

# **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**