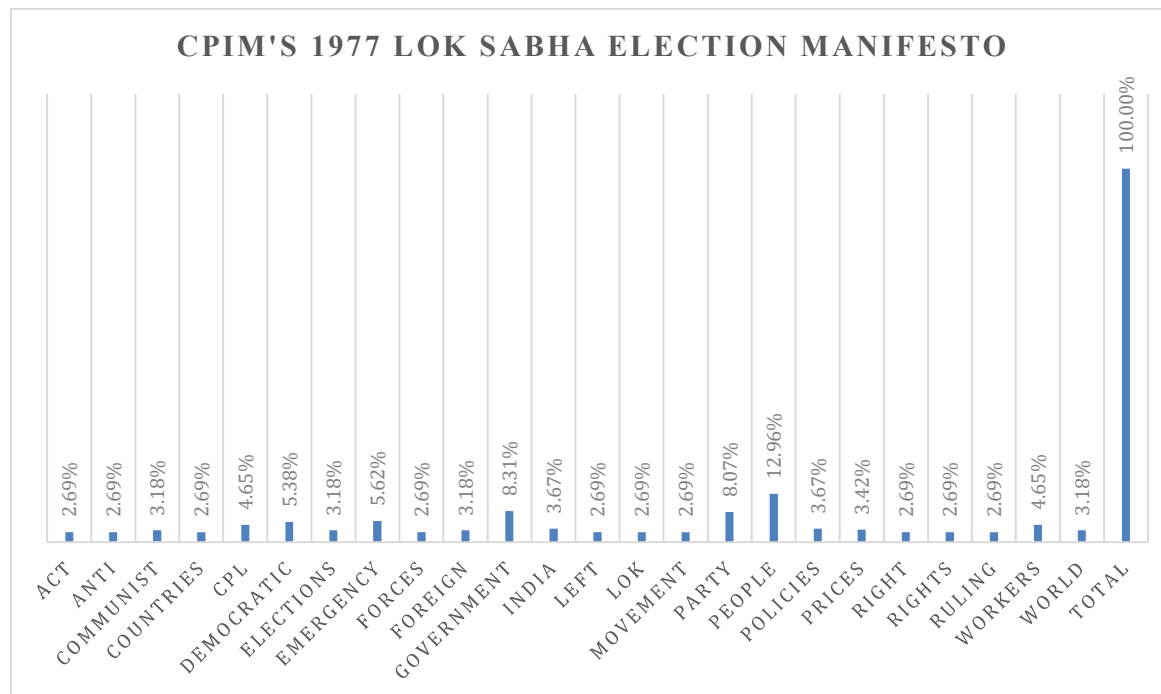
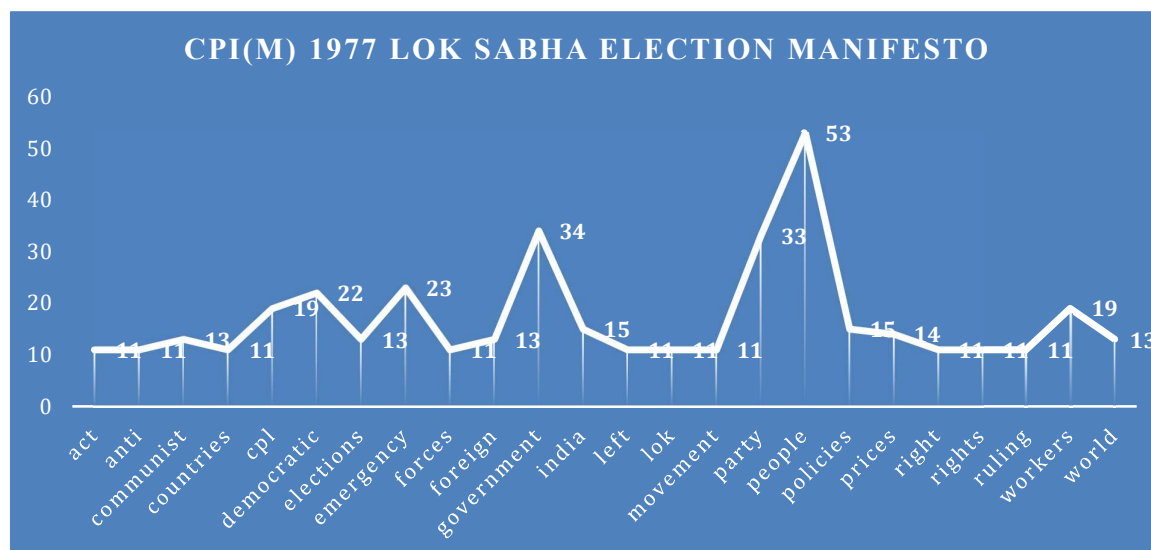
party's instigation of the national emergency in the mid-1970s denied the various democratic demands and unleashed brutal torture and oppression, which was a dislocating moment. The loss of hegemony forced the power bloc to rely on the state machinery to retain their rule. This left the people wholly alienated from the power bloc and created a rift in society—the people versus the establishment/power bloc. At this moment, the Left Front brought together various groups and united the people against the power bloc. As a result, the Left Front secured a resounding majority in the 1977 State Assembly elections after the emergency was over.

In the following segment, word frequency analysis is undertaken to identify the most prioritised issues in the Left's 1977 Lok Sabha election manifesto. We aim to identify the frequently occurring keywords in their manifesto to determine whether the party's discourse was populist.

The twenty most frequent words in the CPI(M)'s Election manifesto for the 1977 Lok Sabha were:

**Table: 1A- Most Frequently Used Words**



**Table: 1B- Percentage of Most Frequently Used Words****Table: 1C- Bar Chart of Most Frequently Used Words**

Looking at the Left Front Lok Sabha elections manifesto of 1977, we will also find that the Left has emphasised the word ‘people’ instead of speaking only for the ‘working class’.



The above tables show that they use the term ‘people’ more frequently than ‘working class.’ This indicates that they did not limit their politics to the working class. They aimed to expand their support base beyond the working class. Their manifesto demonstrates this. They also want to establish themselves as the voice of the underprivileged. Additionally, their manifesto consistently emphasises their desire for democracy, their strong opposition to national emergencies, and the restoration of various rights for the people, as evidenced by the three tables above.

The leftists in West Bengal called for democratic practices in the state and opposed the hegemony of the ruling Congress regime. The Left mobilised underprivileged groups such as small and marginal peasants, landless farm labourers, factory workers, East Bengal refugees, and so on, as well as opposing the declaration of a national emergency and the exploitation of backward castes. The Left Front contested the Assembly elections in Bengal in 1977 and formed the first Left Front government with 45.8 per cent of the vote and 231 seats. It supported the struggles of workers, peasants, refugees, and the rural and urban masses. In this sense, the victory of the Left Front in 1977 suggested the triumph of the various neglected, oppressed, and deprived peoples who were economically, socially, politically, and culturally underprivileged at that time. During the initial years of the Left Front’s rule, the government of West Bengal was popularised through populist jargon, such as “Left Front as the weapon of struggle and the Left Front as the government of the people.” After 1977, the Left Front won seven consecutive elections to stay in power for 34 years till 2011, the longest ruling democratically elected Communist government in history. The first Left Front government (1977–82) of West Bengal was a state populism and left-wing populist regime. During this period, the actions of the Left Front were geared toward constructing counter-hegemony through deepening democratic demands and values towards liberal and pluralistic democracy. “Left-wing populism” refers to the Left Front’s policies and practices in West Bengal, which

emphasised the democratic struggle of the underprivileged for redistributive justice and equality rather than focusing exclusively on working class demands.

In the words of Mouffe, “a left-populist strategy aims at federating the democratic demands into a collective will to construct a ‘we,’ a ‘people,’ confronting a common adversary: the oligarchy. This requires the establishment of a chain of equivalence among the demands. . . . Such a chain’s objective is to create a new hegemony that will permit the radicalization of democracy.”<sup>67</sup> According to Mouffe, the main objectives of the left-wing populist strategy should be to come to power through a popular majority within a liberal democratic framework and to establish a progressive hegemony whose main aim is to achieve justice, liberty, and equality for all. Using this logic, the Left Front’s efforts during this period may be examined as a struggle to establish an alternative hegemony by developing and extending democratic ambitions and values to achieve a liberal and pluralistic democratic state.

The educated Bengali middle class, disgusted with corruption, also supported the Left. Thus, the Left Front garnered the support of most people in rural and urban Bengal to help spread democratic rights, equality, and justice. We can observe how the populist regime of the first Left Front government (1977–1982) combined populist appeals to destabilise the existing hegemony with attempts to extend republicanism via preserving pluralist democratic rights and legal reforms.

### **Consolidation of Left Front State Populism 1977–1991**

***Initiatives taken by Left Front in West Bengal from 1977 to 1991:*** The newly formed Left Front government assumed office on 21 June 1977, with CPI(M) leader Jyoti Basu serving as Chief Minister. It committed to implementing the administration of the State through a comprehensive 36-point agenda inspired by the principles of the 32-point agenda established

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<sup>67</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 24.

by the second United Front government.<sup>68</sup> The predominant influence of the CPI(M) inside the coalition of parties effectively rendered it a government operating as if it were a single entity. Having lost their essential status, the remaining partners felt compelled to align with the CPI(M) on policy and ideological issues. However, since 1980, the alliance has strengthened due to the inclusion of the CPI and several other minor parties. Basu adeptly navigated various challenges, including those stemming from land reforms, an immense number of refugees from Bangladesh, and the aftermath of catastrophic floods.<sup>69</sup> Upon taking office in 1977, the Left Front administration acknowledged the constraints faced by a state government in enacting policies that benefit ordinary people underneath its present constitutional structure. While the state governments held the primary duty of providing amenities to the public, the central government narrowed its financial assets. Given this constraint, the Left Front administration devised a strategy to give some relief to the public and implement alternative measures in areas where the state government exerted influence.

The inaugural Left Front administration's primary endeavours focused on implementing comprehensive land reforms and fostering a dynamic Panchayati Raj system. These historic initiatives notably weakened landlordism in the countryside, substantially strengthened disadvantaged peasants and labourers in agriculture, and fundamentally altered the balance of class forces in favour of the rural poor.<sup>70</sup> A significant portion of the rural disadvantaged population, particularly among the Dalits, Adivasis, and minority groups, aligned themselves with the Left and the CPI (M). This segment remains the most consistent support base for the CPI (M) and the Left Front. The Left Front engaged in numerous initiatives to enhance the welfare of the various communities, focusing on the rights of workers and the

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<sup>68</sup> N. Jose Chander, *Coalition Politics: The Indian Experience* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2004), 106.

<sup>69</sup> Chander, *Coalition Politics: The Indian Experience*, 106.

<sup>70</sup> Communist Party of India (Marxist), *Thirty Years of the Left Front Government in West Bengal* (New Delhi: Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2007).

advancement of the social sector. These efforts have positively impacted diverse groups within society, including factory workers, unorganised labourers, government service holders, teachers at schools and colleges, students, youths, women, and refugees from Bangladesh.<sup>71</sup> As a result of their experiences, the vast majority of people in West Bengal began to view the Left Front government as a pro-people government, a defender of their rights, and a fighter for their cause.<sup>72</sup>

According to Chakrabarty, the accomplishments of the Left Front in rural parts, including its land reform initiatives, the registration of sharecroppers (*operation barga*), and the establishment of the Panchayati system,<sup>73</sup> had set in motion a noteworthy transformation in the political dynamics of the state.<sup>74</sup> Among these two significant legislative actions- *Operation Barga* represented a pivotal moment, a prudent strategic investment that ultimately served as the cornerstone for the Left Front's sustained leadership in governance.<sup>75</sup> The Left Front further solidified its support base in rural areas by safeguarding the tenure rights of 1.3 million sharecroppers, representing nearly 96 per cent of the total 2 million in the state,<sup>76</sup> and formally devolved power to grassroots governance institutions. The results of the 1978 Panchayati elections indicate that the Left Front secured 69 per cent of the seats, garnering over 54 per cent of the total votes cast.<sup>77</sup>

The leadership experienced a notable transformation, as 'marginal farmers, primary and secondary school teachers, landless agricultural labourers, women, and Dalits' replaced

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<sup>71</sup> Communist Party of India (Marxist), *Thirty Years of the Left Front Government in West Bengal*.

<sup>72</sup> Communist Party of India (Marxist), *Thirty Years of the Left Front Government in West Bengal*.

<sup>73</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Communism in India: Events, Processes and Ideologies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 78.

<sup>74</sup> Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Crisis of Governability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 267–96.

<sup>75</sup> Monobina Gupta, *Left Politics in Bengal: Time Travels among Bhadrak Lok Marxists* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010), 39.

<sup>76</sup> T. J. Nossiter, *Marxist State Governments in India: Politics, Economics and Society* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1988), 139.

<sup>77</sup> Chakrabarty, *Communism in India*, 78.

landlords, affluent peasants, and moneylenders who ‘had formed the foundation of previous Congress governance.’<sup>78</sup> Consequently, the Left conferred upon sharecroppers a legal status, which they reinforced by contesting landlords’ entrenched authority in rural governance. Undoubtedly, such historic legislation set the journey for marginalised people to assert their rights with dignity. The effects were observable in the progressive evolution of the rural power dynamics, which led to the displacement of the affluent and created opportunities for the overlooked sections of society.<sup>79</sup> To reassess the dynamics between the centre and the states, the Left Front administration launched a campaign upon assuming power in 1977. One notable result of this campaign was undoubtedly the establishment of the Sarkaria Commission in 1980.<sup>80</sup> In the next segment, we evaluate the various initiatives taken by the first, second, and Third Left Front governments in West Bengal.

**Land Reforms:** The Left-Front government in India realised that, given constitutional limitations, it could not eliminate the feudal and semi-feudal structures deeply embedded in the state’s social and political fabric.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the Left Front administration resolved to implement strategies that would assist the agricultural workers, sharecroppers, and small farmers, who collectively constituted over seventy per cent of the rural population in West Bengal.

The land reform initiatives in West Bengal took shape through two distinct mechanisms: *barga* and *patta*. The previous arrangement provided the sharecropper with safeguards against potential displacement from the land. It has provided for generations while guaranteeing a stable portion of the harvest. The latter involved carefully redistributing ownership of surplus

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<sup>78</sup> Sudhir Roy, *Marxist Politics of West Bengal in Opposition and in Governance, 1947–2001* (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2007), 200.

<sup>79</sup> Chakrabarty, *Communism in India*, 78.

<sup>80</sup> Chakrabarty, *Communism in India*, 81.

<sup>81</sup> Anil Biswas, “An Overview,” in *People’s Power in Practice: 20 Years of Left Front in West Bengal*, ed. Jyoti Basu (Kolkata: National Book Agency, 1997), xxii.

land acquired from wealthy landlords through the fixation of land ceilings.<sup>82</sup> The government enacted the West Bengal Land Reforms Act on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1977 to aid landless peasants by providing a minimum living wage, work opportunities during the lean months, and allocating house sites for them.<sup>83</sup> The primary goals of the land reform policy were to redistribute agricultural land ownership beyond the upper boundaries of *zamindars* and *jotedars* (wealthy peasants) and *khas* lands (government-owned fallow land) to landless farmers, thereby weakening the zamindari and jotedar systems of rural Bengal. Public records indicate that the Left Front allocated close to 1 million acres of land from a total of 2.9 million acres held by the government to approximately 2.35 million landless peasants.<sup>84</sup> The administration asserts that it has successfully allocated housing plots to 275,000 individuals engaged in agriculture and craftsmanship thus far.<sup>85</sup>

Operation Barga enhanced the position of the middle peasants by ensuring their legal entitlements to the land they cultivated. In addition to acknowledging their rights, which had become fundamental, Operation Barga legislation emerged as a tool for fostering dignity and respect for individuals involved in agriculture, thereby enhancing their social empowerment.<sup>86</sup> The sharecroppers have now been granted the inherited right to engage in agriculture. Simultaneously, *Operation Barga* has made it easier to document the names of the *bargadars* in the official rights records. As of 1995, the records indicate that the names of 1.474 million were officially documented.<sup>87</sup> The situation has presented challenges for landlords seeking to remove sharecroppers under the guise of personal cultivation. The Public Distribution System in Bengal provides essential agricultural inputs like fertilisers and seeds to the marginal and

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<sup>82</sup> Abhirup Sarkar, "Political Economy of West Bengal: A Puzzle and a Hypothesis," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 4 (2006): 344.

<sup>83</sup> Biswas, "An Overview," xxiii.

<sup>84</sup> Proshanta Nandi, "Communism through the Ballot Box: Over a Quarter Century of Uninterrupted Rule in West Bengal," *Sociological Bulletin* 54, no. 2 (2005): 174.

<sup>85</sup> Biswas, "An Overview," xxiii.

<sup>86</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Left radicalism in India* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 111.

<sup>87</sup> Biswas, "An Overview," xxiii.

small peasant communities. Over the past two decades, a significant amount of land dedicated to single-cropping has transitioned to double or even multi-cropping practices.<sup>88</sup> Extracting the *zamindars* and *jotedars* in rural Bengal laid the foundation for the Left's economic and distributive justice movement. The Congress Party could not abolish the *Zamindari* system and implement land reform policies at the time because of the influence of the *Zamindar* and *jotedar* elites within its ranks.

***Establishment of Panchayati Raj:*** The Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal was instrumental in the Left Front Government's achievement of land reforms. Launched by the United Front Government in 1967, the system encountered challenges stemming from political conspiracies. In 1977, the Left Front ascended to power and rolled out the Panchayati Raj, a three-tier framework designed to uplift the rural poor and confront established interests. The inaugural democratic elections for the Panchayat took place in 1978, resulting in a noteworthy triumph for the Left Front, which maintained its stronghold in later elections by championing grassroots democracy. The unwavering backing from the villagers showcases their confidence in the Left Front's leadership and its dedication to driving social transformation. The Left Front's implementation of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal propelled land reforms and deepened rural democratic participation, securing sustained support from rural communities.<sup>89</sup> Within a year of forming the first Left Front government in 1978, the stalled electoral process of the three-tier panchayat in West Bengal (decentralisation at the grassroots) was resumed to make the rural system of governance transparent, functional, and accountable. According to a study conducted by the Government of West Bengal's Development Planning Department, more than 80 per cent of the elected members in these panchayats came from small and marginal farmers, landless farm labourers, burglars, artisan classes, and primary school teachers' communities.

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<sup>88</sup> Biswas, "An Overview," xxiv.

<sup>89</sup> Biswas, "An Overview," xxiv.

With an active and effective panchayat system, a massive change in the design of rural autonomy came with the construction of infrastructure, new jobs, and increased agricultural production in rural Bengal. These policies brought about a historic shift in the structure of Bengali society's political, economic, social, and cultural transformation.

The Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal has played a crucial role in effectively executing land reform initiatives launched by the Left Front Government. Thanks to the dedicated work of the Panchayat Samiti and Gram Panchayat, more than 21% of rural families received the fruits of land redistribution. This initiative has led to nearly 60% of agricultural land being in the hands of small and marginal farmers, a significant increase compared to the national average of 29%.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, Panchayati Raj has made it easier to obtain vital non-land resources like irrigation, farming equipment, fertiliser, and credit, which are key in boosting productivity. The system received more extensive acknowledgement for its impactful response to the 1978 floods via the Food for Work Program, highlighting its ability to ease rural challenges. In West Bengal, the proactive engagement of Panchayat Samiti sets it apart from other regions in India, ensuring that rural development initiatives genuinely reach those in need. A notable portion of the beneficiaries are landless workers, especially those from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The Panchayati Raj in West Bengal has significantly reshaped land ownership dynamics and has been crucial in enhancing the livelihoods of rural communities, establishing itself as a benchmark for successful rural governance and development in India.

### **Transformations in the Rural Economic Landscape**

The economic landscape of rural West Bengal has experienced a remarkable transformation, driven by land reforms and the successful execution of the Panchayati Raj

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<sup>90</sup> Biswas, "An Overview," xxv.



system. West Bengal has witnessed remarkable agricultural growth, boasting an annual crop output increase of 6.5%. This achievement has positioned the state as India's top food grain producer.<sup>91</sup> The farm sector has significantly boosted the State Domestic Product (SDP). West Bengal has experienced a remarkable surge in agricultural productivity, positioning the state as a key player in the national production of diverse crops and fish, earning recognition for its outstanding achievements in this field. The growth has significantly enhanced rural employment and decreased poverty levels, showcasing a notable rise in rural enterprises and reduced dependence on private moneylenders for financial support. The political landscape has transformed, showcasing new leadership in the panchayats, primarily made up of small and marginal farmers. This transformation has strengthened the position of impoverished peasants and agricultural workers while simultaneously enhancing women's representation in local governance via constitutional measures. Administrative decentralisation has effectively responded to local aspirations and ethnic demands, as demonstrated by creating entities such as the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council.<sup>92</sup> The synergy of agricultural innovations, political empowerment, and administrative reforms has sparked a remarkable socio-economic transformation in rural West Bengal, cultivating a more inclusive and thriving rural economy.

### **Education, Healthcare, and Housing**

Upon assuming power, the Left Front government encountered a tumultuous education system with challenges like mass cheating and postponement of examination results. It effectively introduced reforms that created regular classes, fair examinations, and democratic governance in educational institutions.<sup>93</sup> The government has raised teacher salaries to attract top-notch educators and broadened educational prospects by launching several universities and

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<sup>91</sup> Biswas, "An Overview," xxvi.

<sup>92</sup> Biswas, "An Overview," xxviii.

<sup>93</sup> Biswas, "An Overview," xxviii.

vocational programs. The government prioritised enhancing school education, resulting in a notable increase in the number of schools and enrolment rates, complemented by initiatives such as midday meals and adult education programs. The Left Front in health care aimed to achieve ‘health for all’ by the year 2000, emphasising both curative and preventive strategies, particularly for those in need.<sup>94</sup> Numerous hospitals and health centres bolstered healthcare infrastructure while initiatives focused on enhancing the doctor-nurse ratio, prioritising family planning, implementing mass vaccination programs and promoting alternative medical systems. Moreover, the government introduced housing initiatives to cater to the diverse needs of various income groups and established collaborations with the private sector to ensure effective project execution.<sup>95</sup> The government focused on providing essential amenities and health care to slum dwellers. The Left Front had achieved notable progress in education, health, and housing amidst financial constraints, showcasing a dedication to implementing strategic reforms and focused initiatives to enhance the quality of life for the people of West Bengal.

From 1977 to 2011, the Left Front government continued to rule West Bengal for thirty-four consecutive years—seven successive terms. No other place in the world has witnessed such consecutive left governments. No elected government has stayed in power for such an extended duration. Looking at the various steps taken during the first Left Front government in West Bengal (1977–1982), we can identify this government as a true example of state populism. State populism entails when a power bloc institutionalises and strengthens the conflict between the underprivileged and the elite, uses state power to disrupt the existing hegemonic structure and establish a new one, revives democratic institutions, unites the people against the elite, and implements various redistributive programs and democratic reforms.

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<sup>94</sup> Biswas, “An Overview,” xxx.

<sup>95</sup> Biswas, “An Overview,” xxxi.

Although there was some radical character in the second and third terms of the Left Front government until 1991, we cannot call those periods quintessentially state populist. However, we cannot deny that these two Left Front governments, from 1982 to 1987 and from 1987 to 1991, came forward to implement the steps taken by the first Left Front government.

The Left Front government tried to use its state power to dismantle the then-existing hegemonic structure and establish a new one. The new structure served as a tool for empowering socio-economically and politically underprivileged people. Populist jargon, such as ‘the Left Front as the weapon of struggle and the Left Front as the government of the people’, popularised the government of West Bengal during the initial years of its rule. In this struggle between the existing illegitimate elites and the underprivileged, the Left Front united the underdogs when they were in opposition and advanced various democratic movements. As a power bloc, they were using the state’s power to uproot all entrenched, vested interests in society and politics that were against sharecroppers, landless people, middle- and small-scale cultivators, the organised labour class, the lower middle class, the underprivileged communities, etc. At the same time, they tried to restore democracy, justice, and equality—economically, socially, politically, and culturally. This slogan encapsulates the true significance of state populism. Once the Left-Front government came to power, it institutionalised the struggles of marginalised people against the existing establishment. They united the people against the then-elites. This enabled them to secure support from social and political entities to implement various redistributive government initiatives. Such policy actions disrupted the prevailing hegemonic structure.

The Left Front, by consolidating the various unfulfilled democratic demands of these marginalised people, constructed a popular subject, namely the people. They united the people to restore democracy against the undemocratic regime and vested interests of the society. The collective power of these marginalised people propelled the Left Front to adopt various

redistributive policies and initiate democratic reforms. Examples of this include the abolition of the *zamindari* system, the imposition of a ceiling on land holdings, government acquisition of land above the land ceiling, and redistribution of the land among landless peasants. Ensuring sharecroppers' legal rights or entitlements over their hereditary cultivated land was a significant step. The aim was to stop landlords from forcing them off the land they have been cultivating for generations. Through all these steps, the *zamindari* system gradually disappeared in West Bengal. Against the centralisation of all economic and administrative power in the hands of the Centre and the divisive behaviour of the Congress government at the Centre mainly due to ideological and political differences, the Left Front was able to unite the people of the states against the central government. They held the divisive policies of the Centre accountable for the state's backwardness. Upon assuming power, the Left Front launched a more extensive movement throughout India to re-establish the relationship between the Centre and the state within the federal framework.

Additionally, the first left-wing government simultaneously took steps to safeguard legal, economic, and social rights, as well as various welfare measures for factory workers, unorganised labourers, government service holders, teachers at schools and colleges, students, youths, women, refugees from Bangladesh, and other groups. They pursued various welfare measures and conferred rights, such as the creation of unions, the right to strike, a guaranteed minimum income, an increase in salaries and old-age pensions, the reservation of seats for women and backward castes in panchayats, regular classes, fair examinations, and democratic governance in educational institutions. The government tried to safeguard the democratic rights of individuals from diverse societal segments. For instance, during the first cabinet meeting, the Left Front government released all political prisoners.<sup>96</sup> Simultaneously, a three-tier

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<sup>96</sup> Jyoti Basu, "1977 First Left Front Government: Jyoti Basu Exclusive" GC media, Video Courtesy Zee 24 Ghanta, June 21, 2017, 1min., 32 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irk48gR8PEs>

governance system was established to include rural people in the governance process and decentralise political and administrative power. This entails the empowerment of socially and politically marginalised and oppressed peoples.

Some of the important reform measures taken by the first Left Front government, such as land reforms, securing the legal rights of sharecroppers and establishing the panchayat system, exemplify the logic of accountability. Before assuming power in 1977, the Left Front government had decisively pledged to the people that they would carry out all these reforms.<sup>97</sup> Before assuming power in 1977, the Left Front put forth a 36-point Common Minimum Programme (CMP), which included commitments to implement “radical changes in the land reform laws to do away with all forms of concentration of land holdings and to give substantial relief to *bargadars* (sharecroppers) and landless peasants and agricultural workers.”<sup>98</sup> This accountability to the popular subject led the Left Front government to take all necessary steps to overthrow the then-existing hegemonic structure and establish a new one. The Left Front’s supporters were the driving force behind the government’s actions. In other words, one can interpret the actions taken by the first Left Front government to safeguard their support base as an illustration of the logic of accountability. All these steps of the Left Front government were to uproot the existing hegemonic structure and create a new one. In addition to these steps, the first Left Front government implemented numerous policies and actions, which were easily explicable through the logic of governance and difference.

However, from the period of the second Left Front government to 1990, the radical character of the Left Front as a power bloc gradually diminished. Since 1982, the Left Front government has shown signs of widespread laxity and failure in its efforts to distribute lands

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<sup>97</sup> Jyoti Basu, “1977 First Left Front Government: Jyoti Basu Exclusive” GC media, Video Courtesy Zee 24 Ghanta, June 21, 2017, 1 min., 56 sec to 2 min., 12 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irk48gR8PEs>

<sup>98</sup> Ratan Ghosh, “Agrarian Programme of Left Front Government,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 25/26 (1981): A49.

(*pattas*) to landless peasants, register the sharecroppers, establish the panchayat system as a self-governing system, assist small and medium-scale peasants through various cooperative measures, and open various closed factories. The advancement of land reforms experienced a deceleration during the 1990s. Following the ascension of the Left Front to power, they documented nearly 900,000 *bargadars* from 1978 to 1988. From 1988 to 1997, the figure reached fewer than 90,000. From 1993 to 1999, the government acquired approximately 95,000 acres of land and distributed 94,000 acres, exhibiting similar trends in redistributing land to *pattadars*. This only accounts for approximately 6 per cent of the total land allocation.<sup>99</sup> They started to distance themselves from the actions that built the Left Front's public base and solidified its hegemony. Individuals from the middle-class, upper-middle-class, and upper-caste backgrounds have predominantly held leadership positions within the Left Front since 1990.<sup>100</sup> Those class demands and aspirations remain at the forefront of the Left Front, recognised as significant priorities. The Left Front has consequently disregarded the various kinds of democratic demands of the underprivileged. The Left Front had demonstrated a lack of responsiveness to the various democratic demands put forth by the disadvantaged sections. In this way, the leadership of the Left Front had compromised its integral relationship with the underprivileged.

Towards the end of the Left Front government, various government reports showed that West Bengal was lagging behind other states in India in diverse fields, including economic, social, educational, health, roads, electricity, water, etc.<sup>101</sup> Earlier, we saw that the Left Front government used its power to defend the rights of the people against the elites, including the right to land and livelihood. However, we have observed significant shifts in the direction and

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<sup>99</sup> Sarkar, "Political Economy of West Bengal", 344- 345.

<sup>100</sup> Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, "The Resilient Bhadrolok: A Profile of the West Bengal MLAs," in *Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar (New Delhi: Routledge, 2009), 361–92.

<sup>101</sup> Sarkar, "Political Economy of West Bengal", 343- 344.

priorities of the Left Front after the 1990s. During the last phase of the Left Front government, in response to the demands for privatisation and industrialisation of the middle and upper middle classes, the government forcibly took over the cultivated land of middle and small peasants in Singur and Nandigram to establish large industries under the leadership of big capital.<sup>102</sup> We can explain this phenomenon as an example of primitive capital accumulation.<sup>103</sup> Such a move exposed the class bias of the Left Front. This government had demonstrated its determination to establish new sources of income for the upper and upper middle classes by displacing marginalised people from their rights to land and livelihoods.

The Left Front has undergone a significant shift in class interests. Previously, they regarded the interests of marginalised lower-class individuals as their own. And now, they have aligned themselves with the interests of the upper middle and middle classes. Forced land acquisition in some parts of the state, along with evicting marginalised people from their livelihoods and land rights, marks the Left Front as anti-people. Chatterjee and Basu observe that despite a remarkable tenure of 34 years in power in West Bengal, there was a notable absence of viable alternatives or a demonstrated willingness to counter the swift advance of neoliberal economic growth.<sup>104</sup> It is possible that the disconnect of the CPI (M) from the ‘basic classes,’ as noted by Patnaik,<sup>105</sup> along with its increasing focus on middle-class concerns, were the main factors contributing to this situation. According to Patnaik, the CPI(M)’s tendency to ‘adjust’ to circumstances to avoid losses rather than maintaining its commitment to revolutionary practices led to a disconnect with the ‘basic classes’ it aimed to represent, such as workers, peasants, agricultural labourers, and the rurally impoverished.<sup>106</sup> Party interests

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<sup>102</sup> Chakrabarty, *Communism in India*, 100- 102.

<sup>103</sup> For an in-depth comprehension of the notion of primitive accumulation of capital, see Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887), 505- 507.

<sup>104</sup> Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After*, 94.

<sup>105</sup> Prabhat Patnaik, ‘The Left in Decline,’ *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 29 (2011): 12.

<sup>106</sup> Patnaik, ‘The Left in Decline,’ 12.

were seen as distinct from these classes, prompting immediate actions to protect their own, which may have collided with underlying class concerns. The then opposition party, the Trinamool Congress, successfully brought together the numerous dissenters against the power bloc in the call for a regime change, leading to a democratic shift. It is worth noting that the main opposition party to the Left Front, the Trinamool Congress, came to power by uniting the people against the Left Front in the fight to restore people's right to land, livelihood, and various democratic rights. In 1977, the Left Front, in the same way, had emerged victorious over the Congress, striving to safeguard the rights of the disadvantaged.

The preceding sections of this chapter illustrated how populism and state populism serve as mechanisms to democratise society by including and fulfilling unrepresented demands and interests. Thus, populism addressed the crisis of representation. Populism functions as a collective democratic effort against a shared adversary to establish a new democratic institution to restore popular sovereignty. Populism and republicanism are frequently seen to be mutually exclusive.<sup>107</sup> While the former is perceived to be inherently anti-institutional. The clamour for greater democratic participation exposes the inability of state institutions to accommodate people's demands. However, populism may not be understood as a danger to the state but as a means to reconcile democratic demands within the institutional framework. To address the conflicts between the people and the elite, democratic decentralisation and constitutional sovereignty must bring populism and republicanism on the same platform. The inherent incapacities of existing institutions need to be acknowledged while attempting to locate populism within the framework to resolve the institutional crisis. At the same time, populism has to broaden its horizons to accommodate a democratic dialogue between the constitutional establishment and the oppressed people. This chapter concludes that the populist regime of the

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<sup>107</sup> Óscar García Agustín, *Left-Wing Populism: The Politics of the People* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2020), 85.



first Left Front government (1977-82) in West Bengal aimed to reconcile the populist demand to dismantle established hegemony with efforts to broaden the republican frontier by securing pluralistic democratic rights and implementing governmental reforms.

## Chapter Two: Crisis of Left Front Populism

### Cracks in Left Front Populism 1991–2006

The Left Front achieved electoral dominance in the 1977 election, securing 231 seats.<sup>1</sup> The CPI(M) secured a majority of 178 seats and decided to form a government in collaboration with the Left Front alliance. It saw itself as assisting the labourers and farmers in their challenges and offering temporary assistance to the urban and rural populations. The changes included limitations on land ownership size, land redistribution, and the implementation of local self-government based on statutes and laws already in place. Mass mobilisations and the existence of disciplined party units ensured the successful enforcement of such legislation. Operation Barga granted legal recognition to sharecroppers previously vulnerable to the absolute authority of landowners, thus enhancing their protection and entitlement to a larger portion of the harvest. The implementation of these reforms and the augmented allocation of public funds to the agricultural sector liberated the peasants from the oppressive system of feudal landlordism.

The result was a significant increase in the rate of agricultural production in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> For years to come, the reforms had entrenched electoral support for the Left Front among substantial sections of the rural poor. The party's leadership was 'categorical' that the reforms had to target the *jotedars* (big landlords) alone and 'not risk' comparatively well-off peasants owning medium-sized landholdings and even more prosperous peasants with significant land.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Löfgren, "The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Left Government in West Bengal, 1977–2011: Strains of Governance and Socialist Imagination," *Studies in Indian Politics* 4, no. 1 (2016): 5.

<sup>2</sup> Prabhat Patnaik, "Three decades of Left Front rule in Bengal," *Nature, Society and Thought* 19, no. 4 (2006): 492–497.

<sup>3</sup> Sumantra Bose, *Transforming India: Challenges to the world's largest democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 127.

According to Samaddar, ‘Prosperous farmers, men of substance and the rural gentry became the political class in the villages of Bengal.’<sup>4</sup>

Post-land reform initiative in West Bengal, notable advancements were observed in agricultural productivity, simultaneously ameliorating the circumstances of those living in rural poverty.<sup>5</sup> After years of limited and substandard progress in agricultural output, West Bengal reached remarkable growth rates in this sector, achieving an annual growth rate of 6.9% from 1981–82 to 1991–92.<sup>6</sup> The percentage of rural populations experiencing poverty had significantly decreased, standing well beneath the national average, while average per capita consumption showed a consistent upward trend.<sup>7</sup>

The advancement in agriculture and overall economic prosperity fostered improvements in various human development metrics. The state was experiencing a notable decline in infant mortality rates, decreasing from 95 per 1000 during 1981–83 to 72 per 1000 in 1990–92, positioning it as the fifth lowest in the nation.<sup>8</sup> By the early 1990s, literacy rates among the rural population aged over seven demonstrated a commendable ascension, surpassing the national averages: 68% for males and 47% for females, compared to the national figures of 64% for males and 39% for females, as reported in the 1991 Census.

In practice, though, these assertions were frequently challenged. The rationale behind reform-driven growth often hinged on the belief that land redistribution fosters agricultural

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<sup>4</sup> Ranabir Samaddar, *Passive revolution in West Bengal: 1977–2011* (London: Sage, 2013), xix.

<sup>5</sup> Ritanjan Das, *Neoliberalism and the Transforming Left in India: A Contradictory Manifesto* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 32.

<sup>6</sup> Abhijit Sen and Ranja Sengupta, ‘The Recent Growth in Agricultural Output in Eastern India, with Special Reference to the Case of West Bengal,’ paper presented at the Workshop on Agricultural Growth and Agrarian Structure in West Bengal and Bangladesh, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 9–12 January 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Berk Özler, Gaurav Datt, and Martin Ravallion, *A Database on Poverty and Growth in India* (Washington, DC: Poverty and Human Resources Division, Policy Research Department, The World Bank, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Haris Gazdar and Sunil Sengupta, ‘Agricultural Growth and Recent Trends in Well-Being in Rural West Bengal,’ in *Sonar Bangla? Agricultural Growth and Agrarian Change in West Bengal and Bangladesh*, ed. Ben Rogaly, Barbara Harriss-White, and Sugata Bose (New Delhi, India: Sage, 1999), 75–76.

advancement.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, this assertion encountered significant challenges when subjected to a thorough examination.<sup>10</sup> While the land reforms demonstrated commendable progress in assisting numerous landless families, it is noteworthy that the overall proportion of land redistributed constituted less than 6.5% of the state's total cultivated area. The primary catalyst for growth, as noted by Harriss,<sup>11</sup> was the substantial advancement in groundwater irrigation. This development emerged not from public or cooperative efforts but instead through the initiative of enterprising individuals who adeptly responded to market needs.

Despite such criticism, Nandi expressed that the Left Front frequently received praise for the changes it implemented after 1977, which raised wages in rural areas, improved living standards, and eliminated the feudal class's prevailing influence in rural Bengal.<sup>12</sup> Kohli states that the disciplined Left Front successfully implemented effective administration in a politically active and chaotic state in the late 1960s.<sup>13</sup> This was achieved through reforms that adopted a non-confrontational stance towards groups that owned property. According to Kohli, the party pursued socio-democratic changes, albeit using Marxist-Leninism-style rhetoric. Following successfully suppressing the Naxalite rebels and assuming control over a significant population, it transitioned from a revolutionary mindset to a more 'reform-oriented' approach.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, in the following twenty years since 1977, West Bengal's small-peasantry economy was consolidated. However, a significant and increasing proportion of the population remained landless, with a considerable decline in the manufacturing sector. Undoubtedly, the

<sup>9</sup> Partha Dasgupta, *An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Anamitra Saha and Madura Swaminathan, "Agricultural Growth in West Bengal in the 1980s: A Disaggregation by District and Crops," *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, no.13 (1994): A2–A11.

<sup>11</sup> John Harriss, "What Is Happening in Rural West Bengal? Agrarian Reform, Growth and Distribution," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 24 (1993): 1237–47.

<sup>12</sup> Proshanta Nandi, "Communism through the ballot box: Over a quarter century of uninterrupted rule in West Bengal," *Sociological Bulletin* 54, no. 2 (2005): 176.

<sup>13</sup> Atul Kohli, "From breakdown to order: West Bengal," in *State and politics in India*, ed. Partha Chatterjee (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 336.

<sup>14</sup> Kohli, "From breakdown to order: West Bengal," 356.

party's reforms and political strategy were mainly concentrated around the rural sector till a sudden shift towards capitalist industrialisation during the middle of the 1990s, which saw a fresh perspective surface, highlighting a culture of political negotiation ingrained in the CPIM's operational nature. It has been suggested that the essence of the regime's longevity did not stem from party discipline or ideology but rather from the party's role in facilitating 'negotiations' and 'transactions' "between the government and the people in a field of popular transactions."<sup>15</sup> This relatively recent perspective suggests that a finely-tuned party apparatus was not merely a means to deliver governance to the people but rather a tool for negotiation intended to bolster its electoral status.<sup>16</sup>

The notion of a political agency serving as a facilitator of 'popular transactions' draws upon Partha Chatterjee's characterisation of political society.<sup>17</sup> Chatterjee posits that with the rising trend of the 'governmentalization of the state' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a novel array of conceptual linkages has surfaced in the political arena, complementing the traditional associational structures of civil society to nation-states as outlined by democratic political theory. This new line establishes a connection between the people and governmental bodies engaged in various security and welfare initiatives,<sup>18</sup> leading to an evolved political relationship between the State and its population. The emergence of these new relationships and processes forms the foundation of the political society.

In the Indian context, it becomes evident that the traditional notions of popular sovereignty, as reflected in the constitutional portrayal of the relationship between the State and civil society, do not sufficiently guarantee adequate representation for all population

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<sup>15</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, "Of Control and Factions: The Changing 'Party-Society' in Rural West Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 9 (2009): 60.

<sup>16</sup> Das, *Neoliberalism and the Transforming Left in India*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*, 37.

segments. A significant number of population groups, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, continue to endure being excluded from the privileged sphere of civil society and the legal protections of private property. This exclusion mainly results from deficits and discrepancies in education, financial resources, and the accompanying ‘social and cultural capital.’<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, they must receive appropriate supervision and care from various governmental bodies as constituents within the state’s territorial boundaries.<sup>20</sup> This act of care fosters a novel political relationship between the people and the governing body, diverging from established constitutional norms, and thus marks a departure from conventional models of civil society within nation-states. According to Chatterjee, this is the realm of political society. Bhattacharyya expressed that political society is comprised of underprivileged and marginalised groups who, lacking citizens’ rights, advocate for their livelihood needs through community-based approaches.<sup>21</sup> These communities are not rooted in primordial ties but in strategic alliances formed in response to specific governmental policies as they engage with the state and civil society.

A productive ‘negotiation’ with governmental bodies to safeguard or advance their livelihood needs must demonstrate unity and collective strength. This approach aspires to forge a shared identity compelling enough for the authorities to acknowledge them as a legitimate community deserving state support. Even if they are marginal, once a population group successfully establishes itself as a recognised entity, it can begin to discuss and negotiate its rights and entitlements with the state and civil society. This illustrates the operational dynamics of the political community.

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<sup>19</sup> Das, *Neoliberalism and the Transforming Left in India*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Bhattacharyya, “Of Control and Factions”, 60.

Partha Chatterjee analysed the relationship between corporate and noncorporate capital in postcolonial societies like India. Kalyan Sanyal discussed capitalist growth, the process of the “reversal of primitive accumulation” in the twenty-first century, and the role of the agencies of biopolitics and governmentality.<sup>22</sup> According to Sanyal, “contemporary development discourse has changed towards growth through an accumulation economy. On the other hand, it has created a subsistence economy where the excluded would be given rehabilitation.”<sup>23</sup> As per Sanyal, it is essential to consider the effect of global capital and the logic of biopolitics and governmentality on political strategies.

Taking his cue from Sanyal, Chatterjee explores how corporate capital is hegemonic within civil society, but there is scope for noncorporate capital to expand in political society.<sup>24</sup> In his recent book, he examines how populism might evolve into a tactic for a passive revolution of capital.<sup>25</sup> However, it may not act as a counterhegemonic revolt against the rule of capital.<sup>26</sup> According to Chatterjee, owners of capital can justify their hegemony over the whole economy only by utilising the state’s administrative institutions to operate as a mediating agency to ensure the survival of the disenfranchised poor.<sup>27</sup> The governmental dimension of populism<sup>28</sup> applies to various state policies to distribute benefits and secure popular support for the regime in power. Procedurally, such policies work within a particular institutional rationality of legitimacy, budgetary viability, and bureaucratic responsiveness. This dimension follows the rationale of meeting differential requirements while maximising anticipated costs

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<sup>22</sup> Kalyan Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-Colonial Capitalism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, 218–19.

<sup>24</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “Democracy and Economic Transformation in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 16 (2008): 58.

<sup>25</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *I Am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Chatterjee, *I Am the People*, 144.

<sup>27</sup> Chatterjee, *I Am the People*, 139–40.

<sup>28</sup> Chatterjee, *I Am the People*, 92.

and benefits, segregating the target population, and discouraging the consolidation of unfulfilled democratic demands.

These policies may be understood as what Laclau terms the logic of difference. When the existing regime portrays its policies as benevolent actions for which the recipients should feel obligated to continue their support, they become part of populist politics, and it seeks to counteract future populist challenges against the government. However, it would not be deemed populism in the framework of Laclau. Instead, it would be institutionalism, which is based on the logic of difference. However, such a strategy may also face populist resistance that creates chains of equivalence among different subgroups within the populace, who may feel aggrieved because their demands have not been accommodated. An internal division is formed between the elite oppressors and the oppressed people: the former becomes the latter's enemy. According to Chatterjee, this aspect of the ideological dimension of populism follows Laclau's logic of equivalence.<sup>29</sup> These projections, constructed rhetorically through speech, images, and performance, create an internal border between the people and their adversary that is both cultural and emotional. The ideological dimension of populism is reflected through the rhetoric of unity via national, linguistic, religious, caste, and other identities. It may lead to building an image of the people versus their enemy and pave the way for new antagonisms, such as between the wealthy few and the poor majority, aborigines and refugees, or the elite and the excluded masses.

Das expressed that a singular focus increasingly characterised interactions between the state and the margins during the Left Front era—political loyalty and affiliation.<sup>30</sup> Chatterjee's portrayal of a political society underscores the significance of collaboration, rooted in shared

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<sup>29</sup> Chatterjee, *I Am the People*, 93.

<sup>30</sup> Das, *Neoliberalism and the Transforming Left in India*, 35.



interests, positing it as a legitimate foundation for engaging in ‘negotiations’ with the state. In West Bengal, it appeared that ‘negotiations’ were only deemed valid if they were supported by a clear party affiliation or possessed a unique party identity. It was so deeply rooted within the state’s political environment that all parties, regardless of size or influence, were obliged to adhere to it.

Nonetheless, the Left parties—particularly the CPI(M)—had demonstrated notable success in effectively managing society through a meticulously coordinated, locally integrated, and hierarchically connected party structure.<sup>31</sup> Local government institutions, particularly the panchayats, were not immune to this level of politicisation, making them susceptible to significant partisan influences that undermined their independence and autonomy. Bhattacharyya refers to this particular manifestation of social interaction as party society—a distinct type of political community in the West Bengal countryside—where people’s political identities inherently shape the legitimacy of discussions. Bhattacharyya’s concept of ‘party society’ offers an interesting viewpoint on the political system that developed in rural West Bengal after land reforms and the implementation of the panchayat system for local democratic governance.<sup>32</sup> According to his perspective, the political parties, particularly the CPI(M), gained control over rural West Bengal’s social sphere during the late 1970s and early 1980s reforms.<sup>33</sup> The party’s exclusive dominance at the village level originated from its successful leadership during the violent peasant uprisings of the 1950s and 1960s, which aimed to overthrow landlords’ control. Many leftist leaders’ selfless commitment and sacrifice, consistently arriving from outside the area, solidified the party’s dominance in rural life. These

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<sup>31</sup> Bhattacharyya, “Of Control and Factions”, 60.

<sup>32</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 123- 152.

<sup>33</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, “Party-society, its Consolidation and Crisis: Understanding political change in West Bengal,” in *Theorizing the Present: Essays for Partha Chatterjee*, ed. Anjan Ghosh, Tapati Guha-Thakurta and Janaki Nair (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 230.

leaders effectively rallied the peasants around specific local economic exploitation or social exclusion concerns.<sup>34</sup>

Bhattacharyya emphasises the strategic governance of the CPIM after 1977, which introduced significant land reforms and established a panchayati raj, marking essential legislative advancements. Nevertheless, these efforts encountered resistance from local leaders, the lower levels of administration, and the landholding elite, who perceived threats to their revenue, authority, or property rights. This opponent highlights the constraints inherent in conventional legislative processes. The CPI(M) had navigated that challenge by serving as guardians of the recipients' legal rights, illustrating that effective reform laws necessitate strong political commitment at the grassroots level.<sup>35</sup> This political commitment required constant watchfulness over rural communities through a network of organised party members and machinery to guarantee the effective execution of these initiatives, even in the face of frequently harsh resistance. This approach necessitated that party members remain actively engaged on the field. With the most effective and well-structured organisational framework among all the left parties, the CPIM adeptly navigated challenges and successfully established a notable presence in the rural areas during its initial term in office.<sup>36</sup>

The political parties serve a dual purpose by establishing a moral identity for a negotiating group while maintaining exclusive control over all avenues of public engagement. At this moment, assessing which group can most adeptly foster a strong connection with the population is essential, mainly through its capacity to represent the marginal community and address its ongoing needs consistently. Through its meticulously coordinated, locally integrated, and hierarchically linked organisational structure, the CPI(M) in West Bengal

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<sup>34</sup> Bhattacharyya, "Party-society, its Consolidation and Crisis", 230.

<sup>35</sup> Bhattacharyya, "Of Control and Factions", 54.

<sup>36</sup> Das, *Neoliberalism and the Transforming Left in India*, 36.

excelled at performing this essential role more effectively than its counterparts. This elucidates, to a significant degree, the enduring and the then unchallenged and unbroken tenure of the Left in West Bengal. Nevertheless, parties' widespread involvement was not limited to overseeing governance efforts; with nearly total authority across all local organisations, local party leaders had begun to broaden their stewardship to encompass every facet of village existence. In a relatively short span, the local party leaders and prominent figures had emerged as the sole intermediaries connecting the local populations with the state and official administrative structures.

The historical background, the significant influence of the CPI(M) in the reforms after 1977, and its successful infiltration and control of panchayats, educational institutions, and other establishments resulted in party loyalty becoming the primary identity for many individuals. This loyalty was considered essential for one's existence in rural Bengal.<sup>37</sup> In rural areas, schoolteachers typically held prominent positions in the party organisation. They connected the less educated rural populace and the educated leadership in Kolkata, the Bhadrak (‘gentlefolk’).<sup>38</sup> During the era of party dominance in West Bengal politics, identification with the political party either replaced or suppressed the marginalised religious, ethnic, and caste identities.<sup>39</sup> Simultaneously, the ruling party could prevent opposition forces from participating in the regions it governed by segregating rural communities based on political affiliations.<sup>40</sup>

In analysing the integration of the party society, Bandyopadhyay<sup>41</sup> underscores two additional elements with the idea of the party society of Bhattacharyya: a tendency towards

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<sup>37</sup> Bhattacharya, “Party-society, its Consolidation and Crisis”, 232.

<sup>38</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, “‘Civic community’ and its margins: School teachers in rural West Bengal,” *Economic & Political Weekly* 36, no. 8 (2001): 673–683.

<sup>39</sup> Bhattacharya, “‘Civic community’ and its margins”, 673–683.

<sup>40</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “The coming crisis in West Bengal,” *Economic & Political Weekly* 44, no. 9 (2009): 42–45.

<sup>41</sup> Partha Sarathi Bandyopadhyay, *Ajker Paschimanga: Kshamatar Rajniti, banam Janatar Rajniti* (Calcutta: Aneek Publications, 299). (in Bengali).

clientelist behaviour and an inclination to suppress any manifestations of dissent. As Bandyopadhyay observes, party rule endures in rural West Bengal through two mechanisms—offering administrative benefits and maintaining strict oversight over the populace—where some are aligned with the former, some with the latter.<sup>42</sup> The integration of the party and society was thus wholly accomplished.

After three decades of governance of the Left Front in West Bengal, the interactions between the state and its peripheries were increasingly perceived as merging into the background. Moreover, a significant portion of the literature concerning West Bengal in the post-institutional context has primarily concentrated on the evolution of the CPI(M)/Left Front, extending well beyond the confines of formal state structures. This transformation has led to the emergence of a nearly parallel social institution, exerting comprehensive influence over various aspects of society, especially in rural areas, encompassing the formation, consolidation, and maintenance of the party society. Such observations align seamlessly with the ‘shadow state’ characteristics.<sup>43</sup>

Suman Nath gave a different account regarding the hegemonic role of CPI(M) in rural West Bengal. In his recent article, Nath points out that the dominant influence of the CPI(M) in the minds of the people of rural Bengal was not a spontaneous but a manufactured political ploy created by the ruling party.<sup>44</sup> He described the matter as a ‘Systemic Misrecognition’ of the CPI(M) party. He added that the process of misrecognition advocated by the Left Front Government was ‘systemic’ since the essence of misrecognition was profoundly rooted within the system itself. It was perpetuated over a very long time and has become part of the routine activities of individuals as a result. This was typical for the regime of the CPI(M). The CPI(M)

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<sup>42</sup> Bandyopadhyay, *Ajker Paschimanga*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Barbara Harriss-White, *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>44</sup> Suman Nath, “Cultural Misrecognition and the Sustenance of Trinamool Congress in West Bengal,” *Economic & Political Weekly* 53, no. 28 (2018): 98.

created elaborate mediating structures because of their long-term political influence, consistent with the theoretical constructions of ‘political society’ and ‘party society’. The essence of party mediation was no longer an explicit mechanism, and somewhat, it had become part of the daily practices of citizens. These mediating mechanisms could also be studied as embedded in many subtle, symbolic, ‘natural’ cultural structures, often pre-given (almost ontological). Therefore, the supremacy of the party and its mediating position in gaining access to local government institutions continued to be misrecognised by citizens as an integral part of their daily practices. As a result, government agencies were usually regarded as having unknown paperwork, bureaucracy, and constraint structures. The controls at the irrigation office and police oppression were equated as variations of ‘government’ terms, both denoting a lack of access for the common folk. Therefore, the party filled the void between the people and the government, which would reap electoral benefits over decades. The party positioned itself as a ‘friendly’ and approachable complement to the government. The procedures a person must follow to access government institutions form a mental map that individuals have taken for granted over time and neglected to review. Actual access to government institutions had always been a mystery. As a result, what seemed to be the ‘consent’ of the public in Gramscian terms was misrecognition ‘manufactured’ by local political leaders.<sup>45</sup>

The Communist Party of India CPI (M) faced new challenges and possibilities by the 1990s due to events on a national and international scale, as well as the political and economic circumstances of West Bengal. The fundamental issue facing the party was that, after the changes of the 1970s and 1980s, they could no longer maintain a productive economic and political momentum. A decrease in agricultural development also resulted in increasingly smaller landholdings. The increased population and the increasing number of trained young people in the villages further contributed to a job crisis. There had been a substantial rise in

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<sup>45</sup> Nath, “Cultural Misrecognition’ and the Sustenance of Trinamool Congress in West Bengal,” 98.

landless labourers and massive migration from rural areas, as villages could no longer support a rising population. In such circumstances, the leadership of the CPI(M) believed that the focus must be rapid industrial growth for employment and renewed development. The industrial strategy implemented in 1994 acknowledged the crucial role of the private sector in driving rapid economic development and solidified the new approach.<sup>46</sup> However, the results have proven meagre regarding Indian and foreign big business investments and new employment.

Since 2006, political trends have taken a devastating turn for the CPI(M). The policy of neoliberal industrialisation and the forced purchase of agricultural land for factories created a divide between many ideological supporters and other significant parts of its social base. Thus, a strong anti-Left movement caused the violent incidents in Singur and Nandigram.<sup>47</sup> Under neoliberalism, growth is solely aimed at making money from capital-intensive industrialisation ventures for industrial and business companies. Chatterjee and Basu argue that the adherents of the Washington Consensus propose reducing governmental involvement to prioritise preserving corporate interests.<sup>48</sup> From this viewpoint, economic liberalisation implies allowing businesses to progressively appropriate public assets such as land, minerals and water. Although limited state participation creates favourable conditions for unrestricted capital accumulation, the philosophy of a free market defined by unrestricted competition is put forward to camouflage/misrepresent this.

Ultimately, this results in more impoverishment for the already deprived masses of the developing Third World. Escobar contends that this top-down and technocratic growth policy is fundamentally exclusionary since it excludes ‘...what development was supposed to be all

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<sup>46</sup> Government of West Bengal, *Policy Statement on Industrial Development* (Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1994), 7–8.

<sup>47</sup> Amit Bhattacharyya, “Is Lalgargh showing the way?,” *Economic & Political Weekly* 45, no. 2 (2010): 17–21; Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Chowdhury, “The meaning of Nandigram: Corporate land invasion, people’s power, and the Left in India,” *Focaal—European Journal of Anthropology* 54 (2009): 73–88.

<sup>48</sup> Jyotiprasad Chatterjee and Suprio Basu, *Left Front and After: Understanding the Dynamics of Poriborton in West Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage, 2020), 214.

about: people.’<sup>49</sup> This makes the established regime of growth undemocratic. The substitution of liberal marketocracy (market rule) for the meaning of liberal democracy is a central issue for the survival of democratic institutions, such as the state and political parties. Free market theory becomes incompatible with democracy’s ethos as the former raises inequality and decreases the spectrum of social justice that the latter promises to limit or remove. The outcome was that the CPI(M) suddenly found itself under ferocious assault from all places. Also, people were dissatisfied with the CPI(M) for several reasons. Most significant among these were the state’s economic decline, the illusion of invincibility arising out of a long tenure in power, the arrogance of the party cadres in dealing with the people at large, the misunderstanding of the government’s civic space by the party, the penetration of the party into civil society’s autonomous territory, and so on.

It could be calculated from the continuously rising electoral support for the opposition Trinamool Congress (TMC) since its creation in 1998 that the resultant frustration of the masses with the CPI(M) was growing. But maybe it was not enough for the Left Front government to be dislodged. The state continued to rule primarily based on its rural support base, built from earlier attempts to reform rural societies’ economic and political structure. Due to its association with erstwhile landlords, rural voters concerned about the Trinamool Congress (TMC) chose to back the Left Front.<sup>50</sup>

### **Decline of Left Front Governance 2006– 2011**

Löfgren argues that the Left’s fundamental dilemma was that the reforms of the 1970s and 1980s were incapable of sustaining constructive political momentum.<sup>51</sup> A decrease in agricultural development resulted in increasingly smaller landholdings. The growing

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<sup>49</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995): 44.

<sup>50</sup> Löfgren, “The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Left Government in West Bengal, 1977–2011”, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Löfgren, “The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Left Government in West Bengal, 1977–2011”, 7.

population and the increasing number of educated youths have exacerbated the job crisis. There was a significant increase in landless workers and a tremendous influx of jobless individuals. Under these circumstances, the left shifted its emphasis to fast industrial expansion to revive the economy and create employment. Although the Left Front retained a majority in the 2006 West Bengal elections, they were gradually driven out of power, as evident from the polls between 2008 and 2011. After 1994, new industrial policies were implemented to “recognize the significance and vital role of the Private Sector in delivering rapid development in the economy.”<sup>52</sup> The Left took the initiative towards corporate and state-led industrialisation, with its ideological contradictions, negotiating with labour unions and agrarian fronts to steadfastly implement the reforms enshrined in the new industrial policy.<sup>53</sup> In such a scenario, the strength of the bargaining power of the trade unions dwindled in West Bengal.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, from the 1990s onwards, a corresponding shift in approach towards labour reforms was noticed within the Left Front governance.<sup>55</sup> Such a shift also impacted the management of industrial relations and the judiciary’s attitude towards industrial disputes.<sup>56</sup>

The expansion of the neoliberal industrialisation policies and the forced purchase of agricultural land for factories by the Left Front created a divide among the Left’s ideological supporters and its mass social base. The incidents of violence in Singur and Nandigram, when the state took forceful action against protesting farmers, led to a powerful anti-Left movement.<sup>57</sup> The Left Front’s decline can be attributed to its disregard for the democratic

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<sup>52</sup> Government of West Bengal, *Policy Statement on Industrial Development*, 7–8.

<sup>53</sup> Ritanjan Das and Zaad Mahmood, “Contradictions, Negotiations and Reform: The Story of Left Policy Transition in West Bengal”, *Journal of South Asian Development* 10, no. 2 (2015): 199–229.

<sup>54</sup> Achin Chakraborty, Subhanil Chowdhury, Supurna Banerjee and Zaad Mahmood, *Limits of Bargaining: Capital, Labour and the State in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>55</sup> Zaad Mahmood, *Globalization and Labour Reforms: The Politics of Interest Groups and Partisan Governments* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>56</sup> Supurna Banerjee and Zaad Mahmood, “Judicial Intervention and Industrial Relations: Exploring Industrial Disputes Cases in West Bengal”, *Industrial Law Journal* 46, no. 3 (2017): 366–396; Zaad Mahmood and Supurna Banerjee, “The State in Industrial Relations: Neoliberal Intervention or Intervening in Neoliberalism?”, *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 63 (2020): 575–596.

<sup>57</sup> Sanjib Mukherjee, “The Use and Abuse of Democracy in West Bengal,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 44 (2007): 101–108.



demands for fundamental services. According to the 2011 Census statistics, West Bengal significantly fell short of the national average regarding the availability of electrical supply, drinking water, banking services, and other vital services like access to television.<sup>58</sup> Even after 34 years of leftist rule, the state only performed moderately well in health and education. All these unfulfilled democratic demands accumulated, and the cry for empowerment and justice found a significant outlet in the form of land agitations in Singur and Nandigram from 2006 onwards. Although the Left did implement various land reforms and Panchayati Raj (decentralisation) policies, these only temporarily extended its tenure in power without solving the roots of the crisis posed by a plethora of unfulfilled demands and a disconnected electorate.<sup>59</sup> The Left Front's agrarian reforms and local self-government policies were soon overshadowed by the dominance of "party society" and the Left intelligentsia, upon which the Left Front regime became thoroughly dependent.<sup>60</sup>

The Left Front regime had become centralised around this core party intelligentsia. With successive electoral victories and continued enjoyment of power, the focus shifted away from populist reforms and toward the party's dominance over social space: the Left Front morphed from a mass-party-based democratic force into a coercive one, and the promotion of certain groups' interests at the expense of others resulted in deep divisions within their 'party-society', which subsequently weakened the Left Front's dominance in Bengal. According to Bhattacharyya, the Left Front's defeats in a sequence of local and national elections from 2008 cannot be described without a knowledge of rural West Bengal's 'party society'. The party's predominance across the social space, a shift from a hegemonic to a coercive power, and finally, the ruptures in the 'party society' led to the Left Front's control ebbing in West

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<sup>58</sup> Maidul Islam, "Big national parties in West Bengal: An exceptional outcast?," in *Rise of Saffron Power Reflections on Indian Politics*, ed. Mujibur Rehman (New York: Routledge, 2018), 284- 285.

<sup>59</sup> Maidul Islam, "Big national parties in West Bengal", 285.

<sup>60</sup> Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 123- 152.

Bengal.<sup>61</sup> The Left took recourse to coercive means to expand this party society and used the state apparatus to suppress the weaker sections and political oppositions.

The backward castes, the Muslims, and the rural poor gradually moved away from the Left, and their traditional support base weakened in the late 2000s. The Left understood ‘people’ in terms of class through their conventional political discourse and could not prioritise the fulfilment of the democratic demands of the marginalised groups. Originally intended to represent the working class and peasants, the party witnessed an unprecedented gathering of Bhadrolok (upper castes like Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas) in the Bengal Left Front administration.<sup>62</sup> The communists’ devotion to secular politics rendered them insensitive to the demands for social justice. The Bhadrolok Left leadership was unfamiliar with the conditions of the working class and peasants.<sup>63</sup> Such cultural alienation was evident between 2006 and 2011 when the bewildered Left leadership pushed for corporate industrialisation to develop the economy without considering the immediate democratic demands of the poor sections, the rural agrarian and working classes. This led to the collapse of their popular support base. The underprivileged masses progressively sought an alternative to the arrogant and unresponsive Left, which was offered by the Trinamool Congress (TMC) at the opportune moment.

The party management hesitated to participate in an open dialogue and suffered from the dilemmas of progressive change. Admittedly, significant socio-economic inequality and major development issues, clubbed with long-term governance pressures of a vast population, may have contributed to a political culture hostile to progressive democratic practices. The flow of knowledge took place inside the party, according to Prasenjit Bose, ‘only from top to

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<sup>61</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, “Left in the Lurch: The Demise of the World’s Longest Elected Regime?,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 3 (2010): 51.

<sup>62</sup> Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, “The Resilient Bhadrolok: A Profile of the West Bengal MLAs,” in *Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar (New Delhi: Routledge, 2009), 370–373, 388–390.

<sup>63</sup> Islam, “Big national parties in West Bengal”, 285.

bottom, not from bottom to top. The leadership has become impervious to critical opinions from below. The decision-making bodies, like the party congress, have become increasingly formal.’<sup>64</sup>

There has been a lack of debate about how involvement in representative institutions and electoral politics can be effectively paired with an anti-capitalist transition driven by mass mobilisation. Democracy, economic scale, and alternative development methods were not the party’s concerns, including cooperative output, urban agriculture (as in Cuba), emerging technology, ‘green thinking’, and the environmental crisis. In addition, the CPI(M) misread the electoral situation, taking its rural support base for granted. However, clientelism, intolerance, intimidation and small-scale corruption were manifest characteristics of the Party-Society regime. In this viewpoint, 2011’s loss was not only due to ‘peasant disaffection with its (then) recent efforts at land acquisition, but...to widely and intensely resented all-pervasive and oppressive party control of all aspects of local life.’<sup>65</sup> According to Kaviraj, it was a ‘subtle process of imaginative defeat’ as the CPI(M) ‘accepted a complete absorption into ordinary electoral politics—banishing serious social change to the level of pure rhetoric.’<sup>66</sup>

Chatterjee<sup>67</sup> opines that in his study of West Bengal, Ross Mallick<sup>68</sup> emphasised a self-critical internal document from the Burdwan District Committee of the CPI(M). This document was initially intended for internal party circulation but was later withdrawn. Mallick argued that it demonstrated the party’s inability to accept criticism from any source. Mallick highlighted the party and the Left Front’s predicament within a federal constitutional

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<sup>64</sup> Prasenjit Bose, “Verdict 2009: An appraisal of critiques of the Left,” *Economic & Political Weekly* 44, no. 40 (2009): 32–38.

<sup>65</sup> Pranab Bardhan, “The avoidable tragedy of the Left in India—II” *Economic & Political Weekly* 46, no. 24 (2011): 10–13.

<sup>66</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Enchantment of Democracy and India: Politics and Ideas* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011), 227.

<sup>67</sup> Rakhahari Chatterji, “Introduction,” in *West Bengal under the Left 1977-2011*, ed. Rakhahari Chatterji and Partha Pratim Basu (New York: Routledge, 2020), 8.

<sup>68</sup> Ross Mallick, *Development Policy of a Communist Government: West Bengal since 1977* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 212.

framework. They could not engage in violence or effectively pursue class conflict in urban areas due to their lack of motivation. Additionally, their reliance on the middle peasantry hindered them from fully implementing land reform initiatives and politically mobilising the lower classes in rural areas.<sup>69</sup> The execution of reforms and development projects in this state, often proposed and backed by the central government, had been mediocre at best and usually worse than most other states in India.<sup>70</sup> Based on Mullick's analysis, the CPI (M) (along with the Left Front) made the mistake of prioritising electoral victories to retain their political control without successfully pursuing socialism or capitalism.<sup>71</sup>

In a paper based on a field study performed from 2003 to 2005, Abhirup Sarkar contended that the rapid progress that occurred at the beginning of the Left government in West Bengal ceased during the 1990s.<sup>72</sup> Rural society's impoverished and underprivileged segments consistently supported the Left Front, contributing to its enduring electoral success. The author discovered that the people's persistent support was not motivated by economic benefits, as there were few and far. Instead, it sprang from their thankfulness for the newly gained dignity they had acquired under the Left Rule, something they had never experienced before.<sup>73</sup>

Sarkar<sup>74</sup> discusses the 'increasing informalization of the economy and the breakdown of the formal legal system' during the Left Front regime in West Bengal, highlighting how these factors may have contributed to the growing weaknesses faced by the comparatively marginalised and weak segments of society. These circumstances necessitated their reliance on the parties for assistance. The CPI(M), with its unparalleled organisational structure,

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<sup>69</sup> Mallick, *Development Policy of a Communist Government*, 79, 167, 205.

<sup>70</sup> Mallick, *Development Policy of a Communist Government*, 217.

<sup>71</sup> Mallick, *Development Policy of a Communist Government*, 218.

<sup>72</sup> Abhirup Sarkar, "An Inquiry into the Mystery of the Left Front's Long Durability," (in Bengali) in *Bamraj* (The Left Regime) (Kolkata: Charchapad, 2013), 39-49.

<sup>73</sup> Sarkar, "An Inquiry into the Mystery of the Left Front's Long Durability," (in Bengali), 48.

<sup>74</sup> Abhirup Sarkar, "Political Economy of West Bengal: A Puzzle and a Hypothesis," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 4 (2006): 346.

demonstrated exceptional efficiency in protecting the interests of the vulnerable compared to other parties. As a result, he attributes the remarkable stability of Left Front governance under the CPI(M) in West Bengal to a delicate balance between the electorate's growing uncertainty and their continued support for the ruling CPI(M).

Bardhan<sup>75</sup> contended that the primary cause of the Left Front's downfall in 2011 wasn't the land acquisition problem. Instead, the Left Front, specifically the CPI(M), exerted a dominant, repressive, and pervasive influence on all aspects of the people's daily lives in the areas, which made the situation unpleasant and untenable for the people, leading to the downfall of the Left Front. Even though the party had implemented a 'mafia raj' system that negatively affected the general public, it eventually lost control over its lower-level leaders. The decentralisation project failed to achieve the desired democratisation of the rural community. The Front assisted unionised school teachers, health workers, clerks, and other professionals, without whose involvement people would not be able to access services in these areas, which they have a fundamental right to receive. Furthermore, he highlighted neglected aspects that required urgent consideration, which the Left Front had ignored entirely. For example, the government did not prioritise the organisation of the unorganised and informal sector in the labour market. Its desire for complete control led it to overlook the potential contributions that nonprofit organisations could make to society and the economy, leaving that sector and associational life in West Bengal uncertain and impoverished. The government also did not recognise the importance of the cooperative movement. Its heavy reliance on middle and small farmers rendered it unable to address wage issues for peasants, as doing so effectively would directly harm the interests of the former. Lastly, when land acquisition became necessary for industrialisation, the government did not succeed in identifying and implementing

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<sup>75</sup> Pranab Bardhan, "A Preventable Tragedy of the Indian Left," (in Bengali) in *Bamraj* (The Left Regime) (Kolkata: Charchapad, 2013), 28-38.

compensation methods that would provide long-term benefits for those who lost their land. The Left failed to devise a framework to facilitate the simultaneous advancement of industrialisation and rehabilitation.

Bardhan et al.<sup>76</sup> further, explore the nuances of clientelism within the dynamics between the Left parties—especially the CPI(M) and the rural electorates. Upon careful examination of the data gathered from a survey encompassing 85 villages in West Bengal, it became evident that there existed a positive correlation between receiving different governmental welfare programs and the tendency to vote for the Left. The study indicates subtle connections between patrons and clients, as evidenced by the observation that individuals who consistently participated in the CPI(M) meetings received more significant advantages than those who did not engage in such activities.

In his comprehensive examination of the Singur and Nandigram incidents, which played a crucial role in toppling the Left Front government, Bhattacharyya concludes that neither industrialisation nor land acquisition, even if it involves fertile land, can be faulted since they are necessary for establishing industries in West Bengal.<sup>77</sup> According to him, the mistake made by the CPI(M) was deviating from its previous practice of including local leaders and people in the decision-making process, known as ‘a consultative governmental process’, while executing policies.<sup>78</sup> The Left leaders then assumed that the population’s support was guaranteed and engaged in self-satisfied, one-sided decision-making.<sup>79</sup> As a result, the local leaders had utterly lost their credibility, and the party had lost all popular sympathy.

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<sup>76</sup> Pranab Bardhan, Sandip Mitra, Dilip Mookherjee, and Abhirup Sarkar, “Local Democracy and Clientelism: Implications for Political Stability in Rural West Bengal,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 9 (2009): 46–58.

<sup>77</sup> Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*.

<sup>78</sup> Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 167.

<sup>79</sup> Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 207.

In the 2011 Assembly Election, the TMC and INC alliance emerged victorious in West Bengal, securing 226 out of 294 seats. This victory resulted from the people's dissatisfaction with the Left Front government's handling of land acquisition. The events at Singur and Nandigram have had a significant impact on the social base of the CPI(M), particularly in rural areas. The agricultural community, traditionally a strong CPI(M) supporter, experienced a significant divide. The TMC, under the leadership of front-line movements, gained immense support from workers in agriculture and farmers: the conventional Left Party support base. This was exposed in the 2009 Lok Sabha Election, where the Left Front lost substantial support for these two agricultural groups. Compared to the 2004 Lok Sabha Election, the Left also lost nearly 16 per cent of its votes among skilled and semi-skilled workers in rural areas in this election.<sup>80</sup>

In the various elections from 2006 to 2011, the comparative success of the Left Front and the TMC signalled a dramatic change in the connotation of leftist politics altogether. In place of the left-oriented CPI (M), the non-left TMC assumed responsibility for advancing the cause of the underprivileged and impoverished within the political sphere. Corrupt authoritarian Stalinists generally characterised the party. Singur and Nandigram took on a symbolic status in India for a land grab strategy and the CPI(M)'s failure in West Bengal. The anti-communist resistance had been divided and ineffectual until Singur and Nandigram. Trinamool had then used populist rhetoric from the left to create an anti-CPI(M) movement that defeated the left in both the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, and the 2011 Assembly elections, in which Trinamool alone won 184 of the 294 Assembly seats and the CPI(M) scraped just 40.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After*, 216.

<sup>81</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty, "The 2011 state assembly elections in West Bengal: The Left Front washed-out!" *Journal of South Asian Development* 6, no. 2 (2011): 143–167.

### Chapter Three: Rise of Trinamool Congress Populism

According to Chatterjee and Basu, the Bengali term ‘Trinamool,’ which translates to ‘grassroots,’ has enabled the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC) to carve out a niche within the current structure of global politics. The election symbol, representing the essence of the ‘grassroots’ with two saplings on the grass, aims to convey the party’s identity as one that serves, means, and emerges from the subalterns.<sup>1</sup> The TMC supremo, Miss Mamata Banerjee, has emerged and has been steadily surging as a compelling leader with a significant popular base, reflecting the essence of contemporary political dynamics and the characteristics of grassroots movements. Furthermore, the name ‘All India Trinamool Congress’ signifies a clear departure from the elitist tendencies associated with the Indian National Congress (INC), the party Mamata Banerjee chose to separate to establish her new organisation. Since the 1980s, Smt. Mamata Banerjee, aligned with the Indian National Congress (INC), has persistently struggled against the CPI(M). However, in light of the consistent and increasing decline of the Indian National Congress (INC) both within the state and nationally since the mid-1980s, along with its interdependent responsibilities in national politics, the leadership was hesitant to advance the anti-CPI(M) campaign too aggressively. As a prominent figure possessing a deep understanding of the public, Miss Banerjee was acutely aware of the rising dissatisfaction of the regional citizenry directed towards the CPI(M) during that period. Consequently, in her pursuit to counter the CPI(M), her only political rival, she decided to part ways with the INC. It is because the INC was planning to collaborate with her anathema politically. It’s intriguing, however, to note that she chose to designate her new party as the ‘Trinamool Congress.’ Thus, the name may also imply her dissent towards the exclusive and elitist tendencies of the INC.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jyotiprasad Chatterjee and Suprio Basu, *Left Front and After: Understanding the Dynamics of Poriborton in West Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage, 2020), 80.

<sup>2</sup> Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After*, 81.



The TMC, formed in 1998 in West Bengal, switched from opposition politics to power politics in 2011. The TMC and the Indian National Congress alliance came to power in West Bengal by winning 226 out of 294 seats in the 2011 elections, reflecting people's resentment at the Left Front's mishandling of livelihood issues and land acquisition.<sup>3</sup> They retained power with consecutive victories in the 2016 and 2021 elections. The TMC portrayed itself as the 'people's government' and, by articulating the interests of "*Ma Mati O Manush* (Mother, land, and People)," was able to sway disgruntled former Left Front supporters.

I argue that the Trinamool Congress's populist discourse and practices before assuming power in West Bengal was a 'centre-left populism'. In the name of the people, these discursive practices articulated the interests of diverse underprivileged groups, prioritising their democratic struggles for equality, distributive justice and social justice. The Trinamool Congress would have been unable to ascend to power in West Bengal without such a polarised discourse. The agent of this populist configuration, referred to as 'the people' (Manush), is the party's leader, Miss Mamata Banerjee. In this chapter, I use a psychosocial or psychoanalytic framework to understand Miss Banerjee's charismatic appeal, drawing inspiration from anthropologist James Scott's findings about charismatic leadership.

I have tried to explain a leader's charisma or charismatic appeal within a discursive methodological framework. In his article,<sup>4</sup> Stavrakakis argued that political anthropologist James Scott provides an intriguing investigation of charisma, uncovering the intricate mechanisms behind its creation and consolidation.<sup>5</sup> According to Scott's general framework, each 'social order' or 'political institution', every process of dominance, 'generates a

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<sup>3</sup> Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After*, 216; Biswanath Chakraborty, "Electoral tsunami in West Bengal," *Socialist Perspective* 34, no. 1-2 (2011). Biswanath Chakraborty, *2011-Banglar Rai* (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2011) (In Bengali).

<sup>4</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, "Populism in Power: Syriza's Challenge to Europe," *Juncture* 21, no. 4 (2015): 279.

<sup>5</sup> James Campbell Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (London: Yale University Press, 1990).

hegemonic public conduct and backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power.’<sup>6</sup> Consequently, two transcripts come out: one public and the other hidden. For Scott, ‘If subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant is a public transcript.’ He argues, “I shall use the term hidden transcript to characterise discourse that takes place ‘offstage’, beyond direct observation by powerholders.”<sup>7</sup> Scott opined, ‘The hidden transcript is thus derivative in that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript.’<sup>8</sup> Normal circumstances rarely reveal these concealed transcripts. And yet, on occasions, when circumstances reach the domain of the extraordinary, they emerge, drastically shifting the situation: ‘The most explosive realm of politics is the rupture of the political cordon sanitaire between the hidden and the public transcript.’<sup>9</sup> Therefore, charisma is not an individual’s attribute; it is more closely associated with a socially generated reciprocity than personal magnetism.<sup>10</sup> This kind of relationship starts when a subordinate group’s problems, complaints, and demands are suddenly made public after being kept secret and denied by those in power. This creates a strong connection between the subordinate group and the agent speaking out on behalf of the ‘hidden transcript.’<sup>11</sup> In Scott’s words, ‘Putting the matter more generally, we may say fairly that if Mrs. Poyser becomes a charismatic heroine to the parish, it is because she was the first person who publicly confronted power with the hidden transcript.’<sup>12</sup> According to Scott, when we emphasise the significance of the hidden narrative in the social creation of charisma, it appears that we reinstate the mutual exchange at the heart of this idea.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, xii.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Stavrakakis, “Populism in Power”, 279.

<sup>11</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 221.

<sup>12</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 221.

<sup>13</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 221.

Upon entering the movement to safeguard the land and livelihoods of marginalised groups, Mamata Banerjee presented a pro-people agenda in opposition to the Left Front's cadre raj, characterised by its oppressive regime, fostering a strong connection with the people. Challenging the autocratic and partisan mindset of the Left Front while maintaining her commitment to safeguarding the interests of marginalised people, she positioned herself as a compelling leader among diverse groups discontented with the Left Front. She did not abruptly transform into a charismatic leader. Her charisma gradually enhanced as she initiated presenting and consolidating various off-stage discourses against the Left Front. This marked the beginning of the Left Front's decline and the Trinamool Congress's emergence as a significant player in Bengal politics.

#### **A succinct summary of the Trinamool Congress's rise in West Bengal politics**

*The Transfer and the Transition:* West Bengal, since independence, through thick and thin, through political stability to upheaval, had been served by the Indian National Congress Party, or INC before the uninterrupted reign of the Left Front government was ushered in and ultimately ousted by the AITC. Post-independence, just like every other state, the hegemonic position of INC served the party for three decades. After the 1970s emergency, the political scene of West Bengal witnessed the rise of leftist political ideology. Since the 1977 landslide victory of the Left Front led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or the CPI(M), in Bengal, communism was ushered in. Mr Jyoti Basu, the patriarch, reigned over the Left Front for 23 years before passing on the baton to his younger colleague, Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharya. The new leadership, the new zeal, the fresh vision, and the promise soon were realised to have been out of touch with the ground reality, and by the time it was acknowledged, it was too late for the front, as the change of wind and wind of change—the *hawabodol* and the *paribartan*—had taken over.

The transfer of power in Bengal and the keys to the Writers' Building changing hands exhibits a socio-political pattern, may that be the tsunami of TMC in the 2011 assembly election washing off the Left Front government from the soil or that the very same leftist parties in 1977 freeing the very same soil from the central government's atrocities. Bengal, the powerhouse of the anti-colonial movement, post-partition and Indian independence, struggled to cope with industrial and manufactural reorientation, food shortages, and the refugee crisis. Unfortunately, in addition to these, the centre did not make any developmental efforts, the rupee was devalued, the economy was ineffective, and land reforms were ineffective. When the tension heightened and led to riots, the 1972 presidential rule brought about a reign of terror that was faced and countered by the CPI(M)'s massively and meticulously organised multipronged mass movement, creating the mammoth hegemonic empire. What would account for the factors contributing to the rise of the Communist Party in West Bengal, achieving a level of prominence unmatched in other parts of India, can be explained with significant parts stemming from the relative frailty of Congress in the region, along with a unique social structure, particularly regarding land ownership, following Independence. Communism: A transnational ideology and a multinational political organisation failed to take such deep roots in other parts of India but took a stronghold in Bengal to the effect of reshaping national political dynamics with the possibility of the patriarch chief minister, Mr. Jyoti Basu, being spoken of as a possible prime ministerial candidate of a centre-left coalition in the mid-1990s. Bengal, the place of origin of the anti-British position in India during the early twentieth century and the central hub of industry in the subcontinent, provided a focal point for cultural revival, national consciousness, peasant agitation, and worker activism, where communism succeeded in establishing a lasting presence.

The history of Bengal politics and its dynamics are widely, if not unequivocally, accepted to revolve around the rise and fall of the communist party. The flag bearer of the

subaltern cause, champion of the aggrieved of the central maladministration, Ms. Mamata Banerjee, the challenger to the behemoth Left Front, also focused her campaign on reaching out to those disenfranchised and marginalised by the CPM's rapid capitalist development strategies, particularly highlighting the party's infamous harsh treatment of impoverished farmers in Singur and Nandigram.

In a state where, in the early 2000s, 82% of family households existed with less than 5000 as the monthly income of the highest-earning member,<sup>14</sup> 10% of rural households were struggling for the absolute bare necessities like food,<sup>15</sup> 34 years, almost seven terms of uninterrupted rule of the party, could no longer be justified, and the party couldn't claim development and good governance as their deliverance or the reason for their sustenance of power. It was, in fact, a balance of factors involving culture, diplomacy, politics, and administration that culminated in the continuous success of the Left Front government. Under Left rule, West Bengal presented a unique model of democratic governance where political stability wasn't achieved through the political apathy of the electorates relying on the lack of conscious choice and predominance of habitual behaviour, which was a prevalent political behaviour of the voters. The sustenance was ensured through consistent engagement with diverse stakeholders across urban and rural communities. The onus of this mammoth undertaking was carried on by the party organisation, which gradually became the primary channel for accessing all public services, from securing hospital beds to qualifying for government programs, effectively mirroring the government's bureaucratic structure while operating parallelly and in tandem with it, making it indispensable for the citizens who increasingly relied on the party to resolve both public and personal conflicts. This

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<sup>14</sup> Maidul Islam, "Big national parties in West Bengal: An exceptional outcast?," in *Rise of Saffron Power: Reflections on Indian Politics*, ed. Mujibur Rehman (New York: Routledge, 2018), 288.

<sup>15</sup> Praful Bidwai, "Reading the Verdict," *Frontline*, 19 June 2009: 93.

omnipresence that led to omnipotence soon turned to such insensitive arrogance that the same absorbed citizenry entirely absolved itself of the party.

Since coming to power in 1977, the party has gone through ideological and structural evolution/devolution, but the mandate never seemed to hegemonise the party's progression. The 2006 assembly election results were especially crucial as they signified certain derivatives. Mr. Jyoti Basu's successor, Mr. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, had completed his tenure leading the left-front coalition government. After being on trial for his first term in office post-2001 assembly election, the absolute decimation of the opposition in the 2006 assembly election was a testament to his government's acceptance and unassailability. At this juncture, misconstruing this victory as unqualified, unchecked, and unconditional support and trying to bulldoze through to their vision of rapid industrialisation, steamrolling every objection or concern, snatched away the platform that supported and housed the sprawling organisational empire. The vacuum welcomed a new aspiration and conjured another structure that scavenged and took in the mechanical parts of the previous structure, avoiding the former's fatal flaws and growing stronger with each passing term.

***The Fatal Flaws of the Left Front:*** The communist party ruling in West Bengal since its inception had undergone significant changes, and what was left of the Left Front was the shell with the appearance of what it once stood for. Since coming to power, the composition of the party organisation at the heart of the Left Front government has been gradually changing. The upper and upper-middle class 'Bhadralok' took up the leadership role, staying close to the revolutionary ideology, aspiring to lead the subaltern and the downtrodden towards emancipation. Later, the party seemed to have been replaced with the aspirational middle class with middle-class priorities, in constant pursuit of maintaining political dominance, prioritising electoral victories, at the cost of a growing disconnect between the party and the marginalised sections of Bengali society, who were the bedrock of their initial support.

The Left Front's declining electoral success can be attributed to this shortsightedness and the state's evolving social, economic, and political landscape. The party faced the challenge of adapting to the changing realities of liberalising India while simultaneously adhering to its core communist ideology and maintaining support from its traditional base. In juggling the demands, the Left Front failed to effectively address the evolving socio-economic concerns and grievances of the people at the grassroots level from whom it essentially derived its hegemonic status.

Moreover, the party had been increasingly relying on the elaborate nexus of party activists that had grown into a full-fledged 'cadre raj' that worked to enforce and coerce the party's hegemony. This 'reign of terror' was pervasive and unavoidable. Over the years, the CPI(M) developed a machinery that became privy to the detailed information about each household in the villages, including the ideological inclination of their members. The cadre raj, its formidable party machinery, its operation, and its grip over every aspect of society can be paralleled with China's cultural revolution. This, along with an elaborately synchronised third tier of government, ensured a complete grip of the party so that nothing could happen without the party's approval. As a result, many of the party activists turned into extortionists. No redressal was available to the victims, presumably because of the complicity of the administration with the cadres, who mainly belonged to the leading partner of the Left Front, the CPI(M). The party's power increasingly relied on an elaborate nexus of party activists, creating a system of dominance known as 'cadre raj', characterised by coercion and enforcement. This pervasive 'reign of terror' left no room for escape. Over time, the CPI(M) established a system that meticulously gathered information about every household, including political leanings. This, combined with a parallel third tier of government, a politically synchronised local government, ensured complete party control over all aspects of life. As a

result, many party activists resorted to extortion, with victims finding no recourse due to the administration's complicity with the CPI(M) cadres.

This is when the controversy over land acquisition added fuel to the fire. Under their new supremo, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, the Left Front aggressively pursued their new vision, aligning with the neoliberal model of economic advancement. The West Bengal government, led by the Left Front, planned to build a chemical hub in Nandigram as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) with the help of Indonesia's Salim Group. However, this project required taking over 10,000 acres of land from local farmers, who strongly opposed the plan. The farmers, backed by Maoist groups, gathered under the Bhoomi Raksha Committee to resist the land acquisition. Tensions escalated when, on 14th March 2007, police entered the area while the governor was unavailable, leading to violent clashes between protesters and police. At least 14 villagers were killed, and 70 were injured in the conflict. Ms. Mamata Banerjee and her All-India Trinamool Congress party seized on the issue, using the *Ma Mati Manush* (Mother, Land, and People) slogan in their election campaigns. On the other hand, the front partners saw deep fissures being caused among themselves over the issue.<sup>16</sup>

Not being deterred by the backlash, the faction orchestrated a recapture of land within months of the recent clash, exhibiting unprecedented violence. Similar to the controversial land acquisition in Nandigram, the Left Front government's decision to acquire land for Tata's Nano car factory in Singur and the following coercive measures to take over the land caused massive violence and displacement, further alienating many of their rural supporters. The government's push for rapid industrialisation sparked criticism from other Left Front partners and allowed opposition parties to strengthen their anti-government campaigns.

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<sup>16</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Communism in India: Events, Processes and Ideologies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 100-102.



This quintessential Stalinist formula of oppressive governance created a golden opportunity for the opposition as the electorate repelled from the political identity that they were loyal to. The underdog to champion, the story of the real winner, was of Mamata Banerjee. The 25-day hunger strike was a game-changer for her. She gained massive national attention by championing the cause of farmers in Singur who were against handing over their land for a factory. She revived her political career in West Bengal. Her campaign re-established her reputation as a key anti-left political mobiliser and showcased her political maturity, portraying her as a seasoned politician. Unlike her previous movements, which were primarily anti-government or anti-CPI(M), this one focused on a pro-people issue, highlighting her ability to adapt and evolve as a leader.

***The Momentous Rise of Trinamool:*** The avalanche that completely engulfed the Left Front had humble beginnings under the opposition banner of the INC. Accompanying her father to Congress Party rallies as a little girl of a middle-class Brahmin family, Mamata Banerjee gained notoriety by blocking Indian politician and theorist Jay Prakash Narayan's car and then proceeding to dance on the car's bonnet. She rose in ranks within the Congress' local group, a student vigilante wing, the Chhatra Parishad, amidst the National Emergency and held the office of General Secretary of West Bengal Mahila Congress from 1976-1980.

In the 1984 general elections, she emerged as one of the youngest parliamentarians in Indian history, defeating established Communist leader Somnath Chatterjee to secure victory in the Jadavpur parliamentary constituency of West Bengal. Additionally, in 1984, she was appointed as the general secretary of the Indian Youth Congress. She was appointed the Union Minister of State for Human Resources Development, Youth Affairs and Sports, and Women and Child Development in the 1991 cabinet of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao. Her volatile temperament and theatrics made her an unconventional figure in politics. She had been adamantly anti-CPI(M) throughout her career, dating back to her time working during Sanjay

Gandhi and later under Rajiv Gandhi, which is why she split up with the Congress in the mid-1990s. In 1990, the fight against the CPM became personal after she was severely beaten by its cadre, resulting in a cracked skull that kept her in the hospital for three months. When police shot and killed 13 people during a demonstration she organised in front of the Writers' Building in 1993, she became even more enraged against the Left Front.

In 1996, embroiled in corruption problems, Congress began discussions with the CPM on a federal coalition of minor parties, which Congress would support outside to oust the BJP in the Bengal elections. Jyoti Basu was mentioned as a potential prime minister for the United Front government. Mamata resisted, strongly condemning short-sighted national coalitions that would essentially stifle the Congress's attempt to overthrow the CPM in West Bengal. Her critical disgust with Bengali Congress politicians who chose their national ambitions and allowed themselves to disregard the interests of the Trinamool or grassroots resulted in the final split.

In late 1997, Mamata launched the Trinamool Congress as her vehicle to lead a revolt of disgruntled Bengali Congress activists. She had already reached out to people outside Congress's usual base as early as the mid-1990s, premeditating and foreshadowing the future course. For the 1998 general election in Bengal, Mamata Banerjee and TMC entered into a compromising, seat-sharing alliance with the BJP that probably sponsored her seed money. To save face after this self-compromising and to keep some semblance of maintaining the champion of the underdog perception, she had to commit and profess that their party would never abide by communalism.

After the genesis of the party, In the fragile urban sector, the 1998 election proved to be a shot across the CP(M)'s bow, signalling a growing wave of pessimistic cynicism and anti-incumbent sentiment. In the industrial suburbs of Calcutta, there was a significant swing in favour of the TMC and BJP, even though the CPM's percentage of the state vote did not go

below 34%. In Dum Dum, where the Communists had only lost once since 1952, the party received some sour news: the BJP won the seat when the vote dropped by 10%. Mamata's national prominence began the next year when the TMC joined the National Democratic Alliance administration, which was led by the BJP.

When the TMC won 60 seats and 31% of the vote in the 2001 West Bengal state assembly election, the official Congress party was all but eliminated, dropping to 8%. With Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee as the new chief minister, the CPM won 143 seats and 37% of the vote. It appeared that the electoral structure built by Basu and Dasgupta was still standing. After Gujarat's anti-Muslim riots in 2002, Mamata's reputation suffered as a result of her collaboration with the BJP. When the TMC, now allied with Congress, saw its support drop to 27% while its seats were halved to 30 in the 2006 state elections. CPI(M) state office, Alimuddin Street's confidence in weathering any storm was further reinforced.

Pre-2009 general elections, the Left front seemed invincible. The combination of multiple factors that ensured the same, primarily the support of trained cadres and well-oiled, effective, and streamlined electoral machinery with an extensive reach to the most remote areas of West Bengal validated the hegemonic and dominant political position of the left front in the assembly election of 2006 by securing more than 50 percent of total votes and two-thirds of the state legislative assembly seats.<sup>17</sup> Later, when analysed, it was observed that what had led to such a landslide victory was the splitting of votes among the supporters of the anti-left position.<sup>18</sup> There was a dramatic shift on the political scene after the land grab fiasco orchestrated by the left front. With their new slogan, '*Ma, Mati, Manush*'—Mother, Land, Humanity—the TMC went on to win resounding victories in the May 2008 panchayat elections across the Singur and Nandigram districts. For the anticipated drawn-out political battle, a

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<sup>17</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, "Assembly Polls: 2006 Election: *Jatra* Style in West Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 10 (2006): 865.

<sup>18</sup> Yogendra Yadav, "How West Bengal Voted," *The Hindu*, 16 May 2006.

grand alliance was formed among the opposition parties, spearheaded by the Left Front arch nemesis TMC and strengthened by the seasoned INC, which was named the *Mahajot* alliance.

This alliance was a mutual effort on both parts, namely the INC and TMC. The Mahajot was clinched on the INC's part with the intervention of the Congress high command, stating that the alliance was the only hope to defeat their common *bête noire*. The TMC, the former ally of the BJP-led NDA, on its part accepted the alliance to protect and uphold its secular stance, which was imperative to secure the minority vote bank. TMC was also impressed by the excellent governance of the Congress-led UPA government during the great recession period prior to 2008. The supporters of TMC were also easily persuaded to back the alliance; essentially, TMC was an offshoot of the INC, once a single party with little to no ideological difference. The effort and produced lethal results proved fatal for the left front government because it succeeded in bringing together all the anti-left voices, translating them into votes for the 2009 general elections. The Mahajot triumphed by creating a unified platform for dissatisfied voters in West Bengal, which was clear from the significant voter engagement during the election. The election in West Bengal saw an exceptional voter turnout, nearing 85 percent. This level of participation was remarkable, with data indicating that in some regions, up to 90 percent of voters exercised their right to vote.

The general election of 2009 was followed by the Assembly polls of 2011, which proved to be another catastrophe for the CPI(M)-led left front. The Mahajot alliance won 227 seats out of the total 294 Assembly seats, while the left front only managed to scrape 62 seats in comparison. This was absolutely dismal if you compare it to the previous tally of 235 seats in the 2006 Assembly Elections. In the avalanche of losses of the 2011 election, not one of the CPI(M) partners was able to retain the seats of their 2006 assembly victory. The leading partner of the Left Front that celebrated the 2006 elections had a massive drop to 42 seats from its massive hold of 176 seats in 2006. An 11 % vote swing lost them two-thirds of the seats that

they had won in the 2006 assembly elections and rocketed Trinamool's 30 seats to 184. This debacle was followed by the disaster of the 2013 election for the local bodies.

The local body election is a case study in itself. The Left Front's strong rural base was a fortress that evolved due to the meaningful and arguably generous land reforms that radically altered the feudal economy. Reforms that were 'effectuated through the use of mobilized supporters more than the administrative machinery'<sup>19</sup> that gained the communist government a massive loyal base. The achievement was solidified through implementing panchayati governance, allowing local communities to engage in policy-making at the grassroots level while navigating the complexities and obstacles of bureaucratic systems. Consequently, the Left Front managed to extend its influence in rural areas without relying on the support of wealthy landowners. This "two interlinked patterns of political change: an organizational penetration by the 'center' into the 'periphery' and a simultaneous shift in the class basis of institutional power"<sup>20</sup> was instrumental in rendering 'the landless, socially and educationally backward sections constituting a strong base for the left.'<sup>21</sup> When the 73rd and 74th amendments mandated that every state government establish the third tier, West Bengal was already much ahead. The third tier was a genuine platform for participatory democracy. It not only gave legitimacy to the word but also helped raise political consciousness on a very personal level while creating an extremely close connection between the party and civil society.

However, this initiative was gradually not left pious, with rampant corruption seeping through and taking over. These local governing bodies were reduced to "institutions dominated by local CPI(M) and other Left Front party leaders and apparatchiks who diverted the

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<sup>19</sup> Arild Engelsen Ruud, "Embedded Bengal? The Case for Politics," *Forum for Development Studies* 2 (1999): 238.

<sup>20</sup> Atul Kohli, "From Elite Activism to Democratic Consolidation: The Rise of Reform Communism in West Bengal," in *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order*, Vol. 2, ed. M. S. A. Rao and Francine Frankel (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 380.

<sup>21</sup> Pranab Bardhan, Sandip Mitra, Dilip Mookherjee, and Abhirup Sarkar in "Local Democracy and Clientelism: Implications for Political Stability in West Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44, no. 9 (2009): 46–58.

government funds from investment in social welfare for the villagers to build party offices and their own houses.”<sup>22</sup> The ones breaking ranks were deprived of the benefits development schemes promised the rural population. Too many atrocities at the level caused the resultant distrust to massively dent this base support. The opposition recognised that power in Bengal wasn’t truly impenetrable and was always vulnerable until and unless the panchayat and municipality were taken over, as a careful study of Bengal politics will show that it is there “where the muscles of cadres are oiled and massaged.”<sup>23</sup> In the local elections, the communist party was outsmarted by the TMC at its own game. The 2013 local poll results indicate that the Trinamool candidates secured 5,098 unopposed seats in south Bengal alone, more than twice the Left Front’s uncontested victories (2,362) from the previous elections in 2008. At the district level, TMC won fifteen seats unopposed, nearly doubling the Left Front’s wins from 2008. However, the pattern was evident: rural voters rallied behind the Banerjee-led TMC to instigate a shift in the rural power dynamics. The results of the 2013 poll closely mirror those of 2003, with the roles of the players switched. In 2003, the CPI(M), the leading partner of the Front, was elected unopposed in a significant number of constituencies, leading the TMC to accuse the ruling state government of ‘large-scale rigging’ and ‘intimidating Trinamool supporters.’ By 2013, the nature of the allegations remained unchanged, but the roles of the complainants had flipped.

Thus, the poll reversal was dramatic but not entirely unanticipated. The cadre-Raj that the parliamentary left had established in a Stalinist manner began to show weaknesses during the 2009 Lok Sabha elections when the Left Front’s share fell from its tally of 35 seats out of 42 in 2004 to only 15 seats in 2009. It ultimately fell apart in the 2011 assembly elections, with *Mahajot* winning two-thirds of the seats. The TMC delivered a crushing blow, defeating the

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<sup>22</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, “West Bengal’s Next Quinquennium, and the Future of the Indian Left,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 23 (2011): 16.

<sup>23</sup> M. J. Akbar, “In Bengal, the British PM Will Get Bang for Investment Buck,” *Times of India* (New Delhi), 17 November 2013: 12

Front in the 2010 Kolkata municipal election, confirming the victory of the TMC-Congress alliance's principal ally. The Trinamool Congress defeated the Left Front, the previous ruling coalition, which only held thirty-nine seats in the Kolkata Corporation, to take ninety-three seats. In addition to the result of the Kolkata Corporation, the Trinamool Congress had won other West Bengal municipal elections. The results of the 2013 local elections further confirmed its decline. Paradoxically, a profoundly entrenched party that gradually extended its influence across different social classes in the state experienced such a dramatic loss of its support base. The TMC has developed its organisation by recruiting most of the former members from the constituent parties of the Left Front, which became evident in the 2013 panchayat elections where the CPI(M) and other Left Front partners faced a humiliating defeat.

***The Deterioration of Social Base:*** The biggest victory and the prize that keeps paying should be enlisted by the TMC as the shift in loyalties among the Bengali electorates. The TMC absorbed the disenchanted social groups at the most opportune turn of events. The omnipresence of the Left Front party and its grip was evident from the behemoth that the Left Front had become in those three decades. At the base of this was the concrete support system that was provided for by every social group, may that be the rural peasant, loyally indebted by the land reforms; the urban labour class, protected by the patronised trade unions; the religious minority, putting their confidence in the pro-Muslim or non-communal stance of the party; or, most recently, the urban aspirational middle class, seduced by the promise of rapid industrialisation. With the sense of unassailability that crept into the party, the arrogance assured them to push through, ignoring all voices towards a vision that was increasingly being seen as self-seeking.

***The Muslim Minority rhetoric:*** The communist Left had been serving as a protectorate of the religious minority under their secular stance and had been generously reciprocated through popular mandate and vote share. However, with time, the dire ground reality for the community

proved to be rather unpromising. The Sachar Committee report exposed that, despite the rhetoric of secularism during the Left Front regime, the state of Muslims in West Bengal was among the worst in the country. The Muslim minority in West Bengal, making up 27% of the population, faced significant challenges in receiving social and political support from the state. This was particularly evident during Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's tenure as chief minister. During his early years of tenure, in January-February 2002, he sparked controversy by calling for a campaign against madrassas, labelling them as 'dens of terrorism.' This move was perceived as a betrayal by the Muslim community, exacerbating their feelings of marginalisation and deprivation of state patronage. The episode became a negotiating hurdle between the sentiments of the Muslim minorities, the terrain of national security and the balancing act of the Left leadership that only exposed the contradictions of a secularist narrative within the Left.<sup>24</sup> It was rather cruel a coincidence that among the displaced, distressed, and afflicted, rendered so by the Singur and Nandigram incident, that was the last straw, the spark-off incident, the number of Muslims was significantly high. Adding to this, there were many petty misfortunes where the community felt directly targeted by both the government and its machinery.

***Assertion of Dalit Identity:*** West Bengal, possessing a Schedule Cast population that constitutes 23.51 per cent of its total demographic, holds the third position, following Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, in terms of the size of the Dalit or SC population according to the Census of India 2011. Despite the considerable representation of the SCs within the overall population, the expression of Dalit interests in the formal political landscape of West Bengal has emerged only recently. The recent emergence of caste within the political landscape of West Bengal, while not as pronounced as in other Indian states, deserves scholarly

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<sup>24</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 16-21.



consideration.<sup>25</sup> The unique cultural history of West Bengal provides a constrained environment for the expression of caste-related ambitions in formal political discourse. However, this research goes beyond such a caste-centric framework to understand politics in West Bengal. Instead, it is focused on the interplay of multiple anchors in understanding populism in the state where caste is only one of the actors in the logic of populist mobilisation and one among many sectors that the state has tried to accommodate caste in delivering the welfare schemes and policies targeted towards Dalits, Adivasis and backwards castes.

State administrations are obligated to follow the regulations established by the central authority concerning refugees and their citizenship status. In 2003, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, articulated that the state government reached a consensus with the central government to take measures against foreign nationals who had entered the country unlawfully.<sup>26</sup> The sentiments of discontent were shared among the Matuas and various marginalised groups within the Scheduled Castes who found themselves compelled to migrate to India without proper documentation as a result of economic instability. The All India Matua Mahasangha advocated for the repeal of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, which designated all refugees who arrived in India post-1971 as illegal. Bhattacharya's statement hurt the sentiments and citizenship aspirations of the Matuas, which may have resulted in their

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<sup>25</sup> Some of these writings can be consulted for details on the presence and absence of caste politics in West Bengal. Praskanva Sinharay, "A New Politics of Caste", *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 34 (2012): 26-27. Praskanva Sinharay, "West Bengal's Election Story: The Caste Question", *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 17 (2014): 10-12. Praskanva Sinharay, "To Be a Hindu Citizen: Politics of Dalit Migrants in Contemporary West Bengal", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 2 (2019): 359-374. Praskanva Sinharay, "Harichand-Guruchand Thakur: the emerging icons of Dalit politics in West Bengal", *Religion* 52, no. 4 (2022): 595-615. All the essays compiled in Uday Chandra, Geir Heierstad, and Kenneth Bo Nielsen, ed. *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal* (New York: Routledge, 2017). Ranabir Samaddar, "Whatever Has Happened to Caste in West Bengal?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 36 (2013): 77- 79. Ayan Guha, "Why Caste Politics Failed in West Bengal?" *Frontier* 49, no. 2 (2016): 1-2. Ayan Guha, "Caste and Politics in West Bengal: Traditional Limitations and Contemporary Developments," *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 9, no. 1 (2017): 27-36. Ayan Guha, "The caste question in West Bengal politics: continuing inconsequentiality or rising relevance?" *Contemporary South Asia* 29, no. 3 (2021): 376-400. Ayan Guha, *The Curious Trajectory of Caste in West Bengal Politics: Chronicling Continuity and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, "Bengali Left: From Pink to Saffron?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 9 (2003): 864.

distancing from the CPI(M) and the Left Front (LF). This shift enabled the opposition TMC, under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee, to garner support among this group.

**Lalgarh Movement:** Lalgarh, a village situated within the Binpur-I community development block, was included in the Paschim Medinipur district during the events of the 2008 Lalgarh movement. The initiative, which extended over nearly 10 blocks in the Paschim Medinipur district and the neighbouring areas of Bankura and Purulia in West Bengal, was predominantly spearheaded by tribal groups in Lalgarh. The protest movement attracted increased scrutiny following a landmine explosion aimed at the convoy of West Bengal Chief Minister Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and then-union Steel and Mines Minister Mr Ram Vilas Paswan, who were en route from the inauguration of the Jindal Steel Works Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Salboni, located in the Paschim Medinipur district.<sup>27</sup> The initiative posed a risk of separating the villagers from their essential land and forest resources, which are crucial for their sustenance.

It has been reported that there is a tendency among law enforcement to target and detain tribal groups following incidents of Maoist violence in the region. The focus this time was on the chief minister, prompting the police forces to escalate their actions significantly, leading to the indiscriminate harassment and arrest of the adivasis from nearly 35 villages in the vicinity of Lalgarh. They showed no consideration for the teenagers and women either. One individual from the Adivasi community tragically lost her eyesight, while another endured several fractures due to a severe kick to her chest. There had been claims suggesting that the police did not show leniency even towards a pregnant woman. The level of police brutality reached a point that exceeded the Adivasis' capacity for tolerance. The police force's brutality sparked the Lalgarh movement.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After: Understanding the Dynamics of Poriborton in West Bengal*, 173.

<sup>28</sup> Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After: Understanding the Dynamics of Poriborton in West Bengal*, 174.

Consequently, some of the smaller Adivasi organisations, including Junit Gaonta and Kudmi Chatra Sangram Committee, which were actively engaged in the movement, convened on 14 November to establish the *Pulishi Santrash Birodhi Janaganer Committee* (People's Committee Against Police Atrocities [PCAPA]) to steer the movement forward. PCAPA expressed a strong demand for the prohibition of police camps in educational institutions, local government offices, or healthcare facilities. All the then present camps on such grounds would have to be removed. Subsequently, additional demands were presented, with the foremost being the safeguarding of the adivasis' longstanding rights to water, forest, and land within their territory. They expressed their dissent against the capitalist model of development, characterised by industrialisation, which led to the dispossession, displacement, and marginalisation of the Adivasis. Rather, they proposed a thesis focused on a development strategy aimed at benefiting the underprivileged, as evidenced by the establishment of educational institutions, healthcare facilities, access to clean drinking water, and similar initiatives.<sup>29</sup>

The TMC, under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee, had consistently aligned itself with the protesters, echoing the sentiments seen in previous movements in Singur, Nandigram, Cooch Behar, and Darjeeling while endeavouring to rally their support for the party. While campaigning for the Lok Sabha Election of 2009, Mamata Banerjee shared the stage with Chhatradhar Mahato, the then convenor of the PCAPA, and conveyed her clear support for his cause.<sup>30</sup> She expressed her opposition to the 2009 deployment of joint forces to address the Maoist presence in the Junglemahals.<sup>31</sup> During a rally in the *Junglemahals* in August 2010, she called for the withdrawal of the joint forces.<sup>32</sup> Alongside Singur and Nandigram, the Adivasi

<sup>29</sup> Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After: Understanding the Dynamics of Poriborton in West Bengal*, 175.

<sup>30</sup> Suhrid Sankar Chattopadhyay, "Mamata vs Maoists," *Frontline*, November 04, 2011, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/other/article30177420.ece>.

<sup>31</sup> Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After: Understanding the Dynamics of Poriborton in West Bengal*, 182.

<sup>32</sup> Chattopadhyay, "Mamata vs Maoists."

movement in Lalgarh provided a more tangible embodiment of her appeal for change in the current oppressive Left Front regime.

It was notably evident that the CPI(M) struggled to identify the intricate connections between subjugations of culture and economic degradation, as illustrated by the movements. The failure to recognise the underlying significance of the movements led to their perception as mere issues of law and order. As a result, rather than engaging in a constructive dialogue to address the people's desire for self-governance through autonomy, there was an inclination to stifle the movements through coercive measures. The CPI(M) approach had proven ineffective, as it had not only failed to diminish the overall magnitude of the movements but also contributed to their growth and proliferation. The agitations in Kamtapur, Gorkhaland, and Lalgarh during the initial decade of this century demonstrated this clearly. The CPI(M) faced significant consequences due to its misinterpretation of the movements and the ensuing hubris. Mamata Banerjee, having candidly expressed her support for the objectives of these grassroots movements, eventually ascended to state power in 2011.<sup>33</sup>

The marginalisation during the communist era extended to all vulnerable groups, be they the Dalits, the Adivasis, or women. With time the party in power proved to have fatally failed in uplifting the downtrodden, and their cause was picked ceremoniously by the then-opposition, the TMC, creating the most loyal support that was instrumental in the power shift assembly election of the year 2011. The Trinamool Congress enjoyed widespread support across these vulnerable sections of the population, as per the National Election Study of Lokniti's post-poll survey data. Notably, 42% of women voters backed the party despite its perceived weakness on women's security issues. In contrast, the Left's vote share significantly declined among marginalised groups, including Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims. These

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<sup>33</sup> Chatterjee and Basu, *Left Front and After: Understanding the Dynamics of Poriborton in West Bengal*, 184.

communities, along with the poor, overwhelmingly supported the Trinamool Congress. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's aggressive campaign against Narendra Modi also drew Muslim voters to the Trinamool Congress in South Bengal. Mamata Banerjee's bold counter to Narendra Modi in her election speeches was a key factor in the Trinamool Congress's success among minority communities, according to political commentators. This shift in support is part of a larger trend where the poor and weaker sections, including Muslims, were losing confidence in the Left. Instead, they could be perceived to be increasingly backing the Trinamool Congress, as seen also in the following 2016 Assembly election. According to the CSDS post-poll survey data, the party's support among the poor grew from 21% in 2006 to 52% in 2016. Similarly, its support among Muslims increased from 22% in 2006 to 51% in 2016. In contrast, the Left and Congress alliance secured 38% of the Muslim vote, while the BJP garnered only 6% in the 2016 Assembly election.<sup>34</sup>

The various welfare schemes that the Trinamool-led government had implemented, including Khadyasathi, Sabooj Sathi, Kanyashree, and Yubashree, which have received enormous popular support. These schemes have been particularly beneficial in rural Bengal, where an impending agrarian crisis and farmer indebtedness have been major concerns. In doing so, the Trinamool has successfully cultivated support from significant segments of the non-corporate business sector and informal labour groups.<sup>35</sup>

The Trinamool's success can also be attributed to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's popularity among significant sections of the electorate. Additionally, the party saw a significant increase in support from women voters, with 48% of women voters backing the Trinamool in the 2016 Assembly election. This growing support from women voters has been a crucial factor in the party's consolidation of power.

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<sup>34</sup> Islam, "Big national parties in West Bengal An exceptional outcast?," 287.

<sup>35</sup> Islam, "Big national parties in West Bengal An exceptional outcast?," 287-288.

The 2006 elections and their results had also established the hegemony of the left front in urban areas. The remarkable poll outcome was attributed to the decision of the left government for rapid industrialisation through neoliberal economic policies. But post the extreme and unfortunate Singur and Nandigram fiascos, the educated segments of society seemed shaken by the party's authoritarian behaviour and the government's inability to curb these power-hungry tendencies. It led to spontaneous protests in the city, drawing prominent writers, educators, and artists. The controversy over land acquisition served as a unifying force for the varied aspirations from extreme backgrounds of all those opposed to the Left Front, galvanising disparate groups and handing the opposition a critical rallying cry. After a successful completion of the first tenure and being re-elected, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) post-poll survey revealed that the voters believed in the Trinamool-led government outperforming the Left Front in three key areas: road conditions, electricity supply, and access to drinking water.<sup>36</sup> Despite some voters perceiving and alleging that the Trinamool-led government was relatively corrupt, many still supported the party due to its development initiatives that for the urban population were the primary ask. It was ultimately the disenchantment of the social base that alienated the people from the communist party first, and soon it was the party that was alienated with the upsurge of a viable alternative in the form of TMC.

Trinamool has successfully gained the support of sizable segments of the state's former Left Front voters and prospective Left supporters for three primary reasons. First, the Trinamool has been more Bengal-centric than the Left, mainly because it is a regional actor. On the other hand, the Left was required to balance its other powerful strongholds in Kerala and Tripura while weighing its many political possibilities and important choices along the politico-tactical line. Second, the Trinamool party organisation's subaltern image has been

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<sup>36</sup> Islam, "Big national parties in West Bengal An exceptional outcast?," 288.

more visible compared to the Left. The leadership of the Left was educated and from the middle class. On the other hand, the prominence of many Trinamool officials, including some in the upper echelons of the party hierarchy, has been crucial in galvanising the impoverished. Lastly, unlike the Left, which still has some influence over organised sector workers through trade unions, it has controlled the large swaths of the unorganised sector, which is the purview of ‘political society’. The BJP aims to seize the open opposition space as the Trinamool becomes more consolidated and the Left and Congress become less potent.<sup>37</sup>

The Trinamool Congress’s (TMC) successful ascent to power in West Bengal, hailing from the grassroots, as its name proudly owns up, exemplifies a novice aspiration’s committed dedication, perseverance, and resilience. Under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee, the TMC effectively challenged the long-standing dominance of the behemoth Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), breaking their 34-year rule in the state. This victory was particularly impressive, considering the CPI(M)’s historical stronghold. Today, rendering all the naysayers speechless, the TMC has demonstrated its ability to maintain its hold on power, actively implementing various policies and initiatives that have significantly reshaped the state’s development trajectory, transforming its landscape.

### **Centre-Left Populism in West Bengal: the emergence of ‘the people’**

The study attempts to elucidate the rise of centre-left populism in the political landscape of West Bengal through a discursive methodological lens. The Essex School of Discourse Analysis method guides this methodological framework. Laclau and Mouffe’s work forms the foundation of this theoretical tradition. This study also employs computer-assisted lexicometric analysis through NVivo data analysis software, conducting a frequency analysis to determine the words that are most frequently used in the 2011–2021 Trinamool Congress

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<sup>37</sup> Islam, “Big national parties in West Bengal An exceptional outcast?,” 288-289.

West Assembly Elections Manifesto, aiming to elucidate the populist tendency within those texts and their discourses.

The dichotomous discourse and practices of the Trinamool Congress before assuming power in West Bengal are defined by ‘centre-left populism’. In the name of the people, these discourses and practices articulated diverse underprivileged groups, prioritising their democratic struggles for distributive justice, social justice and equality. The Trinamool Congress populist discourse will be analysed through four parameters. This yardstick is derived from the works of De Cleen and Stavrakakis.<sup>38</sup> The initial concept is the ‘Nodal point of the chain of equivalence and claim to represent’. Secondly, the ‘subject position offered’ is examined; thirdly, the ‘external factors constitutive to the creation of a chain of equivalence/identity’ are considered; and fourthly, the ‘orientation of the relationship between the nodal point and the constitutive outside(s)’ is analysed. Furthermore, examining the affective and symbolic dimensions of this discursive practice is essential. I shall also explore how this discourse shapes the elite and people. Finally, this chapter examines whether the Left’s polarised, populist discourse threatened democracy or served as a corrective measure.

The Trinamool Congress united the oppressed, deprived, and marginalised people from various sections of society against the Left Front regime, which was perceived as undemocratic and stunting. The Trinamool Congress, by consolidating the various unfulfilled democratic demands of these marginalised groups, constructed a popular subject, namely the ‘*Manush*’ (people). They constructed a popular subject for restoring democracy in the state against the cadre raj and partisan mentality of the CPI(M) party, advocating for the people’s democratic rights, including the right to land and livelihood. Their discourse categorised the social and

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<sup>38</sup> Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis, “Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism,” *Javnost – The Public* 24, no. 4 (2017): 12.



political landscape into two segments using a vertical spatial metaphor. It established two opposing frontiers: the people as an underprivileged, powerless mass and the establishment as a few but powerful groups of illegitimate elites. They employed an open-ended chain of equivalence to define and categorise the people based on their socio-economic, socio-political, hierarchy, and power status. They used a vertical axis to place the establishment/elite and the people/underprivileged as an up/down spatial metaphor. The elite represents an upward group, while the underprivileged represent a downward group. This discourse gives the citizens a subjective position as members of 'the people.' It articulated the underprivileged as part of these people. This discourse gave a new identity to the diverse multitudes of that period as a collective subject, or 'us'. It pitted those collective subjects against the common adversary, the 'them', which was the Left Front regime in this case. Constructing an establishment or elite as a common adversary played the role of a constitutive outsider in forming this chain of equivalence. In this discourse, the relationship between the nodal point and the constituent outside was vertical.

We may note that the concept of '*Manush*' (people), which the TMC had constructed before coming to power, did not refer to specific groups or identities. Instead, the idea of people was open and inclusive. In their populist discourse, the word 'people' served as an empty signifier. Empty signifier means signifier without signified, which represents the collective subject. A theoretical analysis of the 2011 elections in Bengal suggests that the popularisation of the slogan '*Paribartan* (change the Left Front regime)' succeeded in building a popular subject. The TMC discursively constructed a category of people that encompassed various underprivileged groups, all of whom were dissatisfied and resentful towards the Left Front regime. In other words, the people for whom the TMC advocated were not pre-given. The TMC united various disaffected groups against the power bloc to build a popular subject. The TMC constructed the people as an open-ended signifier without any specific meaning or criteria. The

TMC articulated the voices of the marginalised, oppressed, underprivileged, and exploited—whose democratic demands were not met by the power bloc. The TMC represented the interests of those facing economic and social challenges at that time. They assimilated various groups in an open-ended chain of equivalence that included small and marginal farmers (whose land eviction process began during the Left Front era), tribal communities, Scheduled Castes, Muslim communities, urban poor, unorganised sector workers, and rural and urban middle- and lower-class people and others. Such a diverse agglomeration was outraged against the Left Front's partisan mentality and cadre Raj and a significant number among the groups mentioned above expressed dissatisfaction with the Left Front's rule through the 2009 Lok Sabha elections.

The TMC was able to unite all these groups against the then-ruling power bloc in the fight to change the regime in the state, secure democratic rights for the citizens, and eliminate the oppressive regime. In other words, the TMC emerged as a voice for all marginalised, disenfranchised, and disaffected groups in West Bengal. Not only did the TMC construct the people, but they also discursively constructed the establishments or elite. The populist discourse of the TMC revealed a clear presence of the 'autonomy of struggles' articulated by Laclau and Mouffe, seamlessly integrated into the TMC's hegemonic political project. The central point for the diverse collective of the TMC was their shared opposition to a common political adversary: the Left Front regime and CPI(M) rule in West Bengal.

A large section of protesters formed a popular support base for the Trinamool Congress (TMC), which articulated the interests of the unorganised sector and farmers unwilling to give up their land for industrial projects. The TMC opposed the expansion of foreign capital and arbitrary acquisition of land and, in turn, consolidated its populist base with anti-establishment and pro-people rhetoric, with the slogan of *Paribartan* serving as an empty signifier. Popular slogans like *Paribartan* as an empty signifier represented the structured totality of the chain of

equivalence against the Left Front regime and were central to the rise of the TMC in 2011. According to Chakrabarty, Miss Banerjee, “Seeking to establish *Ganatantra* (democracy) to get rid of *Dalatantra* (party rule), the winning coalition appealed to voters for *paribartan* (change) as against *pratyabartan* (return to power) of the Left Front. The other slogan of the AITMC—*badal chhai badla noi* (we want change and not revenge)—seemed to have swayed the voters in favour of the non-left coalition.” The various downtrodden and oft-ignored sections of the population, like the Adivasis (Schedule Tribe), Muslims as a backward community, Dalits (Schedule Caste), and the poor, were successfully mobilised by the TMC against the antagonistic frontier of the Left Front regime. Mouffe states, “We can speak of a populist moment when, under the pressure of political or socioeconomic transformations, the dominant hegemony is being destabilised by the multiplication of unsatisfied demands.”<sup>39</sup> In West Bengal, if the restoration of democracy served as an empty signifier in 1977, it would be replaced by a leader-centric mass mobilisation under the banner of *Paribartan* in 2011.

Mamata Banerjee emerged as the emblem of opposition to the Left Front, particularly the CPI(M), symbolising change and embodying a renewed sense of hope. Chakrabarty opined that, “Banerjee became a symbol of protest against injustice and misgovernance across the state.”<sup>40</sup> Various groups that were agitating at the Left Front at the time felt solidarity with Mamata Banerjee, as she was recognised as a voice of opposition and the face of change. In this context, the party leader’s name, Mamata Banerjee, served as an empty signifier that unified the various groups in a chain of equivalence against the Left Front regime.

According to Venizelos, the political identities referred to as ‘the people’ are shaped through affective processes, where the act of ‘naming’ transcends the mere rhetoric and takes

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<sup>39</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018), 11.

<sup>40</sup> Chakrabarty, *Communism in India: Events, Processes and Ideologies*, 98.

on a performative role.<sup>41</sup> The TMC sparked a flurry of emotions when creating popular subjects, namely the people. They effectively rallied those who felt overlooked, underprivileged, sidelined, and inadequately represented in the then-political landscape. This discourse challenged the establishment and galvanised emotions of ‘injustice,’ ‘frustration,’ ‘indignation,’ and ‘anger,’ transforming these ‘generic’ sentiments into focused discontent aimed at ‘the political elite’ of that time. The unadorned lifestyle of the TMC supremo, Miss Mamata Banerjee, significantly resonated with the people. Subaltern People believed that the TMC supremo was an integral part of their community. Empowering her genuinely entails enhancing their agency. Significant segments of the subaltern population were also attracted to her girl’s next-door image, her dress, a white sari with a blue border, and slippers, which served as symbols of a lower-class lifestyle. In this way, the TMC supremo, Miss Banerjee, was able to keep a large section of the marginalised attached to her and act as an embodiment of the people whom she was representing. According to Chakrabarty, “What contributed to her rise was also her image as a ‘girl-next-door’ that immediately gained her attention as a pro-people leader. To take on this image, she dressed in a crumpled sari, wore cheap flip-flops, and lived in a humble house in a crowded middle-class locality.”<sup>42</sup>

Miss Banerjee’s call to restore democracy and change the oppressive Left Front regime was a nodal point in 2011. This facilitated the unification of diverse disgruntled factions against the then-Left Front regime, all in the name of changing the regime. All those seeking regime change for various reasons and opposing the establishment unite under the TMC’s call, ultimately leading to the ousting of the power bloc. A significant moment of dislocation between the Left Front and the people occurred as a result of the expropriation of land from small farmers for the benefit of private capitalists. This was coupled with state-sanctioned

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<sup>41</sup> Giorgos Venizelos, *Populism in Power: Discourse and Performativity in SYRIZA and Donald Trump* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 199.

<sup>42</sup> Chakrabarty, *Communism in India: Events, Processes and Ideologies*, 98.

violence to uphold the decision and ‘maintain law and order’ in Nandigram and Lalgarh, as well as the intimidation by CPI(M) party cadres in the middle of the 2000s. All of these factors contributed to the suppression of the democratic demands of the underprivileged people. The loss of hegemony forced the power bloc to rely on the state machinery to retain their rule. This left the people wholly alienated from bloc the once revered power and created a rift in society—the people versus the establishment/power bloc. At this moment, the TMC brought together various groups and united the people against the power bloc.

In the following segment, word frequency analysis is undertaken to identify the most prioritised issues in the Trinamool Congress election manifesto from 2011 to 2021.

### Twenty most frequent words in the TMC’s 2011 Assembly Elections Manifesto

**Table: 1A- Most Frequently Used Words**

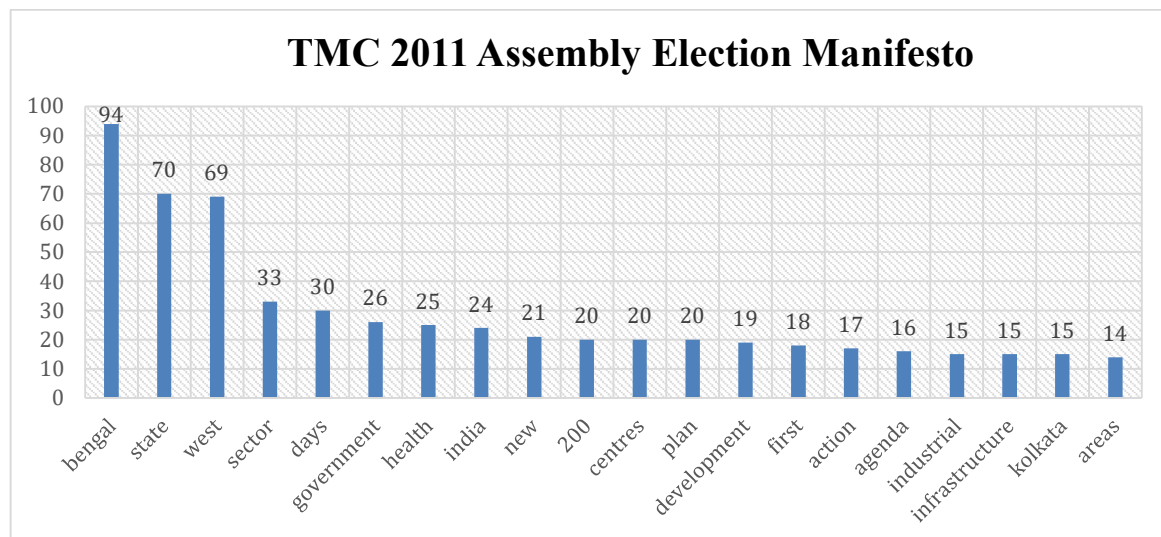


Table: 1B- Percentage of Most Frequently Used Words

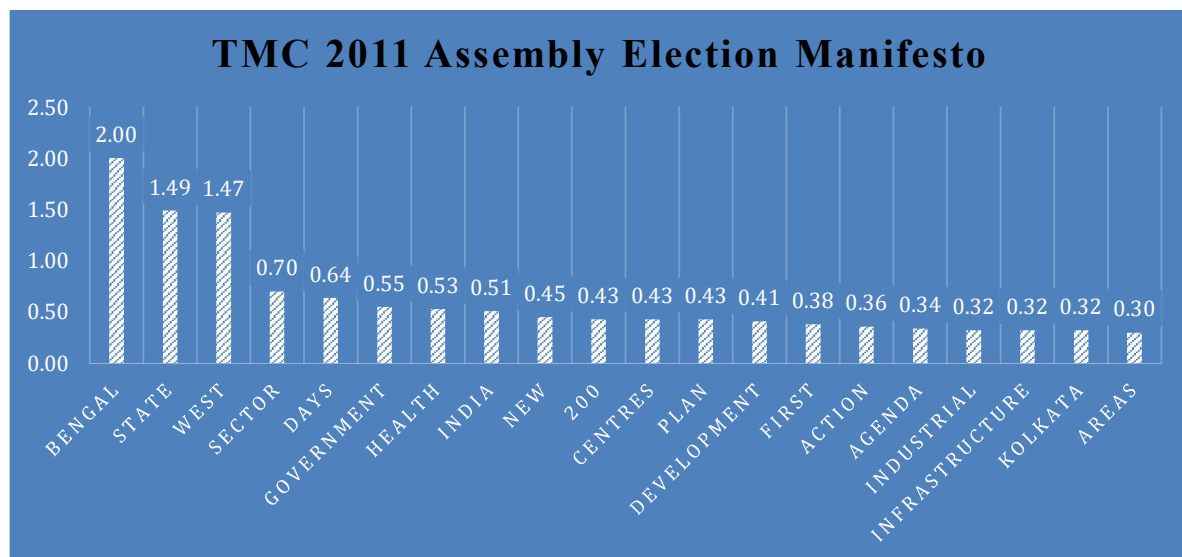
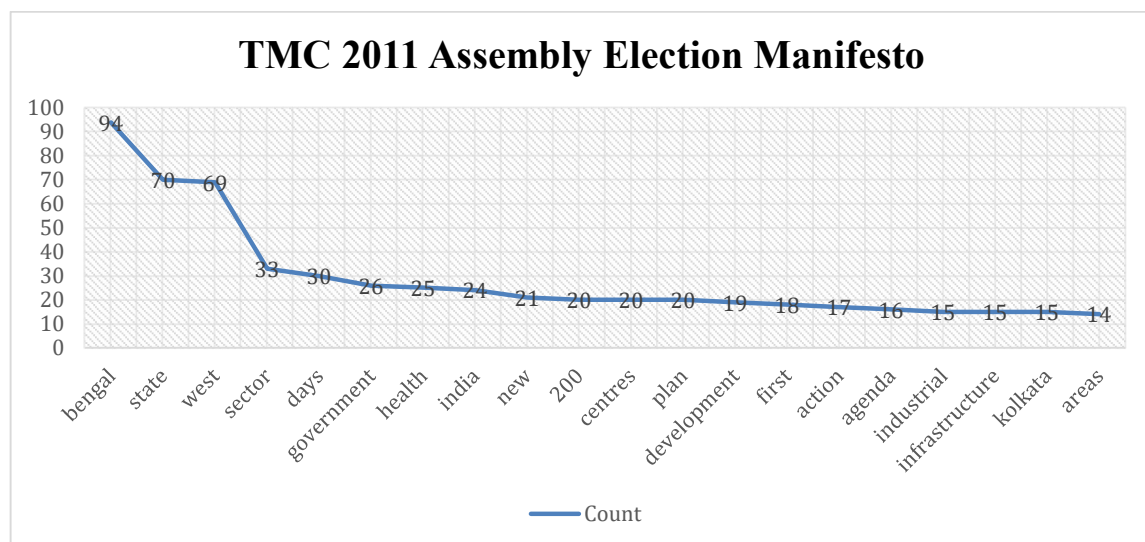


Table: 1C- Bar Chart of Most Frequently Used Words



### The twenty most frequent words in the TMC's 2016 Assembly Election Manifesto

Table: 2A- Most Frequently Used Words

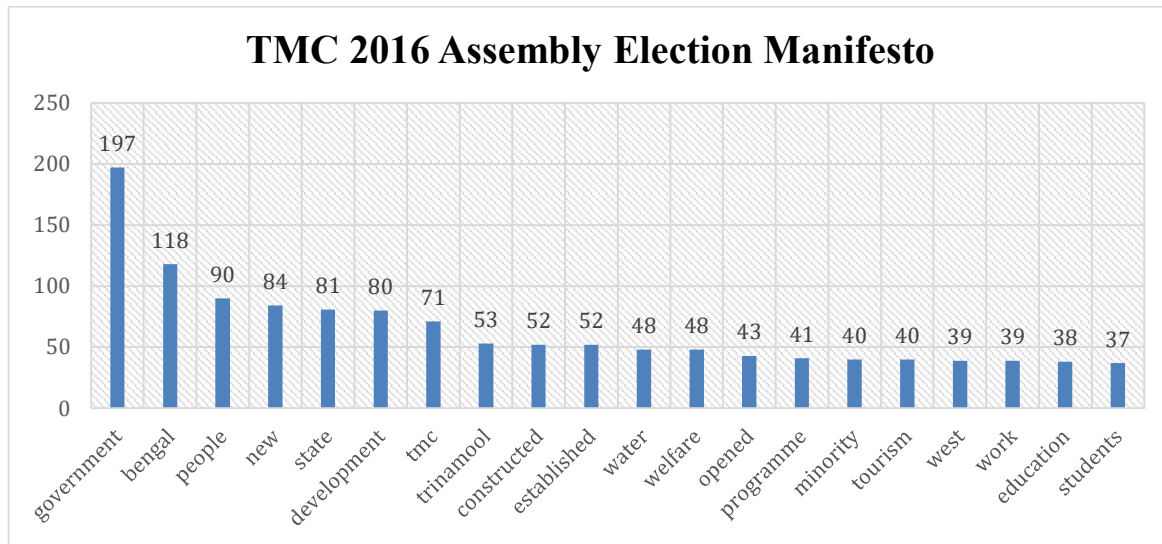
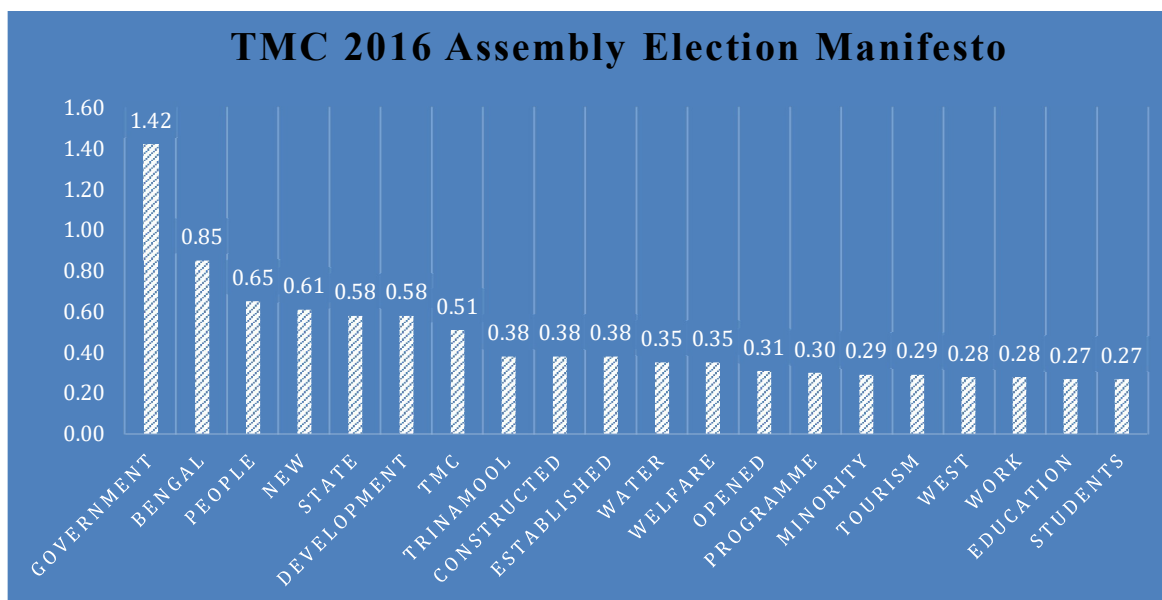
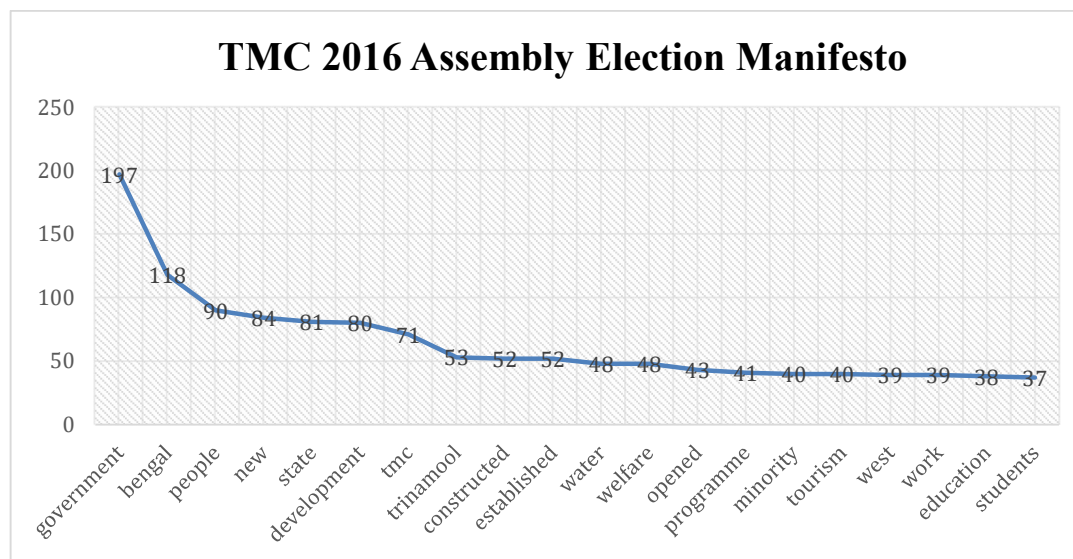
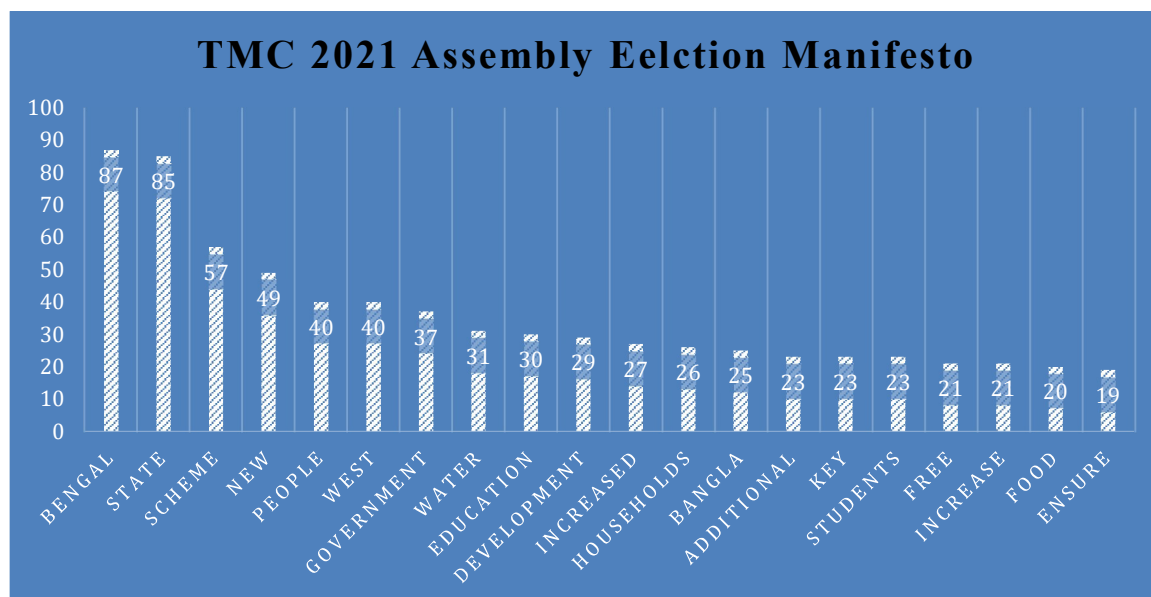
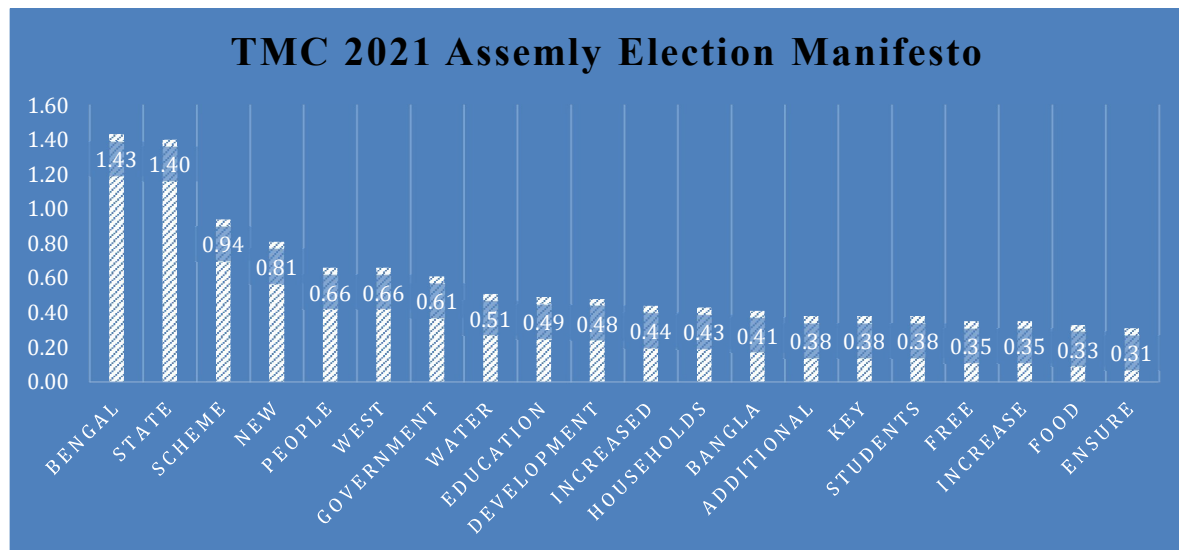
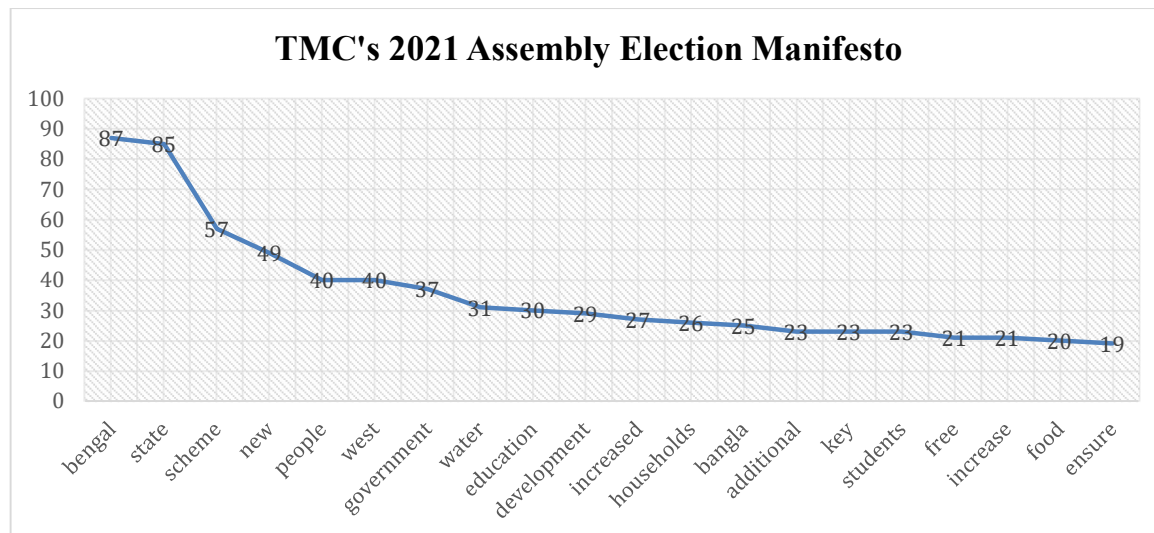


Table: 2B- Percentage of Most Frequently Used Words



**Table: 2C- Bar Chart of Most Frequently Used Words****The twenty most frequent words in the TMC's 2021 Assembly Election Manifesto****Table: 3A- Most Frequently Used Words**



**Table: 3B- Percentage of Most Frequently Used Words****Table: 3C- Bar Chart of Most Frequently Used Words**

Closely examining the manifestos of the Trinamool Congress from 2011 to 2021 for each assembly election, one will notice that terms such as development, plan, vision, action, agenda, infrastructure, welfare, and schemes frequently appear. These words come first in the list of most-used words in the Manifesto of TMC from 2011 to 2021. This shows that the Trinamool Congress has given much importance to institutionalisation, giving special importance to the development of the state and its people through the use of governance and

state power. Their self-portrayal and commitment are extremely action-orientated, as easily revealed by their manifesto, making evident the greater importance they place on governance and government performance. The most frequent words in the three manifestos are government, state, Bengal, and people. That is to say, they aim to improve the socio-economic status of West Bengal and its people by utilising state power and implementing various government initiatives, as their manifesto clearly articulates. They have given special emphasis to improving various areas, like education, health, infrastructure, industry, drinking water, food, etc, with the manifestos clearly expressing their emphasis on these matters. Additionally, their manifestos address the diverse demands of various groups, including minority students. Essentially, they identify the households, the true unit of the grassroots, as the unit that would decide this government's vision, direction and undertakings, staying true to the basic definition and understanding of populism. By undertaking various popular schemes, plans, and projects, TMC has retained the support of a large section of the public, essentially their vote bank. All these governmental initiatives express their accountability towards the underprivileged. And as long as any government remains accountable to the underprivileged, they are likely to stay in power.

## **Chapter Four: Ascendancy of Trinamool Congress Institutionalism**

### **Consolidation of Trinamool Congress Centre-Left Populism**

The manifestos of the Trinamool Congress from 2011 to 2021 highlight themes like development, planning, vision, action, agenda, infrastructure, welfare, and programmes. Their manifestos mostly use these terms, indicating a pronounced focus on institutionalisation and advancing the state and its populace through governance and state power. Their action-oriented dedication underscores their heightened focus on governance and government efficacy. We see in their manifesto the promise of overall development for underprivileged people through various schemes, plans, and projects that use state power. We will examine how well they have implemented their pledged objectives, goals, and promises since taking power.

The Trinamool Congress took control of the state in 2011 and has used its state power and different mechanisms of governance to support the underprivileged. In this chapter, we want to explain what steps the Trinamool Congress has taken until 2021 to enhance its capacity and promote the development of West Bengal and its citizens. Although the title of the present thesis suggests that the scope of the time frame is till 2016, I want to clarify that an examination of the Trinamool government's policies and welfare programmes from 2016 to 2021 is necessary to understand the nature of centre-left populist consolidation in favour of a certain kind of state populism propagated by Trinamool. In this chapter, I will examine what changes have occurred in government spending after the Left Front's demise as a principal opposition force after the 2016 assembly elections, how much has changed, and in what direction.

I will examine the schemes and projects the Trinamool Congress has implemented since assuming power. Additionally, we will endeavour to determine the extent of the advancements achieved in various sectors, including agriculture, health, education, and others, over the past

ten years. I have primarily used the government data available, although several critics of the government have questioned such data on counts of data fudging, misleading data and false data. The point is not to test the actuality of data, which is beyond the scope of this research. The issue at stake is how a comparable picture is depicted in the state's populist propaganda in depicting how the state has progressed from the time of the Left Front. The idea of state populist propaganda is to create a social imagination with a semblance of producing social myths and then propagating through the powerful channels of government advertisements and mediated advertisements. Therefore, in the following pages, I demonstrate several such populist schemes, welfarist programmes, and a comparative picture presented by the Trinamool-led state government by comparing the situation with the Left Front era.

**Sabuj Shree** scheme, initiated by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, commenced on 27th May 2016. Under this programme, each newborn baby in West Bengal is given a sapling for their family members to plant and grow on their land. This not only gives the family a sense of parenthood as well as ownership of the plant along with their newborn child but also helps them financially when the plant grows old and its fruits may be sold in the market. It further promotes the state's green cover and aids West Bengal's environmental efforts. Sabuj Shree is a collaborative effort of the Department of Forest, Panchayat & Rural Development and Health & Family Welfare. The scheme helps give the child a sense of friendship with its birth tree and increases environmental consciousness, while growing the tree also helps increase the green cover in West Bengal.

**Kanyashree Prakalpa** was launched on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2013 under the Department of Women Development and Social Welfare, Government of West Bengal. It is a conditional cash transfer programme by the Government of West Bengal to improve the well-being of the girl child, especially from disadvantaged families. It promotes Education by encouraging girls to stay in school and complete secondary or higher secondary education. The parents are encouraged to

continue with the education of their girl child as an annual scholarship of Rs.1000 is provided up to class XII, and a one-time grant of Rs.25,000 is also given if the unmarried girl child enters college, thus promoting higher education of girls. The scheme further discourages marriage before the legal age of 18. On a larger scale, it supports Empowerment by increasing the girls' self-esteem and social power while encouraging enrolment in higher education. It may be noted that Kanyashree Prakalpa won the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Prize in 2016, which highlights its impact at the local level and recognition at a global scale. The scheme also won the Manthan Award for Digital Inclusion for Development (South Asia and Asia Pacific) in 2014 under category E-Women and Empowerment, National E-governance Award 2014– 2015 from the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances, GoI, Skoch Winner Award and Order of Merit 2015 for Smart Governance, CSI-Nihilent Award for e-governance, 2014-15, United Nations WSIS Prize 2016 Champion in e-Government Category and 1<sup>st</sup> Prize in United Nations Public Service Award in 2017.

**Kishori Shakti Yojana (KSY)** has been implemented in districts where the Sabla scheme is not in operation. It provides vocational training to adolescent girls from these districts. Under the Yojana, Nutrition and Health awareness training camps were conducted to educate young girls on nutrition.

**Swami Vivekananda Swanirbhar Karmasangsthan Prakalpa (SVSKP)** is another such programme to facilitate self-employment generation in urban and rural areas by promoting micro-scale units of production, manufacturing, trade, service or any other sector. This not only promotes employment and small businesses but also addresses the question of self-reliance and independence for the youth. Youngsters with family incomes below Rs.15,000 are assisted in starting individual enterprises and can apply for loans of up to Rs. 10 lakhs. As per government reports till 2018, more than 2 lakh 31 thousand cases have been sanctioned, and nearly Rs. 1,450 crores have been released as subsidy under this scheme. Similar to this, **The West**

**Bengal Swanirbhar Sahayak Prakalpa (WBSSP)** scheme was also launched to facilitate an Interest Subsidy scheme for the benefit of Self-Help Groups at very nominal interest rates to promote the self-sufficiency and employability of persons associated with SHGs. This is amplified with the establishment of **Karma tirthas**, where a unified platform is provided for the marketing of SHG products to be sold in the national and global markets, which also benefit from SVSKP and WBSSP schemes. This provides a further boost to the growth and productivity of SHGs.

**Sabuj Sathi** programme was announced by the Finance Minister of West Bengal during the 2015-16 budget and launched in September 2015. Under this scheme, all learners of classes 9th to 11th are to be given new bicycles sponsored by the state government. This initiative was taken in order to reduce the number of school dropouts and enable the students to commute easily. This promotes higher retention rates for school students, especially for the marginalised sections and those who live in peripheral regions. The Sabuj Sathi Scheme's implementation cost is borne by the departments of Backward Classes Welfare for SC & OBC students, Tribal Development for ST students, School Education for General category students & Minority Affairs & Madrasah Education for Minority category students. According to official data, more than 1.24 crore students across the state have benefitted under the scheme. One of the primary reasons for the dropout of children was the distance and problems in commuting to government schools; this scheme addresses that concern in an eco-friendly manner while promoting easy and safer commutes for the students. The scheme won 3 awards – 'The National Award for e-governance', the Award of Excellence from the Computer Society of India and the Skoch Order of Merit Award during 2017-18.

**Shiksha Shree** was launched in 2014 to provide annual scholarships to SC and ST school students from classes V to VIII. Shiksha Shree for SC day-scholars of Class V-VIII has evolved by merging the previously existing schemes of Book Grant and Maintenance Grant. It is

available to the students of West Bengal reading in class V-VIII in any government-aided, government-recognised school in West Bengal. Similarly, the Shiksha Shree for ST day scholars of classes V to VIII was created by merging the previously existing schemes of Book Grants, Maintenance Grants and Other Compulsory Charges. The scheme's objective is to provide financial assistance of Rs.800 per annum to the SC and ST students by improving their participation in pre-matric stages and minimising the incidence of drop-out, especially for students from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. It also promotes a sense of financial security amongst the parents of the families and incentivises them to keep sending their children to school.

## Amount of Scholarships to Students (in ₹)



Data & Figure Source: Director of Information, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, *Chronicles of Bengal's Progress* (Kolkata: Saraswati Press Limited, 2018).



## Number of Scholarships to Students



Data & Figure Source: Director of Information, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, *Chronicles of Bengal's Progress* (Kolkata: Saraswati Press Limited, 2018).

**Yuvashree** (earlier named 'Yuva Utsaha Prakalpa') was launched by the Labour Department, Govt. of West Bengal, and was effective from 1st October 2013. The programme offers employment assistance to the state's youth and financially incentivises them to upgrade their skills for employability. Through the online application portal of the state's employment bank, eligible applicants receive monthly financial assistance of Rs. 1500 from the State Government. However, to continue receiving the grant, the applicants must submit a utilisation certificate every six months to show how they have used the money to develop themselves and enhance their employability. This improves the youth's accountability and controls the misuse or wastage of government finances. However, once the candidate has secured a job, the financial

assistance is stopped, and the employment bank is updated accordingly. The programme helps educated unemployed youth gain skills for meaningful employment.

**Khadya Sathi** was launched on 27th January 2016 by Chief Minister Smt. Mamata Banerjee, with the slogan 'Food for all', reflects its food security objective to the people. The highlight of the programme is its inclusiveness. Food grains like rice and wheat to everyone in the state, regardless of inequality or specific income thresholds. While applications may be made online and offline, the recipients are allotted food grains like rice and wheat at a subsidised rate of Rs. 2 per kg. It is done through an extensive network of ration shops and dealers throughout the state, and the Department of Food and Supplies, West Bengal, undertakes the momentous task of implementing the programme. Although the highest beneficiary groups are people from the below poverty lines and economically weaker sections, this programme includes all individuals holding a ration card in the state. While the state is not mainly known for a starving population, the programme provides essential steps to ensure food security for all, especially for the weaker sections, so they may purchase highly subsidised food grains from ration shops and ensure their families' nutrition. As per the government's estimate, nearly 90% of the State's people are covered under this scheme.

**The West Bengal government launched Swasthya Sathi's health cover programme on 30th December 2016.** The Swasthya Sathi scheme is a group health insurance scheme that provides basic health coverage for secondary and tertiary care. The scheme's main features include up to Rs. 5 Lakhs health coverage for a family for secondary and tertiary care and treatment. The scheme is based on a smart card, and all transactions are paperless and cashless, which implies smoother access to the benefits and better streamlining for the patients' families at private, empanelled and networked hospitals. The programme has no entry criteria in the sense that all pre-existing diseases are covered, the state government pays the entire premium, and there is no contribution from the beneficiary. While this goes a long way to bring down the

out-of-pocket expenditures of individuals and households in the state, it also promotes better delivery of quality services at private medical institutions through the state's medical cover support. This also facilitates the health treatment for patients in select medical institutions outside the state. As per government data, more than 45 Lakh families belonging to Members of Self-Help Groups, ICDS Workers, ASHA Workers, Civic Volunteers Force, Civil defence Volunteers, selected contractual employees, cable TV operators, etc., have already been enrolled in this state-sponsored health cover programme.

The Government of West Bengal's Transport Department launched the **Gati Dhara** scheme in August 2014 and aids unemployed young people in pursuing self-employment in the state's transportation sector. Families whose monthly income is less than 25,000 per month get the money to purchase a vehicle for commercial purposes to generate self-employment in the Urban and Rural areas of the state through the promotion of transport services. However, one must be able to drive and have a license to be eligible for this scheme. This provides excellent help to budding entrepreneurs and unemployed youth to set up transport businesses by the state offering a subsidy loan of up to 30% of the vehicle cost. This promotes the employability of the youth but also caters to the growing demands in the state transport sector.

**The Samaybyathi scheme of the West Bengal state government** was launched on November 24, 2016. The scheme provides financial assistance to the families of the deceased below the poverty line. The scheme aims to help families with the cremation or burial of their loved ones, as well as with other incidental expenses. The scheme provides one-time financial assistance of Rs 2,000. This ensures a dignified last rite for the deceased, irrespective of their financial constraints. This sympathetic scheme also ensures the preservation of dignity and social rights of the economically weaker sections.

**Bangla Fasal Bima Yojana (BFBY)** was launched in 2016, initially for the Kharif season, but then extended to all state districts for the Rabi and Kharif agriculture seasons. The BFBY is a crop insurance scheme that protects farmers from natural disasters and market failures. It is free for farmers, except for highly commercial products like potatoes and sugarcane. It is the West Bengal version of the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) and promotes a safety net for the farmers and agricultural workers of the state in case of crop failure. It also helps by funding indebted farmers by paying off their loans, thus not only securing their economic interests and reducing financial burden but also empowering them to move on to a new season of agriculture despite losses or crop failure in the previous season. In the long run, this program also helps expand food security coverage in the state while ensuring farmers' welfare.

**Safe Drive, Save Life** campaign was launched on July 8, 2016, by the Hon'ble Chief Minister of West Bengal, Smt. Mamata Banerjee. The campaign aimed to raise awareness about road safety and the importance of safe driving. The campaign used the three Es of traffic management: education, engineering, and enforcement. Some methods included asking drivers to direct traffic and using the Automated Number Plate Recognition system. As per reports from the State Police, the Kolkata Police, and the Department of Transport, the 'Safe Drive Save Life' project significantly dropped the number of deaths caused by road accidents.

Time	Number of accidents	Number of deaths
January-March 2016 (Before the commencement of Safe Drive Save Life)	3,449	1,703
January-March 2017	3,177	1,594
January-March 2018	2,718	1,409

Figure Source: Director of Information, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, *Chronicles of Bengal's Progress* (Kolkata, India: Saraswaty Press Limited, 2018).

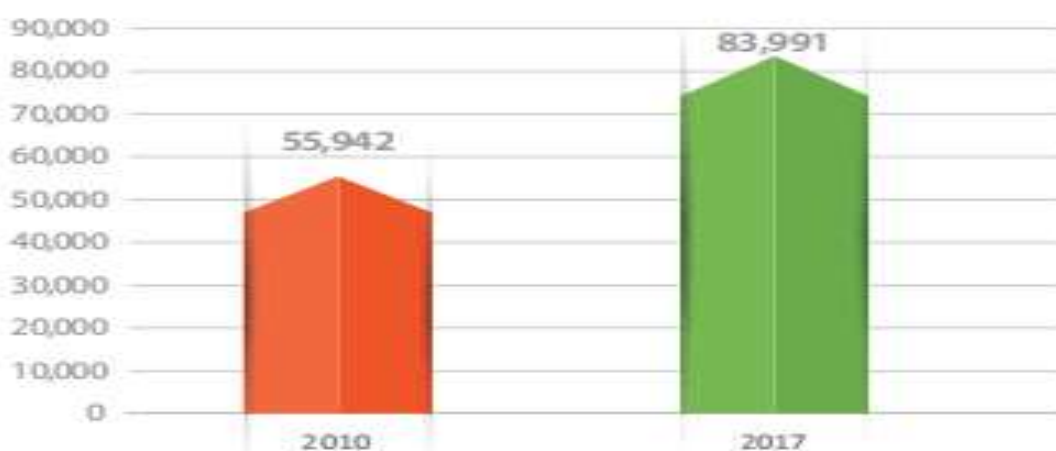
**Lok Prasar Prakalpa** was launched in 2014 by the Department of Information & Cultural Affairs of the Government of West Bengal. The scheme's primary goal is to revive the state's folk and tribal culture by financially supporting rural folk artists. Besides providing economic support to financially distressed rural folk artists, the programme allows them to further their folk culture and preserve the cultural heritage of Bengal. Such a programme protects the artists financially and helps revive the state's cultural traditions.

**Maavoi West Bengal Health Scheme for the Journalists** was launched in 2016 under the Government of West Bengal's Information & Cultural Affairs Department Journalists Health Cell. An accredited Journalists or a beneficiary of such Journalist under the scheme is entitled to a) medical attendance and treatment as an indoor patient in a hospital or an institution and b) medical attendance and treatment at the outpatient department of a hospital or an institution, or clinic attached to such hospital or institution for such diseases, and under such circumstances, as may be specified. ii) Medical attendance and treatment as an indoor patient in a hospital – A Journalist shall be entitled to reimbursement of the cost of his or his beneficiary's medical attendance and treatment as an indoor patient in a hospital or an institution.

**Free Treatment Policy** launched by the Government of West Bengal's Health and Family Welfare Department in 2013 to facilitate a Universal free treatment policy in all state-run hospitals. This effectively nullified the out-of-pocket expenditure (OOPE) of the patients entering public medical institutions, irrespective of their socio-economic background. The scheme included the cost of medicines, consumables, implants, diagnostic expenses, bed charges, and all other incidental expenditures that the patients hitherto bore. This was supplemented by **The West Bengal Clinical Establishments (Registration, Regulation and**

**Transparency) Act, 2017, to facilitate the** smooth and transparent working of all state clinical institutions. To further augment this health initiative, the government has established **Multi/Super Specialty Hospitals (SSHs)** With over 42 Multi/Super Specialty Hospitals with 300/500-bedded facilities, each set up at a project cost of about Rs. 2,714 Crore. Furthermore, fair-price medicine shops, diagnostic health centres, new health districts, new nursing training schools, and the augmentation of the West Bengal Allied Medical & Para Medical Council have worked towards building the state's healthcare infrastructure.

### Hospital Beds



- More than 28 thousand beds increased
- Increased access to healthcare

Data & Figure Source: Director of Information, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, *Chronicles of Bengal's Progress* (Kolkata: Saraswaty Press Limited, 2018).

**The Sishu Sathi** scheme was launched on August 21, 2013. The state government of West Bengal initiated it under the Rashtriya Bal Suraksha Karyakram. The scheme aims to provide free treatment to children who need heart surgeries, regardless of their family's financial situation. It includes assisting in treating congenital cardiac diseases, cleft lip/palate, club foot, and other ailments.

The **Sabla** scheme, for the empowerment of adolescent girls, is a programme in West Bengal that aims to improve the health and nutrition of adolescent girls aged between 11 and 18. The scheme's objectives include improving the health and nutrition of girls, promoting awareness about health, hygiene, food, and family and child care, equipping girls with life skills and vocational skills, mainstreaming out-of-school girls into formal or non-formal education, and providing information about public services.

**Old Age Pension and Social Security** were introduced in 2014-15 in West Bengal for the benefit of members of backward communities and workers from sensitive work domains. Mostly from ST and BPL families, the beneficiaries receive Rs.1000 after age 60, which provides them with a social security net, especially in old age. One related work domain and worker pension programme is the Social Security Scheme for Kendu Leaf Collectors.

**Nijo Griho Nijo Bhumi Prokolpo** was launched by the Government of West Bengal in 2011 to provide land ownership to landless families in West Bengal, aiming to secure their land tenure and improve their quality of life. As per government records, more than 3.35 lakh people in the state have been provided with pattas, including homestead pattas under NGNB, agricultural pattas and forest pattas during 2011-2018. To supplement this, the government also offered numerous policy interventions in its land policy to better enact citizen-friendly land enactments and empower the people through land allotments. This includes The West Bengal Land Reforms Act, 1955 and the amendments of the West Bengal Land Reforms Rules, 1965.

**Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee officially launched the Anandadhara scheme, West Bengal state's name for the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)**, on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2012. It is based on the NRLM, a national program aimed at poverty reduction. This scheme effectively empowers rural poor and vulnerable people by organising them into self-managed groups to improve their livelihoods. This not only helps the poor and vulnerable sections in

terms of their skills and employability enhancement, but through SHG, WHGs and other community groups, they also work to empower the social status of the beneficiaries of these schemes.

**Rupashree Prakalpa**, in the form of one-time financial assistance, was launched by the Government of West Bengal in the 2018-19 state budget, providing a one-time monetary grant to families of economically disadvantaged girls for their marriage. The conditions of eligibility require the girl to be at least 18 years old and the groom to be 21 years old, which also has an impact on the education of young women and men and also combats child marriage in the process. The scheme also encourages girls to continue their education by requiring those who receive the grant to complete at least 10th standard or equivalent education. The scheme goes a long way in assisting the parents of the girl child from disadvantaged and poor sections to get the child married with state aid. As per the governments' estimates, almost 6 lakh women in the state will benefit each year from this initiative.

In its pursuit of fulfilling promises in education, the government of West Bengal also initiated several higher education institutions established after 2011. Those are Alipurduar University, established in 2020; Baba Saheb Ambedkar Education University in 2015; Bankura University in 2014; Biswa Bangla Biswavidyalaya at Bolpur in 2020; Panchanan Barma University at Cooch Behar in 2012, Dakshin Dinajpur University in 2021, Darjeeling Hills University in 2021, Diamond Harbour Women's University in 2013, Harichand Guruchand University at North 24 Parganas in 2019, Hindi University at Howrah in 2019, Kanyashree University at Krishnanagar in 2020, Kazi Nazrul University at Asansol in 2012, Mahatma Gandhi University at Mahishadal in 2020, Murshidabad University in 2020, Raiganj University in 2015, Rani Rashmoni Green University at Tarakeswar in 2020, Sadhu Ramchand Murmu University at Jhargram in 2020, and The Sanskrit College and University at Kolkata in 2015. Besides the above-mentioned state universities, some private universities were established after



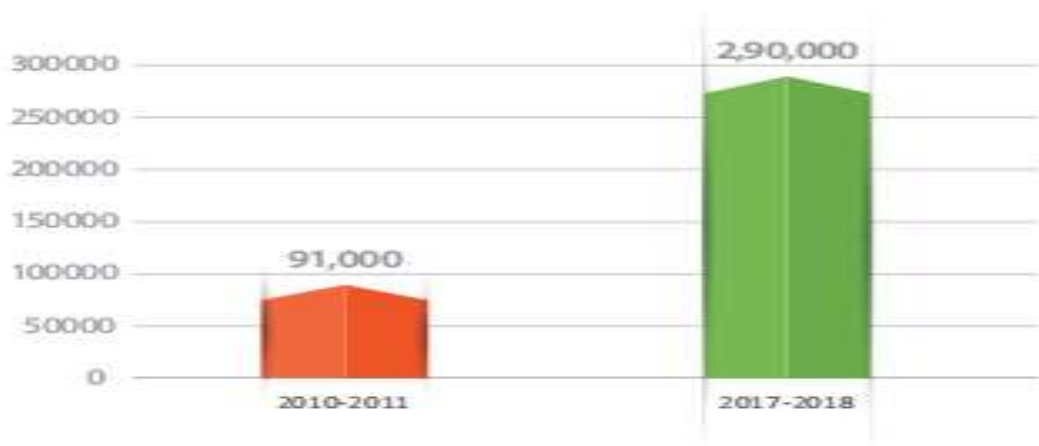
2011. Those are Adamas University (2014), Amity University, Kolkata (2015), Brainware University (2015), IMI Kolkata (2011), JIS University (2014), Neotia University (2015), Seacom Skills University (2014), Sister Nivedita University (2017), St. Xavier's University (2017), Swami Vivekananda University (2020), Techno India University (2012) and UEM (2015). All state-aided and private universities mentioned above were established by passing the relevant Acts and statutes in the state assembly. Besides such universities, several new medical, dental and engineering colleges have been built after 2011. The goal is to democratise the university system by establishing at least one major university in each state district to offload pressure from old universities in a few centres during the Left Front rule. The state populist narrative of Trinamool flaunts such achievements in numerous election campaigns and television debates by pointing out the present government's continuing efforts to expand higher education in the state.

For temple tourism, 303 Karma tirthas are being set up at a project cost of Rs. 755 crores to provide self-employment opportunities to Minority youths and SHGs in Minority-Concentrated Areas (528 Karma tirthas throughout the State). Similarly, many farmer-centric policies have been initiated in agriculture to fulfil their promises to the target agricultural producers and workers. This includes the scheme of soil health card, which was launched in 2015-16, *mati tirtha katha* model field display, custom recruitment centres for agro-based workers, *Bangla fasal bima yojana* for insurance against crop failures to agriculturalists in the state, *matir katha krishanker katha initiative*, establishment of new agricultural education colleges, presentation of awards honouring the farmers under *krishak ratna*, in addition to the availability of easy loans for agricultural purposes, as well as the waiving off loans in case of bankrupt farmers. The combination of all these programmes in the domain of agriculture not only shows the government's resolve to improve the finance and well-being of the agricultural workers but also an attempt to deliver its promises to the farming community.



Data & Figure Source: Director of Information, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, *Chronicles of Bengal's Progress* (Kolkata: Saraswaty Press Limited, 2018).

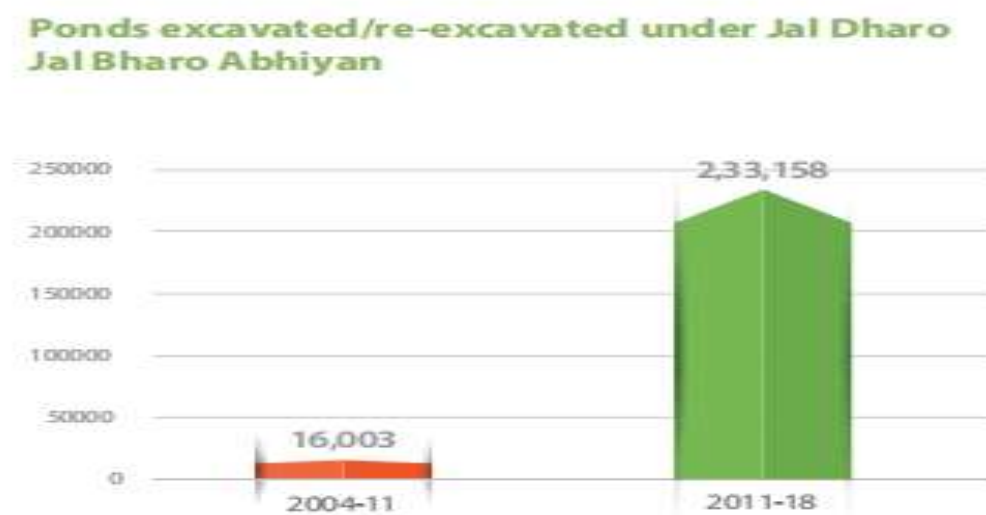
#### Farmer's household income (In Rupees/year)



Data & Figure Source: Director of Information, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, *Chronicles of Bengal's Progress* (Kolkata: Saraswaty Press Limited, 2018).

In its efforts at water conservation and management system, the Government of West Bengal launched several schemes such as **Jal Dharo- Jal Bharo** in 2011-2012 to promote its efforts

at preservation of natural water resources. It included harvesting rainwater and replenishing natural and man-made bodies, including irrigation systems essential for agriculture. Similarly, the **Jala tirtha** in 2014-15 in the State's arid zone, i.e., in the districts of Bankura, Birbhum, Purulia, Jhargram and Paschim Medinipur. This, too, provides essential water-related constructions, including check dams, structures for water harvesting, irrigational lines, etc. This promotes environmental preservation as well as facilitates the need for clean water.



Data & Figure Source: Director of Information, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, *Chronicles of Bengal's Progress* (Kolkata, India: Saraswaty Press Limited, 2018).

The **Utkarsh Bangla** programme was launched on February 16, 2016, by the Chief Minister of the Government of West Bengal. Its principal implementing agency was the Paschim Banga Society for Skill Development (PBSSD). Its manifold aims included, among others, providing wage/self-employment-linked skills training to the residents of West Bengal. While other programmes have also been initiated for skill development and employability enhancement, the Utkarsh Bangla programme is completely funded by the State Government through the Technical Education and Training and Skill Development Department, Govt. of West Bengal.

In April 2019, Utkarsh Bangla was awarded the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Prize in the ‘Capacity Building’ category, given by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).

The Government of West Bengal also initiated governance and personnel and administrative reforms. As per government data till 2018, 405 district-level Administrative Meetings, state-level Administrative Meetings (for intensive monitoring of developmental issues) and Public Distribution Programs had been set up to promote rapid change in governance styles and initiate administrative reforms that facilitate smoother, faster delivery of welfare services. As a result of the state’s resolve in governance reforms, West Bengal received a National Award from the Department of Personnel & Training Government of India for Building Training Capacity: Administrative Training Institute, West Bengal.

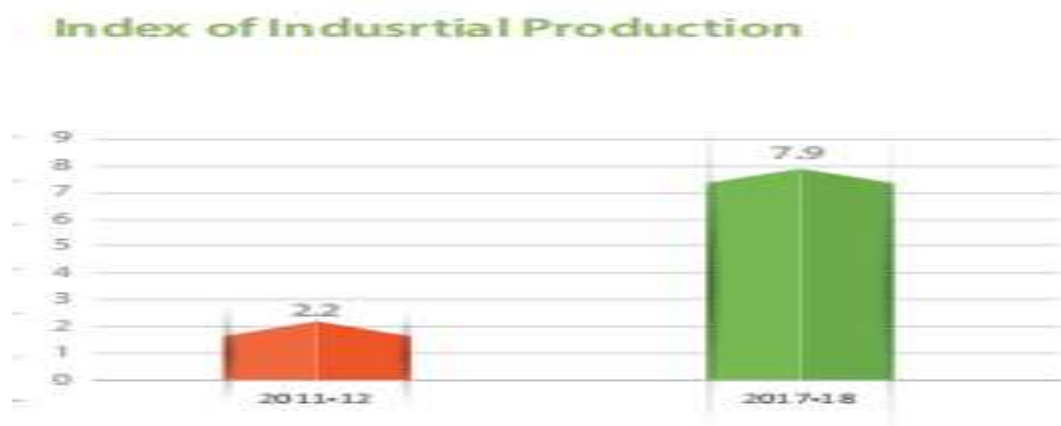
Also, in other economic sectors, West Bengal is ahead of India’s national average as a percentage. Additionally, West Bengal has achieved top rankings in numerous fields. All this reveals the initiative and efficiency of the West Bengal government. Also, in other economic sectors, West Bengal is ahead of India’s national average as a percentage. Mitra expressed that India’s GDP growth rate has reached a significant low, at 5%\* for 2019-20, marking the lowest point in the past 11 years. The GDP growth of Bengal has impressively reached 10.4%\*, a figure that stands in stark contrast to the national growth rate of India, effectively doubling it. In a comparable context, while India’s industrial growth from 2019 to 20 (April to November) stood at 0.6%, the industrial growth of Bengal remarkably reached nearly five times that figure, at 3.1%.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, West Bengal has achieved top rankings in numerous fields. These are 100 days of work, Small-Scale Industries, Rural Housing, Rural Roads, Minority Scholarships,

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<sup>1</sup> Amit Mitra, *West Bengal Budget 2020- 2021* (Kolkata: Saraswaty Press Limited, 2020), 2.

Skill Development, EoDB (Ease of Doing Business), and e-tendering. All this reveals the effectiveness and efficiency of the West Bengal government.<sup>2</sup> To promote **Ease of Doing Business**, the government enacted the **West Bengal Single Window System (Management, Control and Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2017**. The single window application system **Silpa Sathi** was launched to further supplement the ease of doing business in the state through a range of reforms, including the **Business Reforms Action Plan 2017**. All such legislations and support frameworks aid the promotion of a dynamic business environment in the state, which further aids in economic development, generation of employment and growth. To this end, for industrial promotion, **The Bengal Global Business Summit** was set up to showcase significant investment opportunities in the state. As per government reports, nearly 50% of the proposals received through the business summit have been fructified by 2020. To augment these initiatives, some industrial corridor projects, industrial parks and growth centres have been created along with the revival of sick industries such as Haldia Petrochemicals, Saraswati Press, acquisition of Jessop and Dunlop, etc.



Data & Figure Source: Director of Information, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, *Chronicles of Bengal's Progress* (Kolkata: Saraswati Press Limited, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Mitra, *West Bengal Budget 2020- 2021*, 3.

## Investment Towards Growth of Industrial Infrastructure (in ₹)

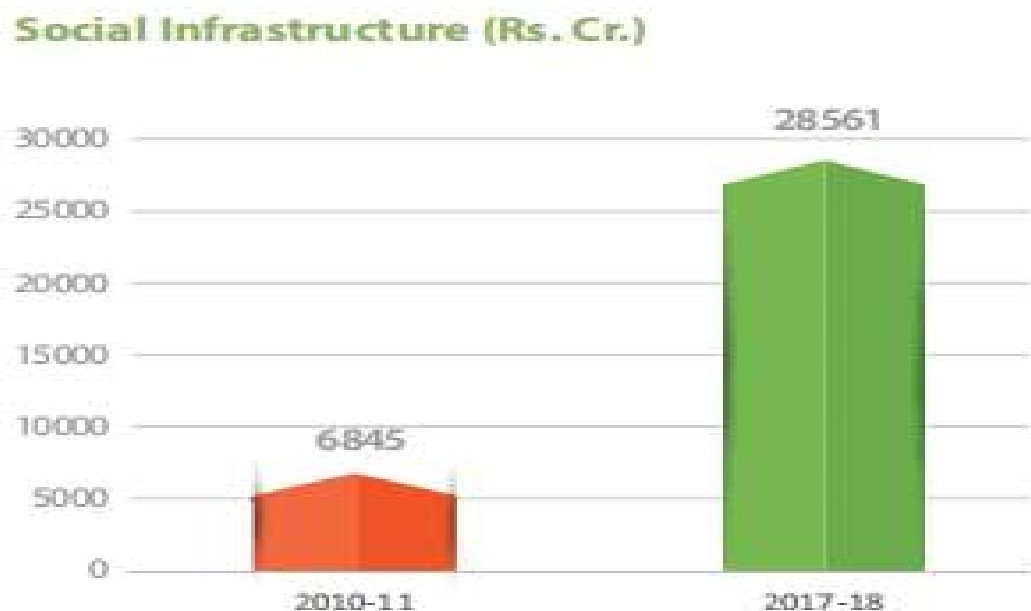


Data & Figure Source: Director of Information, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, *Chronicles of Bengal's Progress* (Kolkata: Saraswaty Press Limited, 2018).

As per data from the Annual Report 2016-17 of the Ministry of MSME, Government of India, in terms of micro, small and medium enterprises, 52.7 lakh in registered and unregistered sectors among Indian States, contributing 11.62% of total MSME establishments in India employing 1,09,15,626 people. In 2017-18(AE), the State's GSDP at constant prices grew by 11.46% in comparison to India's 6.50% growth during the corresponding period of West Bengal's Gross Value Added (GVA) growth at a factor cost of 11.80% against India's 6.1% at constant prices. The industry sector of West Bengal grew at an impressive 11.41% compared to India's 4.4% as a count of GVA.

In terms of expenditures on social infrastructure in the sectors of Education, Sports, Art and culture, Health and Family Welfare, Water Supply, Sanitation, Housing, Information and broadcasting, Labour and labour Welfare, Welfare of SC, ST and OBC, Social Welfare and

Nutrition, the government of West Bengal's expenditure on social Infrastructure has increased more than fourfold, from Rs. 6,845 Cr in 2010-11 to Rs. 28,561 Cr in 2017-18.



Data & Figure Source: Director of Information, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, *Chronicles of Bengal's Progress* (Kolkata: Saraswati Press Limited, 2018).

Similarly, in terms of expenditures on Agri and Agri-allied activities, including Rural Development, agriculture and allied activities, Rural Development, Special Areas Program, irrigation, and Flood etc., the government of West Bengal's expenditures in the Agri and Agri-allied Sector increased more than 6.6 times, from Rs. 3,029 Crore in 2010-11 to Rs. 20,283 Crore in 2017-18.



Data & Figure Source: Director of Information, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, *Chronicles of Bengal's Progress* (Kolkata: Saraswaty Press Limited, 2018).

In the physical infrastructure sector, which includes Energy, Industry and Minerals, Transport, Science, Technology & Environment, General Economic Services, etc., the government of West Bengal's expenditure on Physical Infrastructure has increased more than 3.6 times from Rs. 1,758 Crore in 2010-11 to Rs. 6,456 Crore in 2017-18.



Data & Figure Source: Director of Information, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, *Chronicles of Bengal's Progress* (Kolkata: Saraswaty Press Limited, 2018).

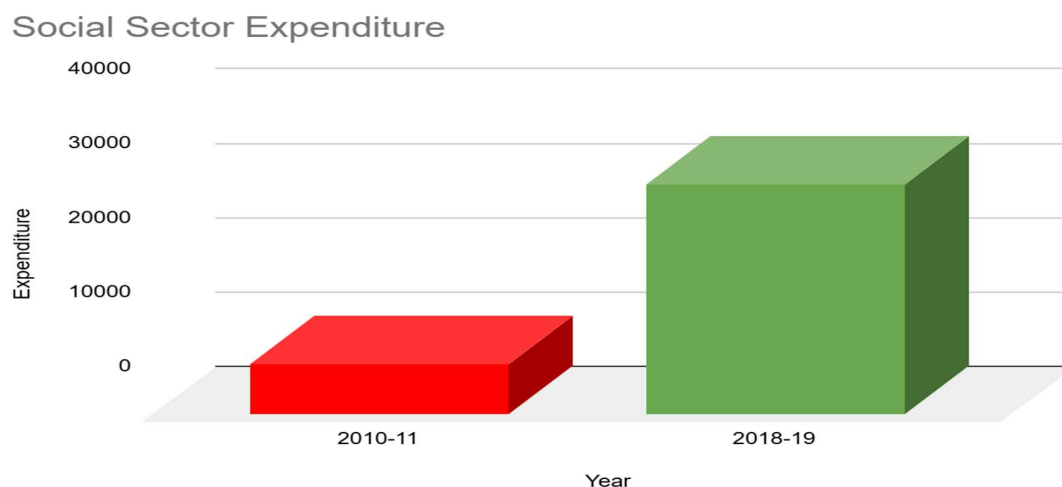


## Differences between expenditure from 2011 vs 2019 in West Bengal

### *Social Sector Expenditure* > 4.5 times the rise

2010-11- Rs 6,845 crore

2018-19- Rs 31,060 crore

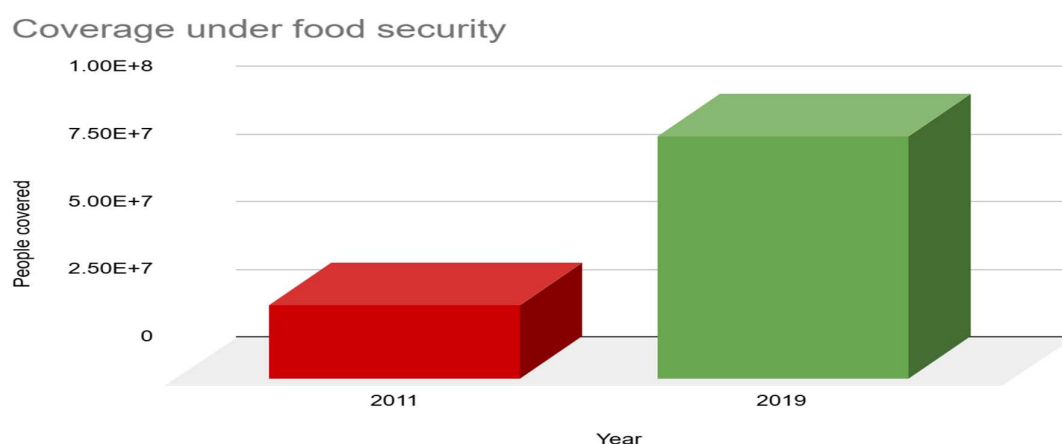


Data Source: Government of West Bengal, *2011-2019* (Kolkata: A Government of West Bengal Publication, 2019).

### *Coverage under food security (Khadya Sathi Programme)* > 3 times the growth

2011-2.74 crore

2019-9 crore

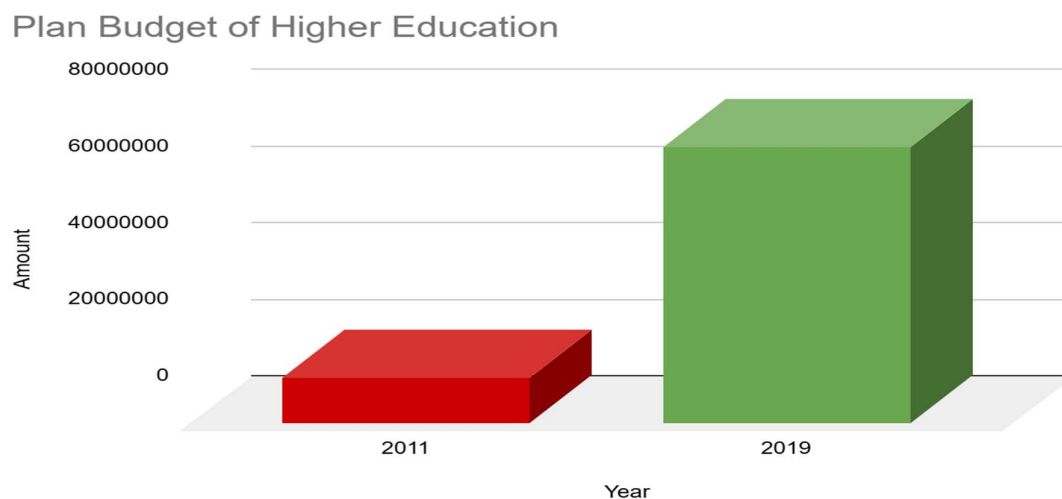


Data Source: Government of West Bengal, *2011-2019* (Kolkata: A Government of West Bengal Publication, 2019).

***Plan budget of Higher Education > 6 times the boost***

2010-11- Rs 120 crore

2018-19-Rs 725 crore

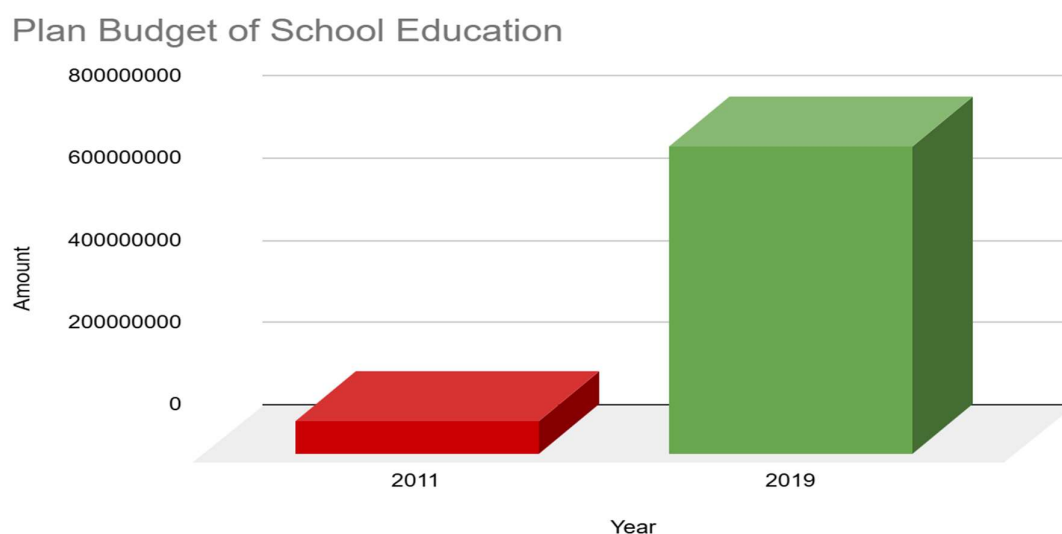


Data Source: Government of West Bengal, 2011-2019 (Kolkata: A Government of West Bengal Publication, 2019).

***Plan budget of School Education > 9 times increase***

2010-11- Rs 829 crore

2018-19-Rs 7,500 crore



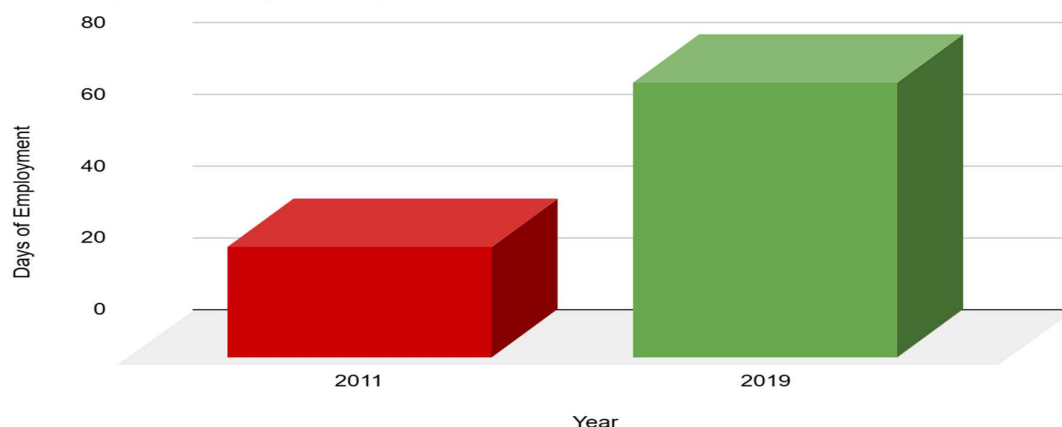
Data Source: Government of West Bengal, 2011-2019 (Kolkata: A Government of West Bengal Publication, 2019).

**100 Days' work: Average employment per household > Nearly 2.5 times increase**

2010-11-31 days

2018-19-77 days

Average employment per household



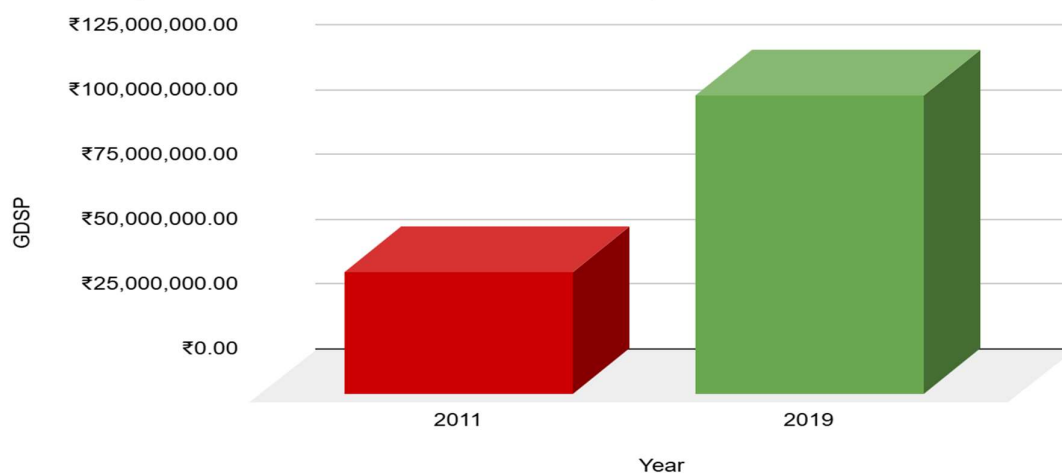
Data Source: Government of West Bengal, 2011-2019 (Kolkata: A Government of West Bengal Publication, 2019).

**GSDP (Gross State Domestic Product) > 2.5 times increase**

2011-Rs 4.74 lakh crore

2018-Rs 11.55 lakh crore

GSDP (Gross State Domestic Product)

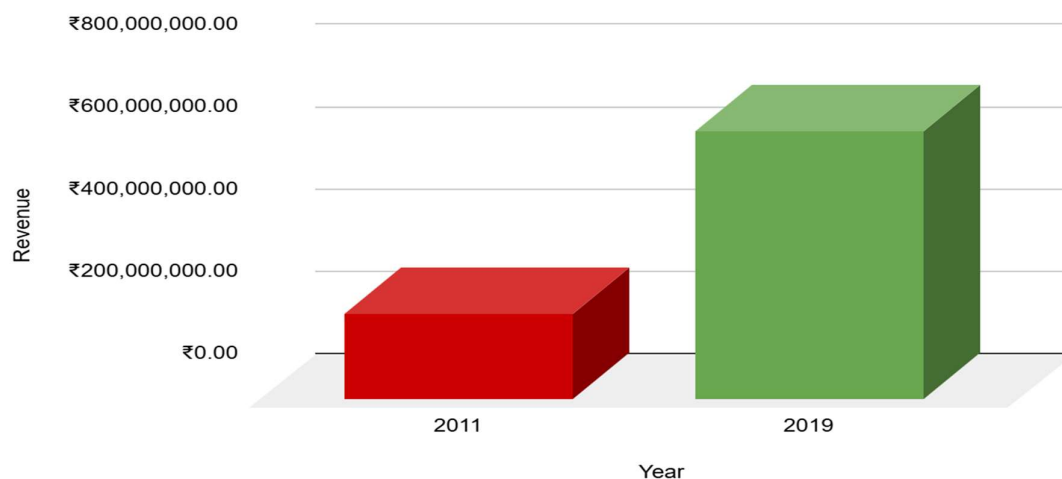


Data Source: Government of West Bengal, 2011-2019 (Kolkata: A Government of West Bengal Publication, 2019).

***Tax Revenue Collection*****> 3 times increase**

2010-11-Rs 21,000 crore

2018-19-Rs 65,341 crore

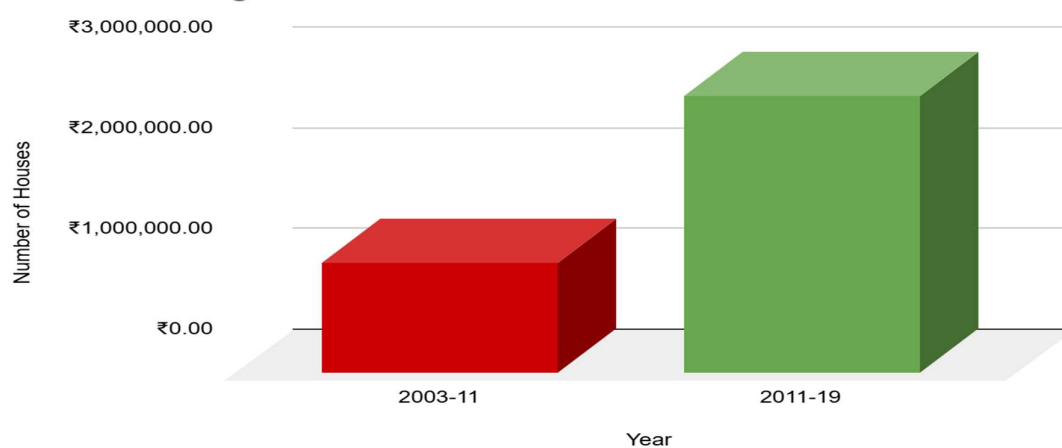
**Tax Revenue**

Data Source: Government of West Bengal, *2011-2019* (Kolkata: A Government of West Bengal Publication, 2019).

***Rural Housing*****> 2 times increase**

2003-11: 11 lakh houses

2011-19: 27.53 lakh houses

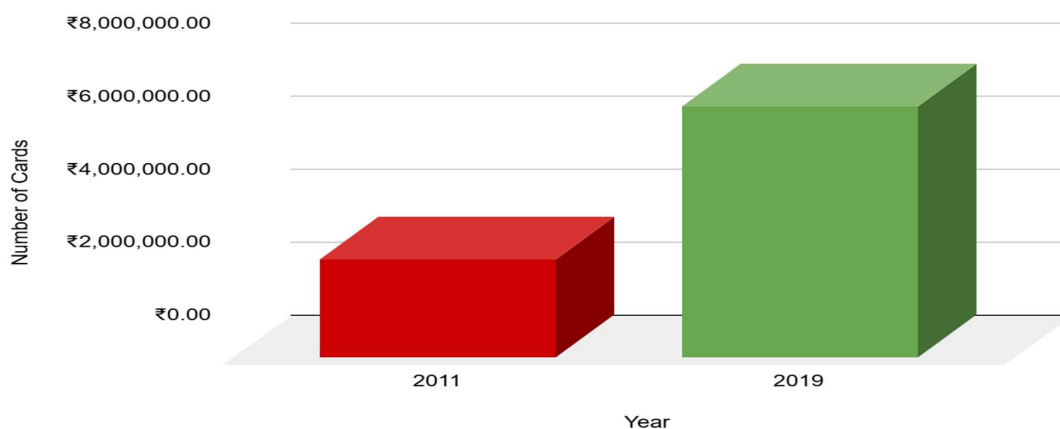
**Rural Housing**

Data Source: Government of West Bengal, *2011-2019* (Kolkata: A Government of West Bengal Publication, 2019).

### *Kishan Credit Cards* > 2.5 times increase

2011-27 lakh  
2019-69 lakh

Distribution of Kishan Credit Card

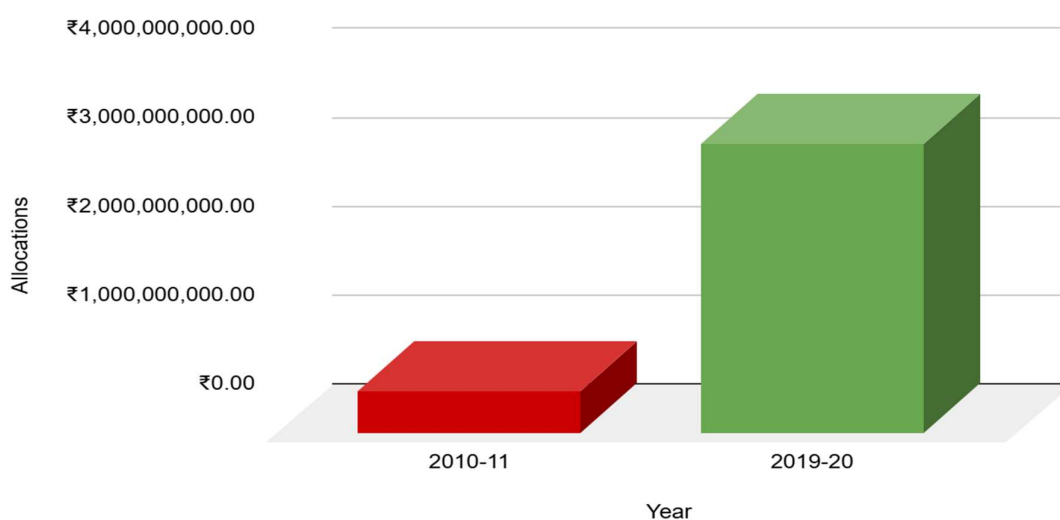


Data Source: Government of West Bengal, 2011-2019 (Kolkata: A Government of West Bengal Publication, 2019).

### *Budget allocation for minority welfare* > 8 times increase

2010-11-Rs 472 crore  
2019-20-Rs 3258 crore

Budget allocation for minority welfare

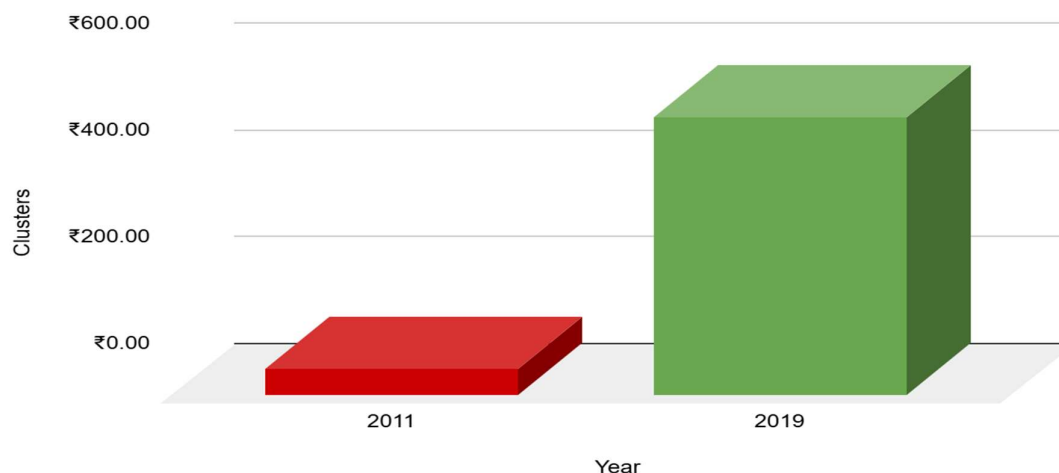


Data Source: Government of West Bengal, 2011-2019 (Kolkata: A Government of West Bengal Publication, 2019).

### *MSME clusters* > 10 times increase

2011-49  
2019-521

MSME Clusters

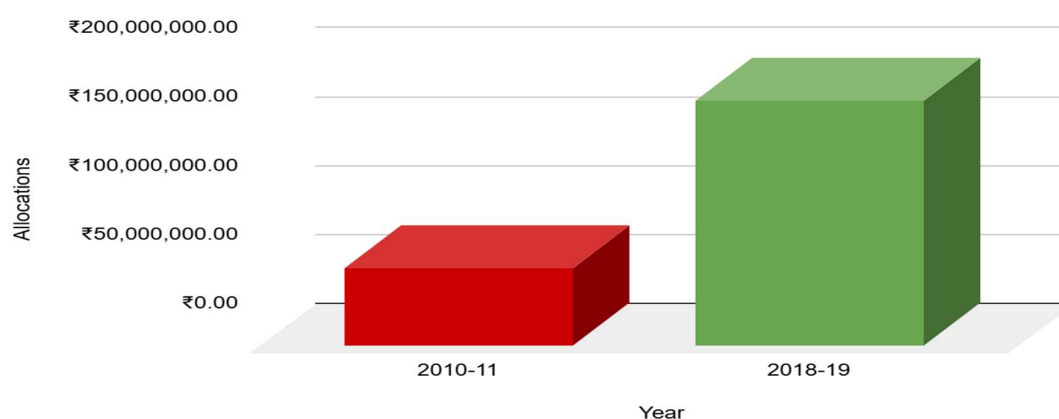


Data Source: Government of West Bengal, *2011-2019* (Kolkata: A Government of West Bengal Publication, 2019).

### *Budget for Backward Classes Welfare & Tribal Development* > 3 times increase

2010-11-Rs 566.50 crore  
2018-19-Rs 1785 crore

Budget for Backward Classes Welfare & Tribal Development



Data Source: Government of West Bengal, *2011-2019* (Kolkata: A Government of West Bengal Publication, 2019).

From the above tables, it is clear that various aspects like social sector expenditure, food security, health for all, primary and higher education, social welfare programmes for the backward groups of society, construction of roads at the village level, construction of houses in rural areas, expansion of medium and small-scale industries, and distribution of agricultural credit cards to small farmers are all in this regard; the Trinamool era has made significant progress compared to the end of the Left Front era. All these initiatives reveal the Trinamool Congress's pro-people and pro-poor attitudes.

The Trinamool Congress emerged as a centre-left populist party during the 2006 Singur Movement. Centre-left populism could be seen as a manifestation of social democracy. The TMC government, characterised by its centre-left populist approach, seeks to reinstate social democracy in the state by implementing a range of welfare policies, programmes, and schemes. The Trinamool Congress, functioning as a social democratic party, has undertaken significant measures to promote distributive and social justice within the state, primarily through various governmental initiatives. Furthermore, TMC is working to meet the democratic needs of marginalised peoples by implementing various distributive and redistributive policies, recognising identities, and addressing the crisis of representation.

All these welfare policies reveal the Trinamool Congress's inclination towards social democracy. We have observed that the Trinamool Congress implements many policies or schemes to maintain its support base. A wide range of schemes, as mentioned above, happen to cover most sectors of the population. Numerous initiatives, such as 'Samaybyathi', 'the West Bengal Swanirbhar Sahayak Prakalpa (WBSSP)', 'Khadya Sathi', 'Gati Dhara', 'the Bangla Fasal Bima Yojana', 'Lok Prasar Prakalpa', 'the Free Treatment Policy', 'the Old Age Pension and Social Security', 'Nijo Griho Nijo Bhumi Prakalpa', and 'Rupashree Prakalpa', among others, can be elucidated through the framework of the logic of accountability. The Trinamool Congress also mentioned several steps and policies in their manifesto before assuming power.

We can also explain all those initiatives through the logic of accountability. For instance, we can consider the Swasthya Sathi Scheme, the Kanyashree Plus Scheme, and Jal Dharo- Jal Bharo, among others.

Just before the 2021 assembly elections, the Trinamool announced a basic income scheme called the *Lakshmir Bhandar* scheme for women in the state. It is a financial assistance programme launched in February 2021 for women aged between 25-60 years, initially Rs. 1000 per month for SC/ST households and Rs. 500 per month for other families. In 2023, the financial assistance was increased to Rs. 1200 per month for SC/ST women and Rs. 1000 per month for other women. The promise of the scheme before the 2021 assembly elections and the steady implementation of such a welfarist measure after the 2021 assembly elections have only helped the consolidation of the centre-left populism of Trinamool by using the loyalties of beneficiaries through the logic of accountability. Furthermore, the majority of the other schemes and initiatives referenced in this chapter, which the logic of accountability cannot elucidate, can be explained through Islam's logic of governance. Considering all these developments, progress, and initiatives, it can be concluded that the TMC demonstrates notable compassion and accountability towards the underprivileged members of society. Despite several deficiencies in employment generation, allegations of corruption and lacklustre efforts in building crucial public infrastructure, the responsibility of the TMC to the underprivileged should not be underestimated.



## **Conclusion: The Upsurge of Populism in West Bengal and its Impact on Governance**

### **Populist Mobilisation in West Bengal**

The emergence of a consolidated populist discourse facilitated the ascent of the Left Front and Trinamool Congress (TMC) to political dominance in West Bengal, India. Populist practices arose from the contrasting framework established when the Left Front introduced the alternative political initiative against the prevailing power bloc in the late 1970s and subsequently by the Trinamool Congress from 2006 onwards. The Left Front, mainly dominated by its leading coalition partner, the Communist Party of India (CPIM), and the Trinamool Congress, propagated an underdog sentiment that framed their initiatives as pro-poor and pro-people, resulting in the integration of previously underprivileged segments of the population. Attributing people's misfortunes to the existing power bloc and illegitimate economic, political, and cultural elites redefines the "us" versus "them" divide that surfaced in the 1970s and late 2000s. To construct the people to restore democracy and overthrow an oppressive regime, the CPI (M) and the TMC articulated various multitudes in a chain of equivalence against the existing power bloc.

The CPIM party, as the Left Front's principal partner, successfully rallied dissatisfied sections against the incumbent Congress party. In contrast, the Trinamool Congress mobilised many factions unhappy with the CPI(M) party's governance. This represents a significant disparity. Despite these differences, both factions successfully consolidated larger segments of the populace dissatisfied with the prevailing power bloc and ousted them from power. In the subsequent section of this chapter, I will investigate populism in power from a discursive and performative perspective.

### Examining populism in power through the discursive and performative lens

According to Venizelos, “populism in power is relevant to how populists speak and act in government, how people identify with them (indicating whether populist ideas resonate with the public) and, above all, how a sense of community is constructed in a relational manner.”<sup>1</sup> The primary inquiry is how populists successfully present themselves as outsiders within established institutions. This positioning enables them to appeal to a collective popular subject, particularly those who feel excluded, through effective emotional conditioning.

There are numerous methodologies to analyse the strategies employed by populist leaders in power. Scholars have noted that the outcomes or policies of populists do not necessarily reflect populist principles. Instead, populist actors engage in various performative actions, often termed ‘flaunting the low’, which are evident in their rhetoric and style.<sup>2</sup> These actions include persuasive language, their overall approach, promotional methods, and strategies integrated into various tangible and digital information dissemination forms. Biglieri and Cadahia prompt us to “consider the possibility of a populist institutionality built by ‘those on the bottom’ one that incorporates the contentious dimension of equivalential logic to compete with those on top for these same (oligarchic or popular) state forms. In other words, the state (and institutions) become another antagonistic space in the dispute between the bottom and those on top.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, to examine institutionalised populism from the perspective of the Essex School, one should focus on the social antagonism it incites and the type of political structures it promotes. Venizelos engages with these questions to elucidate populism in power: “Do

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgos Venizelos, *Populism in Power Discourse and Performativity in SYRIZA and Donald Trump* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Venizelos, *Populism in Power*, 36.

<sup>3</sup> Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia, *Seven Essays on Populism: For a Renewed Theoretical Perspective*, trans. George Ciccariello-Maher (Medford: Polity Press, 2021), 67.

populists continue to construct ‘the people’ antagonistically against ‘the elite’? Does their discourse consistently revolve around notions of popular sovereignty? Do they continue to perform on the socio-cultural low? Do they continue to mobilize the people effectively?”<sup>4</sup>

### **Populist Approaches to Accountability**

O’Donnell established a significant analytical framework for examining accountability as a form of control. Employing a geographical analogy, he distinguished between horizontal and vertical mechanisms ensuring accountability. Horizontal mechanisms refer to the interactions between accountable authorities within a state. In contrast, vertical mechanisms involve external actors exerting influence over the state, such as the electorate, the media, or civil society.<sup>5</sup>

Peruzzotti posits that populist constitutionalism revolves around the idea that constituent power possesses ultimate authority over the legal and constitutional framework.<sup>6</sup> This perspective has been examined by scholars such as Arato<sup>7</sup> and Corrias.<sup>8</sup> The central tenet is that in a well-functioning democracy, popular sovereignty should take precedence over all other considerations. Therefore, the goal of any constitutional endeavour is to facilitate the unrestrained expression of the people’s will.<sup>9</sup> The primary aim of the quality of democracy approach is to uphold the effectiveness of limited government. In contrast, populism seeks to

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<sup>4</sup> Venizelos, *Populism in Power*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Guillermo O’Donnell, “Horizontal accountability: The legal institutionalization of mistrust,” in *Democratic accountability in Latin America*, ed. Scott Mainwaring and Christopher Welna (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 34– 54.

<sup>6</sup> Enrique Peruzzotti, “Populism and Accountability,” in *Populism and Key Concepts in Social and Political Theory*, ed. Carlos de la Torre and Oscar Mazzoleni (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 141.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Arato, *Post Sovereign Constitution Making: Learning and Legitimacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Luigi Corrias, “Populism in a Constitutional Key: Constituent Power, Popular Sovereignty, and Constitutional Identity,” *European Constitutional Law Review* 12, no. 1 (2016): 6– 26.

<sup>9</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, “Populism and constitutionalism” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 598; Corrias, “Populism in a constitutional key: Constituent power, popular sovereignty, and constitutional identity,” 10.

construct a constitutional system that permits an ‘unlimited elected government’.<sup>10</sup> This approach does not necessarily imply expanding institutional avenues for democratic participation. Instead, constitutional revisions often aim to bolster the elected executive’s authority, which is perceived as the embodiment of the people’s will. Consequently, the formation of public subjects is envisioned through embodiment in leadership rather than through democratic involvement.<sup>11</sup>

The populist perspective fundamentally reverses the liberal objective of enhancing democracy. According to this view, horizontal accountability mechanisms should be discarded as they are perceived as unauthorised interference with the people’s will. Instead, vertical electoral accountability should be prioritised to align with democratic principles. Populism’s transformative agenda extends beyond the abolition of horizontal constraints; it also seeks to restructure the vertical accountability framework within representative polyarchy, including political parties, parliament, and public discourse. Peruzzotti argues that the separation of vertical electoral accountability from the notion of representation prioritises identification.<sup>12</sup> Populism arises when a leader successfully connects with the people, bypassing intermediaries. This identification process can only occur directly, without intervention from representative government institutions. Indeed, populism heavily relies on vertical electoral accountability.<sup>13</sup> Dismantling the existing system of vertical accountability in a representative democracy is necessary to facilitate an unimpeded identification process.

With the increasing number of representation crises, it became evident that established democracies suffered from various deficiencies beyond just horizontal ones. As political

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<sup>10</sup> Peruzzotti, “Populism and Accountability,” 141.

<sup>11</sup> Arato, *Post Sovereign Constitution Making: Learning and Legitimacy*, 283.

<sup>12</sup> Peruzzotti, “Populism and Accountability,” 143.

<sup>13</sup> Juan F. González Bertomeu and Maria Paula Saffon, “The Mix of Latin American Populist Constitutionalism,” *Law & Ethics of Human Rights* 16, no. 1 (2022): 137–165.

marginalisation and loss of influence became more prevalent in multiple sectors of society, it became clear that there were also deficiencies in vertical accountability. In this context, populism gains recognition for its democratic criticism of established democracies, shifting the focus from liberal to democratic shortcomings. Populist political theory argues that the framework of representative democracy inherently lacks vertical accountability and suggests that the best way to address the crisis of representation is through significant reform of existing democratic constitutions.

Populist reforms aim to enhance the vertical aspect of elections while neglecting the horizontal element. These changes also establish a weak system of vertical accountability. Populism contends that the framework of indirect governance limits the people's inherent power, necessitating a more direct democratic paradigm. However, populism's prioritisation of constituent over constituted power does not always result in the creation of institutional avenues for democratic involvement but rather in the strengthening of elected executive authority. Oligarchic elites, who obstruct attempts to advance re-distributive reforms and address inequality for marginalised majorities, defend the approach of consolidating and expanding authority while weakening the intermediary institutions of representative governance, such as political parties, parliament, the public sphere, and civil society.

### **Similarities between Left Front and Trinamool Congress Populism**

Before coming to power, both regimes discursively constructed people and elites, seemingly dividing society into two parts. This division heavily emphasised the then-economic, social, and political animosities between the people and the establishment. These antagonisms are the foundation for forming the underprivileged, or people, as a large, impotent group and the establishment, or elite, as a small, illegitimately potent group. Both regimes would have been unable to ascend to power without such dichotomies and polarised discourse.

Both parties employed antagonistic and polarised discourses to separate people from the power bloc. Both used vertical spatial metaphors, such as the down vs. up axis, to construct 'people' and 'establishments' into antagonistic articulatory chains of equivalence. Additionally, both advocated for popular demands, identities, and interests against the establishment, representing marginalised people regarding power and status. Also, the concepts of equivalence, emptiness, and antagonism remain consistent in both discourses.

Both the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Trinamool Congress, by consolidating the various unfulfilled democratic demands of marginalised people, constructed a popular subject, namely the people. They created a popular subject for restoring democracy and overthrowing oppressive regimes in the state, advocating for the people's democratic rights, such as land and livelihood. Both the political parties' discourses categorised the social and political landscape into two segments using a vertical spatial metaphor, establishing two opposing frontiers: the people as an underprivileged, powerless mass and the establishment as a few but powerful groups of illegitimate elites. They both employed an open-ended chain of equivalence to define the people based on their socio-economic, socio-political, hierarchical, and power status. Both parties used a vertical axis to depict the establishment/elite and the people/underprivileged in an up/down spatial metaphor. The elite represents an upward group, while the underprivileged represent a downward group.

Both discourses gave the citizens a subjective position as members of 'the people.' It articulated the underprivileged as part of these people. Both discourses gave a new identity to the diverse multitudes of that period as a collective subject, or 'us', and pitted those collective subjects against the elite/establishment. The construction of an establishment or elite as a common adversary played the role of a constitutive outsider in the formation of this chain of equivalence. The relationship between the nodal point and the constituent outside was vertical in those discourses.

The Left Front and Trinamool Congress sparked a flurry of emotions in creating popular subjects, namely the people. They effectively rallied those who felt overlooked, underprivileged, sidelined, and inadequately represented in the then-political landscape. Both discourses challenged the establishment and rekindled the emotions of ‘injustice’, ‘frustration’, ‘indignation’, and ‘anger’, thereby transforming these ‘generic’ sentiments into focused discontent directed at the ‘political and economic elites’ at that time.

The unadorned lifestyle of the Left Front leaders significantly resonated with the people. People believed that these leaders were genuinely integral to their community. Empowering the left genuinely entailed enhancing their agency. Their life was not much different from that of the toiling masses. As such, they could mingle closely with the marginalised people very quickly. The people thought that the leftists were one of them. Empowering the left means empowering themselves. As there is no difference between the life experience of the leftist leaders and the life experience of the marginalised people, the latter thought that the leftists would help change their conditions. Congruently, the familiar and unsophisticated lifestyle of Trinamool Congress supremo Smt. Mamata Banerjee accepted her as representing the toiling masses and the underprivileged. In this way, the leftists and Trinamool Congress supremo Smt. Mamata Banerjee could keep a large part of the marginalised people attached to them and act as an embodiment of the people they represented.

### **Differences between Left Front and Trinamool Congress Populism**

The populist upsurge in West Bengal in 1977 was largely party-centric. The Left Front, under the leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), primarily initiated this upsurge. At the time, the restoration of democracy in Bengal served as an empty signifier and a nodal point. The Left Front articulated the interests of those facing economic and social challenges at that time. They articulated various groups in an open-ended chain of equivalence that included agricultural workers, sharecroppers, small farmers, landless peasants, and middle-

and small-scale cultivators; the organised and unorganised labour class; the lower middle class; various lower-ranking government service holders; school, college, and university teachers who were demanding decent pay; various underprivileged communities; women; students; and others. The Left Front was able to unite all these groups against the then-ruling power bloc in the fight to restore democracy in the state, secure democratic rights for the citizens, and eliminate authoritarian rule to counter their existing situational crisis.

On the other hand, Smt. Mamata Banerjee, the Trinamool Congress party supremo, spearheaded the populist uprising in West Bengal in 2011. That is, this rise was leader-centric. Here, the word '*Paribartan* (change)' acts as an empty signifier and a nodal point. This significantly aids in bringing together all the factions that had stirred up against the ruling Left Front party. A theoretical analysis of the 2011 elections in Bengal suggests that the popularisation of the slogan '*Paribartan*' succeeded in building a popular subject. Mamata Banerjee, within the category of the people—articulated various groups like marginal farmers (whose land eviction process began during the Left Front era), tribal communities, Scheduled Castes, Muslim communities, poor and unorganised sector people, and rural and urban middle- and lower-class people (they were outraged against the Left Front partisan mentality and cadre Raj). All of them expressed significant dissatisfaction with the Left Front's rule. Mamata Banerjee emerged as the emblem of opposition to the Left Front, particularly the CPI (M), symbolising change and embodying renewed hope. Various groups agitating at the Left Front felt solidarity with Mamata Banerjee, as she was recognised as a voice of opposition and the face of change. In this context, the party leader's name, Mamata Banerjee, was an empty signifier that unified the various groups in a chain of equivalence.

In the era of the Left Front, party cadres were highly engaged, rallying the masses under the party's banner. In contrast, Trinamool's approach was distinctly focused on the cult of personality. TMC is rallying the masses under the banner and vision of its esteemed supremo



leader, Smt. Mamata Banerjee. Individual leadership was absent during the Left Front era, as the focus was on the party's collective leadership.<sup>14</sup>

The Left Front distinguishes itself through its commitment to establishing various unions that advocate for the interests of workers, peasants, lower-ranking government officials, students, teachers, and others. The Trinamool Congress emphasises the importance of uniting unorganised sectors, marginalised people, the poor, women, and underprivileged people, as well as various identity-based groups. Thus, CPM is a much more cadre-based party. Since the Trinamool Congress does not have such a cadre base, the party has adopted various methods to keep the unorganised masses connected with the Trinamool Congress party.

### **Similarities between Left Front and Trinamool Congress Institutionalism**

As the two parties shifted roles from opposition to the ruling regime, they interpreted their power as the power of the people. After being elected, both the parties presented themselves as legitimate power holders. They simultaneously represent state power as well as people's power. They did not present themselves to the public as elites. Instead, they tried to establish their prowess as the power of the people and that the elites had occupied power so far, and finally, it is returning to the people. However, they aim to demonstrate that true power does not reside in their hands but rather belongs to the outsiders, i.e. the central government as the power centre, which had deprived West Bengal on different fronts. And by fighting them, they are trying to free the people from various deprivations.

The examination of West Bengal reveals distinct approaches to governance between the Left Front and TMC. Yet, both share a political aspiration to challenge the established status quo and effect societal transformation. Their endeavours reflect a commitment to addressing

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<sup>14</sup> Prof. Maidul Islam brought up this point in a private email exchange with the author. Maidul Islam, Email to author, August 29, 2023.

the needs of marginalised groups, promoting the concept of ‘popular sovereignty,’ safeguarding liberty and equality, and advancing a progressive democratic agenda.

### **Difference between Left Front and Trinamool Congress Institutionalism**

According to Ray Chaudhry, Smt. Mamata Banerjee was widely viewed as disrupting the ‘party society’ dominance during the CPI(M)-led Left Front government. This regime, characterised by the CPI(M)’s absolute control over local governmental bodies and society in rural West Bengal, allowed the party to act as the exclusive intermediary between citizens and the government. Banerjee’s arrival marked a refreshing departure from this hegemony, ushering in a new era of governance. Banerjee’s relentless efforts to revive the state bureaucracy exemplify the transformative power of AITC’s leader and organisational structure. This dynamic duo revolutionised the delivery of public goods and services to citizens, ushering in a new era that transcends the limitations of ‘party society’ during the Left Front regime.<sup>15</sup> In 2016, voters re-elected the TMC to power for a second term with a greater majority. Assessing Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee’s mandate gives insight into the increasing interplay between populist politics and bureaucracy. People familiar with her have stated that she saw the victory as an endorsement of the bureaucracy’s efforts to ensure the delivery of state services to communities, and she desired to collaborate more extensively.<sup>16</sup> The TMC’s notion of politico-bureaucratic relations positioned the bureaucracy as the primary fulcrum of local development processes. At the same time, political parties and elected officials who held a central role under the Left Front were demoted to a secondary position. This strategy has greatly enhanced the efficiency of public services in West Bengal compared to the previous years under the leadership of the Left Front.

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<sup>15</sup> Proma Ray Chaudhury, “The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India,” *Politics & Gender* 18, no. 4 (2022): 942–977.

<sup>16</sup> Subhasish Ray, “Bureaucracy Unbound? The End of Dominant Party Rule and the Politics-Administration Interface in West Bengal,” *India Review* 19, no. 1 (2020): 19.

The relationship between political and bureaucratic entities during the tenure of the Trinamool Congress exhibits characteristics of both the collaborative and the intrusive model. On the other hand, the relationship between political and bureaucratic entities during the tenure of the Left Front demonstrates characteristics of the intrusive model. The collaborative model<sup>17</sup> is distinguished by minimal role separation among political and bureaucratic elites, accompanied by significant bureaucratic autonomy. An essential aspect of the collaborative model is officials' remarkable impact on shaping the policy process. The intrusive model exhibits a significantly greater separation between elected officials and administrative personnel; also, bureaucrats' autonomy tends to be limited due to the influence of political actors on civil servants' routine operations.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Left Front's approach to state populism was more ideologically intensive and theoretically articulated by its cadres, the TMC's centre-left populism lacks a clear and coherent rationale for pursuing such populist policies. It appears to be primarily motivated by electoral calculations and a vague notion of providing services to the public. The Left understood the concept of relief, but they also had a vision, at least theoretically, of transitioning society from a bourgeois-landlord state to a people's democracy and, eventually, socialism.<sup>19</sup>

In politics, populism is defined by Ostiguy as the "flaunting of the low."<sup>20</sup> He introduces the concepts of "high" and "low" in politics and the high-low dimension, which refers to the various strategies used to engage with people based on sociological differences. Politicians at

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<sup>17</sup> Niheer Dasandi and Marc Esteve, "The Politics–Bureaucracy Interface in Developing Countries," *Public Administration and Development* 37, no. 4 (2017): 231–245.

<sup>18</sup> Dasandi and Esteve, "The Politics–Bureaucracy Interface in Developing Countries," 231–245.

<sup>19</sup> Prof. Maidul Islam brought up this point in a private email exchange with the author. Maidul Islam, Email to author, August 29, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Ostiguy, "Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 73–97.

the high exhibit a sense of decorum and adhere to proper etiquette and institutional protocols. Politicians in Low tend to exhibit less refinement and are more grounded, unrefined, and personalistic in their behaviour and the way their institutions operate. According to Ostiguy, “High and low have to do with ways of relating to people; as such, they go beyond ‘discourses’ that would be understood as mere words, and they include issues of accents, level of language, body language, gestures, ways of dressing, etc. As a way of relating to people, they also encompass the way of making decisions.”<sup>21</sup> Keeping this concept in mind, we can easily put the Left Front rule on the ‘high’ axis and the Trinamool Congress rule on the ‘low’ axis. Left-front politicians demonstrate a refined demeanour, embodying a sense of decorum while upholding established etiquette and institutional protocols—conversely, Smt. Mamata Banerjee, the leader of the Trinamool Congress and current Chief Minister of the state, displays a more straightforward demeanour that is often lacking in sophistication. Her approach is characterised by a grounded, direct and personal style, influencing her conduct and the functioning of her organisation.

Ostiguy<sup>22</sup> articulates that populism is marked by a distinctive political connection between a leader and their social foundation, formed and expressed through ‘low’ politico-cultural appeals that resonate and garner favourable responses within specific segments of society for socio-cultural reasons. We observe several ‘low’ politico-cultural traits in TMC leader Smt. Mamata Banerjee, including an emphasis on individual charisma, personalistic and assertive leadership, proximity to her constituents, and a propensity for swift and resolute decision-making. This is enabled by ‘low’ performative socio-cultural traits, including local dialects, a preference for informal language, vibrant and demonstrative expression, the embodiment of underprivileged people, and a tendency towards more expressive and vivid

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<sup>21</sup> Pierre Ostiguy, “The High and the Low in Politics: A Two-Dimensional Political Space for Comparative Analysis and Electoral Studies,” *Kellogg’s Foundation Working Paper* 360 (2009): 5.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Ostiguy and Benjamin Moffitt, “Who Would Identify with an “Empty Signifier?”: The Relational, Performative Approach to Populism” in *Populism in Global Perspective: A Performative and Discursive Approach*, ed. Pierre Ostiguy, Francisco Panizza, and Benjamin Moffitt (New York: Routledge, 2021), 51.

physical or facial gestures.

Mamata Banerjee's personal and personalistic style of governance often expands vertical accountability. Sometimes, the leaders override the authority of other accountable authorities in the state. On the other hand, the Left Front has adopted many reform-oriented policies within the legal and constitutional framework despite giving importance to its claim of constituent power. State populism has expanded into the realm of horizontal accountability. As a result, the expansion of vertical accountability was not seen much during the Left Front era.

The Left Front government tried to use its state power to dismantle the then-existing hegemonic structure and establish a new one. The new structure served as a tool for empowering socio-economically and politically underprivileged people. The first Left Front government implemented essential reform measures, including land reforms, securing the legal rights of sharecroppers, and establishing the panchayat raj system. Looking at the various steps taken during the first Left Front government in West Bengal (1977–1982), we can identify this government as a true example of state populism. Although there were some radical characteristics in the second and third terms of the Left Front government until 1991, we cannot call those periods quintessentially and essentially state populist. Neither can we deny that these two Left Front governments, from 1982 to 1987 and from 1987 to 1991, came forward to implement the steps taken by the first Left Front government. After 1990, the Left Front adopted a technocratic and managerial style of governance instead of populist institutionalism.

On the other hand, the Trinamool Congress evolved into a centre-left populist party during the 2006 Singur Movement. Centre-left populism may reflect a form of social democracy. The TMC government, a centre-left populist regime, aims to restore social democracy in the state through various welfare policies, programmes and schemes. The

Trinamool Congress, as a social democratic party, has taken many important steps in establishing distributive and social justice in the state, and these steps are mainly implemented through various governmental initiatives. Additionally, TMC is endeavouring to address the democratic needs of marginalised people by implementing various distributive and redistributive policies, recognising identities, and resolving the crisis of representation. State populism entails when a power bloc institutionalises and strengthens the conflict between the underprivileged and the elite; uses state power to disrupt the existing hegemonic structure and establish a new one; revives democratic institutions; unites the people against the elite; and implements various redistributive programs and democratic reforms. However, we cannot interpret the Trinamool Congress regime as a state populist regime due to the absence of many of these features of state populism in their genuine sense. By state populism, we only mean the implementation of various democratic reforms and radical initiatives by the radical left party.

### **Populism and its potential to alter the existing hegemonic order**

The populist project in Bengal can undoubtedly be seen as a tool that attempts to overthrow the existing hegemonic order, transform it, and limit it to a certain extent. The left-wing populism or Left Front state populist regime led by the Left Front came to power and was able to eradicate the feudal system in West Bengal and distribute land among the landless peasants; these measures fundamentally altered the socioeconomic and political realities of the rural poor and paved the way for the empowerment of oppressed and impoverished groups. As a result, Left Front state populism initially succeeded as a form of anti-establishment politics. Borrowing from Brading's understanding, such holistic transformation may be termed a 'radical revolution' instead of a 'passive revolution.' The radical revolution concept appears appropriate for explaining how a new progressive Left Front state populist regime was formed by overthrowing the existing hegemonic order. In his analysis of Venezuela under Chávez, Brading defines a radical revolution as follows: 'When a populist movement is determined to

displace old hegemonic practices with a new hegemonic project for the underprivileged, the appropriate theoretical term for it is radical revolution.’<sup>23</sup> He suggests a radical revolution is underway when a new hegemonic project emerges through a populist movement, replacing the old regime in favour of the underprivileged masses. Such a notion may also apply to West Bengal, where the formation of a left-wing progressive hegemony displaced the existing hegemonic structure through a Left Front state populist regime. The Left Front’s political project in Bengal dismantled the hegemonic status quo. It brought together the socioeconomically and politically oppressed masses to secure economic, social, and political justice. Thus, the Left Front’s democratic populist revolution did achieve some success, though it was short-lived.

In *Revolution and State in Modern Mexico*, Adam David Morton explains Antonio Gramsci’s notion of passive revolution in two easy steps: the first one is “a revolution without mass participation, or ‘a revolution from above’, involving elite-engineered social and political reform that draws on foreign capital and associated ideas while lacking a national-popular base.”<sup>24</sup> The other one is a ‘sense to capture how a revolutionary form of political transformation is pressed into a conservative project of restoration . . . passive revolution is linked to insurrectionary mass mobilisation from below.’<sup>25</sup> Ranabir Samaddar argues that the period of Left Front rule from 1977 to 2011 was an era of ‘passive revolution,’ which implies that the ‘lower classes’ came to power through electoral means, leading to the spread of left populism. The Left, through its participation in popular democracy, would create an epoch of passive revolution in protest against bourgeois society.<sup>26</sup> Echoing scholars like Samaddar, the

<sup>23</sup> Rayan Brading, “From Passive to Radical Revolution in Venezuela’s Populist Project,” *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 6 (2014): 49.

<sup>24</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).

<sup>25</sup> Adam David Morton, *Revolution and State in Modern Mexico: The Political Economy of Uneven Development* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 38–39.

<sup>26</sup> Ranbir Samaddar, *Passive Revolution in West Bengal: 1977–2011* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013), 170–71, 230–34.

policies of the Left in West Bengal, excluding the first tenure of the Left Front government, may be cited as an example of a passive revolution. Their activities during the period were reformist, not transformative. It is “passive” in the sense that important popular policies like cooperative farming to reap the benefits of land reform policy, promoting small and medium enterprises with government support, reopening closed mills and factories in the interest of employment, reopening closed factories under state supervision—none of these happened.<sup>27</sup> With the implementation of a new industrial policy in West Bengal in 1994, the Left turned to corporate capital, primarily to protect the class interests of the educated middle class. From 2006 onwards, the seventh Left Front government even acquired land (which is the first step towards the primitive accumulation of capital) from those who got land leases (legal rights) with the help of the first or second Left Front governments after 1978, to expand corporate capital with the aid of state apparatus and coercion. We cite this as a prime example of transforming from a radical to a passive revolution. As such, the overall epoch of the Left Front government may be divided into two parts: the “radical revolution” of 1977 to 1982 and the “passive revolution” of 1983 to 2011.

Because many TMC supporters are from the unorganised sector, their policies reflect opposition to expanding foreign capital in retail, arbitrary acquisition of land, hands-off policy on SEZs, and strong opposition to twenty-first-century hegemonic neoliberalism. Although these opposition policies do not have the power to transform the capitalist system, they constitute a form of counterhegemonic resistance against the rule of the capital. This, in turn, may be reflected by the term ‘radical reformism.’ Mouffe defines ‘radical reformism’ as “that which accepts the principles of legitimacy (of liberal democracy) but attempts to implement a different hegemonic formation.”<sup>28</sup> Such analysis from the lens of radical reformism will shed

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<sup>27</sup> Atig Ghosh, “People, Politics and Protests VIII: Left Front Government in West Bengal (1971–1982): Considerations on ‘Passive Revolution’ and the Question of Caste in Bengal Politics,” *Policies and Practices* 93 (2017): 3–28.

<sup>28</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018), 28.



a different light on the state's role. In the Gramscian understanding, the state is a battleground for opposing forces and struggles for dominance, which may be analogous to the application of radical reformism, in which the state is understood not as a unified whole but as a collection of wildly divergent functions and aspirations bound together by common hegemonic practices and actions. The populist policies of the TMC may not have had the power to entirely transform the framework of capitalist structures. Still, they acted as an agency of counterhegemonic resistance to the rule and expansion of capital. This corresponds to Mouffe's idea of radical reformism. Although this anti-capitalist rhetoric does not have the radical capacity to transform the nature of capitalist (re-)production, they do provide a democratic anti-establishment (and populist) outlet for the articulation and incorporation of popular demands.

For Chatterjee, populism might become a tool for a passive revolution of capital. What it is not, however, is a counterhegemonic revolt against the domination of capital,<sup>29</sup> which may be a simplification. Left-wing populist counterhegemonic politics may be credited for significantly impacting West Bengal's fundamental socioeconomic transformation. In this sense, left-wing populism has not failed as anti-establishment politics but has enabled the mainstreaming of the voices of the marginalised and distressed within popular democratic politics. As is evident from the study of West Bengal, the populist projects of the Left Front and TMC are different in their approaches to governance. Still, the political aspiration to usher in a change against the established status quo and transform society to voice and act on the popular demands of the underdogs, establish the idea of popular sovereignty, protect liberty and equality, and expand a radical democratic project can be found in both populist projects.

The extent of displacement of the old hegemonic order and the transformation of the status quo depends much on the ideological and articulatory practices of a populist project.

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<sup>29</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *I am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 144.

Even before the assumption of power, populist projects could unite the socioeconomically and politically oppressed sections of society against the oppressors to establish economic, social, and political justice, equality, and democracy. This radical force can transform the existing status quo. However, what distinguishes left and centre-left populism is the extent of this desire and ideological resolve to usher in a holistic transformation or counterhegemonic social change, which can be seen in the case of populist politics in West Bengal.

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