

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

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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 of West Bengal 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 clearly reflects governance in action. This thesis argues 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 1991 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.

Literature on Populism

Discourse Theory and a discursive-performative approach to Populism: Ernesto Laclau constructed the concept of “the political” by incorporating the notion of “antagonism.”¹ He 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

¹ 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> 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).

between scattered social and political demands.² Populist rhetoric and praxis appeal directly to the political component of social connections. Although the ‘political’ relates to the confrontation and creation of diverse social ties, populism entails the division of society into opposing camps in the never-ending battle for hegemony.³ 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.”⁴

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 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.’⁵ 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.’⁶ 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 essential to recognise that it goes beyond simply depicting or distorting the people and their interests. Rather, it actively shapes the concept of the people. Laclau constructs

² David Howarth, ed., *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, Populism and Critique* (London: Routledge, 2015), 13.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What's in a Name?,” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 37–38.

⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶ Cited in David Howarth, ed., *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, Populism and Critique* (London: Routledge, 2015), 266.

his theory by starting with ‘demands,’ which he considers the fundamental building block.⁷ 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. If 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, then 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, these distinct demands may begin to establish connections with each other, resulting in the formation of 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. Our 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. Therefore, 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.⁸ The empty signifier might refer to several entities, such as a political leader, a slogan, or simply the concept of ‘the people’. The empty signifier is a demand

⁷ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2006), 74.

⁸ Lasse Thomassen, “Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and the discursive approach,” in *Research handbook on populism*, ed. Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2024), 144.

inside the chain of equivalence. It lacks any specific meaning or substance, allowing it to symbolise and reflect the entire chain.

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 side 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.⁹ Populist discourse stands in contrast to institutional discourses prioritising the logic of difference.

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 “flaunting of ‘the low’”¹⁰. 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.”¹¹ 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.”¹² In this context,

⁹ Ibid., 145.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism Performance, Political Style and Representation* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016), 45.

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.”¹³ According to Moffitt,¹⁴ 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. In the Introduction, I have engaged with the Ideational approach to populism by discussing the writings of Cas Mudde,¹⁵ Stanley,¹⁶ Albertazzi and McDonnell,¹⁷ Rooduijn¹⁸ and Müller.¹⁹ Also, I have dealt with the Strategic approach to populism by engaging with the writings of Jansen,²⁰ Kenny,²¹ Weyland,²² Roberts,²³ Barr,²⁴ and Urbinati.²⁵ 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

¹³ Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism Performance, Political Style and Representation*, 38.

¹⁴ Ostiguy and Moffitt, “Who Would Identify With An “Empty Signifier”?: The Relational, Performative Approach to Populism,” 51.

¹⁵ Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” 543.

¹⁶ Ben Stanley, “The thin ideology of populism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 1 (2008): 95–110.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Matthijs Rooduijn, “The nucleus of populism: In search of the lowest common denominator,” *Government and Opposition* 49, no. 4 (2014): 572–598.

¹⁹ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

²⁰ Robert s. Jansen, “Populist mobilization: A new theoretical approach to populism,” *Sociological Theory* 29, no. 2 (2011): 75.

²¹ 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 Storkirch and Alan Scott (London: Routledge, 2021).

²² 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).

²³ 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.

²⁴ Robert R. Barr, “Populists, outsiders and anti-establishment politics,” *Party Politics* 15, no. 1 (2009): 29–48.

²⁵ 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.

the strategic approach views populism as “a political strategy that revolves around an individual politician. Specifically, populism rests on personalistic leadership.”²⁶

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.²⁷ Stavrakakis questions how to theoretically distinguish an equivalent discourse centred around ‘the people’ when populism becomes synonymous with politics. Any signifier could potentially serve as the focal/nodal point for a populist discourse.²⁸ He argues that the concern here is that populism loses its conceptual originality as a tool for specific political analysis.²⁹ In their analysis,³⁰ 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 politics, which prompts a critical examination of how one might distinguish between these notions. 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.’³¹

²⁶ Weyland, “Populism: A Political–Strategic approach,” 56.

²⁷ Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?,” 47; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 67.

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ 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): 10.

³¹ Yannis Stavrakakis, Alexandros Kioupkiolis, 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 and its enemies on the other. This discourse also tries to construct the people and their enemies in two 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 nationalism, ethnicity, or racism, with populism occupying a peripheral position. Furthermore, the master signifiers of those discourses representing 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. Instead, 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 categorise 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 right³² and

³² 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.

left.³³ Not all discourses equally incorporate these two elements. We can characterise discourses incorporating these elements as populist nationalism or nationalist populism.³⁴

Discourse Theory in Populism Research: At the most formal level, the term discourse encapsulates the discursive nature of discourse theory, which views the social as a discourse.³⁵ Discourse in discourse theory refers to ‘a horizon of meaningful practices and significant differences.’³⁶ It is a context that gives rise to distinct identities across all objects and subjects and enables individuals to engage with their living world.³⁷ In this context, ‘discourse’ transcends words and ideas; it encompasses all ‘systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects’³⁸ through creating antagonisms and delineating political boundaries. 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 diverse texts to identify the discourses (as a framework/structures of meaning) that different writings utilize, replicate, alter, and question.³⁹ Interest pertains to the manner in which discourses are “embodied in a range of texts, speeches, and signifying sequences of all sorts.”⁴⁰ Discourse theory fundamentally embodies a discursive methodology. The discourse is presented as a

³³ Jacopo Custodi, “Nationalism and Populism on the Left: The Case of Podemos,” *Nations and Nationalism* 27, no. 3 (2021): 705–20.

³⁴ 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, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2024), 23–31.

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ David Howarth, *Discourse* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 2000), 9.

³⁷ Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: SAGE, 2002), 30–34.

³⁸ Howarth and Stavrakakis, “Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis,” 3–4.

³⁹ De Cleen, Goyvaerts, Carpentier, Glynos, and Stavrakakis, “Moving discourse theory forward: A five-track proposal for future research,” 22–46.

⁴⁰ 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.

framework/structure of meaning. The emphasis is on the dynamics of discourses in society rather than functioning as a method for analysing texts.⁴¹

Institutionalism as a manifestation of governance: Institutional discourse serves as a clear reflection of governance in action. This research posits that institutionalism mirrors the essence of governance. Institutionalism,⁴² conceptualized by Laclau in his later work⁴³ and elaborated upon by Griggs and Howarth,⁴⁴ entails the strategic formulation of demands that establishes a primarily non-conflict relationship between those making and receiving the demands. 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.⁴⁵ The second logic is the ‘logic of governance’ based on the government’s implementation strategy before any articulation of democratic demands.⁴⁶ In contrast, the third logic is the ‘logic of accountability’ connected to the logic of governance, fulfilling poll promises made to the people before getting governmental power during election campaigns.⁴⁷

The Concept of State Populism within Institutional Discourse: State populism denotes populism in power. It is a combination of populism and institutionalism, primarily a populist tendency within an institutional discourse. As a combination of populism and institutionalism, we can assert that state populism presents four distinct logics. Firstly, both populism and state

⁴¹ De Cleen, Goyvaerts, Carpentier, Glynos, and Stavrakakis, “Moving discourse theory forward: A five-track proposal for future research,” 22-46.

⁴² Seongcheol Kim, *Discourse, Hegemony, and Populism in the Visegrad Four* (London, UK: Routledge, 2022), 39.

⁴³ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*.

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*.

⁴⁶ Maidul Islam, *Political Theory and South Asian Counter-Narratives* (London: Routledge, 2022), 183.

⁴⁷ 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.

populism adhere to the logic of equivalence. As pointed out earlier, three types of logic define institutionalism: the logic of difference, the logic of governance, and the logic of accountability. This research has 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 by establishing a new one; revives democratic institutions; unites the people against the elite; and implements various redistributive programs 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 eliminates the specificity of this concept. This study aims 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 to rise to power in West Bengal. Populist practices emerged from the dichotomous platform constructed when the alternative political project against the then-hegemonic power bloc emerged in the late 1970s by the Left Front and from 2006 onwards by the TMC. The Left Front and the TMC created an underdog sentiment that constitutes a pro-poor and pro-people project, leading 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 1970s and late 2006s. 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 interests of 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 various 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 ten years of the Trinamool Congress's rise to power to see if a populist party truly institutionalises its claimed level of populism.

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,⁴⁸ discourse analysis is the process of seeing empirical

⁴⁸ 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 J. Norval, and Yannis Stavrakakis (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), 4-5.

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.”⁴⁹ 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.’⁵⁰ This allows discourse theorists to incorporate and refine various techniques and methods in linguistic and literary theory that are consistent with their ontological presumptions. Various 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.⁵¹

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.

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, “But, beyond... (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon),” *Critical Inquiry* 13, no.1 (1986): 165.

⁵⁰ Howarth and Stavrakakis, “Introducing discourse theory and political analysis,” 4.

⁵¹ Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999), 57- 59, 76- 78.

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 techniques⁵² 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 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.⁵³

Chapter Outline

The thesis consists of four main chapters, apart from the Introduction and Conclusion. The main highlights of the thesis chapters and their important contents with the main subsections are as follows.

Introduction

- Review of literature on Populism
- Review of Literature on Populism in Opposition and in Power
- Theorising Populism: Discursive, Socio-Cultural, and Performative Approaches
- Discourse Theory in Populism Research
- Review of literature on Institutionalism
- Review of literature on State Populism
- Consolidation of populism in West Bengal politics
- Justification of the Time Frame
- Research Gaps

⁵² Stavrakakis, Kioupkiolis, Katsambekis, Siomos, and Garefi, Background Paper from the International Conference, 12.

⁵³ 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.

Research questions
 Research objectives
 Research Methodology
 Chapter Outline

Chapter One: *Left Front Populism*

Rise of Left Front Populism 1950– 1977
 Consolidation of Left Front State Populism 1977– 1991

Chapter Two: *Crisis of Left Front Populism*

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Similarities and differences between Left Front and Trinamool Congress Populism
 Similarities and differences between Left Front and Trinamool Congress Institutionalism
 Populism and the question of altering the existing hegemonic order

After presenting the relevant literature review, pointing out the research gaps, asking the specific research questions and elaborating on the research methodology in the Introduction of the dissertation, let me briefly outline the chapters and their central arguments.

Chapter One: *Left Front Populism*

The dichotomous discourse and practices of the Left Front prior to assuming power in West Bengal are defined by the concept of ‘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 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.⁵⁴ 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/are analysed. Finally, this research attempts to determine whether this populist, polarised discourse threatens democracy or serves as a corrective measure that strengthens it.

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 marginalized 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).⁵⁵ The Left Front, by consolidating the various unfulfilled democratic demands of these marginalized 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 categorized 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 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

⁵⁴ 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.

⁵⁵ Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 10.

establishment/elite and the people/underprivileged as an up/down spital metaphor. The elite represents an upward group, while the underprivileged represent a downward group.

According to Venizelos⁵⁶, 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. 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. The 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 marginalized people. This pertains to an electoral address by veteran CPIM leader Jyoti Basu in 1977.⁵⁷ He was appealing to the people that the “Left Front embodied the interests of the poor. Cast your vote for us to secure a majority in the Assembly.”

Consolidation of Left Front State Populism 1977– 1991: From 1977 to 2011, i.e., for thirty-four consecutive years—seven consecutive terms—the Left Front government continued to rule West Bengal. No other place in the world has witnessed such consecutive left governments in a parliamentary democratic set-up. Looking at the various steps taken during the first Left Front government in West Bengal (1977–1982), we can identify the then Left Front government as a true example of state populism. Although there was some radical character in the second and third terms of the Left Front government until 1991, we cannot call those periods as state populism. However, we cannot deny that the second and the third Left Front

⁵⁶ Giorgos Venizelos, *Populism in Power: Discourse and Performativity in SYRIZA and Donald Trump* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 199.

⁵⁷ 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>

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. Populist slogans, 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 united the underdogs when they were in opposition and advanced various democratic movements during the 1950s and 1960s until the mid-1970s. 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 agrarian workers, middle and small-scale cultivators, organised labour, 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. Their slogans encapsulate the true significance of state populism. Once the Left-Front government came to power, it institutionalized the struggles of marginalized people against the existing establishment.

Additionally, the first left-front 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, youth, 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 and examinations, 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 decided to release all political prisoners.⁵⁸ Simultaneously, a three-tier governance system was established to include rural people in the governance process and decentralise political and administrative power. Particularly, this entails the empowerment of socially and politically marginalised and oppressed peoples.

Chapter Two: *Crisis of Left Front Populism*

According to Lofgren, the Left's fundamental dilemma was that the reforms of the 1970s and 1980s were incapable of sustaining constructive political momentum. A decrease in agricultural development resulted in increasingly smaller landholdings. The growing 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 fasten industrial expansion to revive the economy and create employment.⁵⁹ 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, a new industrial policy was implemented that "recognise[d] the significance and vital role of the private sector in delivering rapid development in the economy."⁶⁰ The expansion of the neoliberal policies of industrialisation 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 violent occurrences in Singur and Nandigram (state violent action against the protesting farmers) precipitated an intense anti-Left agitation.⁶¹

⁵⁸ 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>

⁵⁹ Hans Lofgren, "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): 1–12.

⁶⁰ Government of West Bengal, *Policy Statement on Industrial Development* (Calcutta, India: Government of West Bengal, 1994), 7–8.

⁶¹ Sanjib Mukherjee, "The Use and Abuse of Democracy in West Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 44 (2007): 101–8.

The decline of the Left Front can be traced back to its ignoring of the democratic demands for basic services. According to the 2011 Census data, West Bengal lagged behind the national average in access to electricity, drinking water, banking services, and other essential services like access to television. Even after 34 years of leftist rule, the state only performed moderately 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. 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.⁶² 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. Promoting certain groups' interests at the expense of others resulted in deep divisions within their "party society," which weakened the Left Front's dominance in Bengal. 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" all led to the Left Front's control ebbing in West Bengal.⁶³

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 traditional political discourse and was practically unable to prioritise the fulfilment of the democratic demands of the marginalised groups. The party,

⁶² Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*.

⁶³ Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, "Left in the Lurch: The Demise of the World's Longest Elected Regime?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 3 (2010): 51.

intended to represent the working class and peasantry, experienced an unprecedented concentration of Bhadrolok (Brahmins, Kayasthas, and Baidyas comprising the three powerful upper castes in Bengal) within the Bengal Left Front government.⁶⁴ The communists' zeal for secular politics blinded them to the calls for social justice. The working class and peasantry's situations were unfamiliar to the leadership of the Bhadrolok Left. 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, the rural agrarian and the 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 the Trinamool Congress offered at the opportune moment.

Chapter Three: *Rise of Trinamool Congress Populism*

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 leader of the party, Smt. Mamata Banerjee. I use a psychosocial or psychoanalytic framework in this chapter to understand Smt. Banerjee's charismatic appeal, drawing inspiration from anthropologist James Scott's findings about charismatic leadership.

⁶⁴ 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, India: Routledge, 2009), 361–92.

I have tried to explain a leader's charisma or charismatic appeal within a discursive methodological framework. In his article,⁶⁵ Stavrakakis argued that political anthropologist James Scott provides an intriguing investigation of charisma, uncovering the intricate mechanisms behind its creation and consolidation.⁶⁶ According to Scott's general framework, each 'social order' or 'political institution', every process of dominance, 'generates a hegemonic public conduct and backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power.'⁶⁷ As a consequence, two transcripts are released: one is public, and the other is hidden. Therefore, I argue that charisma is not an attribute that an individual possesses; it is more closely associated with socially generated reciprocity than with personal magnetism.⁶⁸ 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.'⁶⁹ According to Scott, when we emphasise the significance of the hidden narrative in the social creation of charisma, we reinstate the mutual exchange at the heart of this idea.⁷⁰

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

⁶⁵ Yannis Stavrakakis, "Populism in Power: Syriza's Challenge to Europe," *Juncture* 21, no. 4 (2015): 279.

⁶⁶ James Campbell Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (London, UK: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁶⁷ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, xii.

⁶⁸ Stavrakakis, "Populism in Power: Syriza's Challenge to Europe," 279.

⁶⁹ Scott, *Ibid.*, 221.

⁷⁰ Scott, *Ibid.*

transform into a charismatic leader. As she initiated the process of presenting and consolidating various off-stage discourses against the Left Front, her charisma gradually began to enhance. This marked the beginning of the Left Front's decline and the Trinamool Congress's emergence as a significant player in Bengal politics.

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, urban poor, unorganised sector workers, and rural and urban middle- and lower-class people. Such diverse groups were outraged against the Left Front's partisan mentality and cadre Raj. Significant sections among the groups mentioned above expressed dissatisfaction with the Left Front's rule by the 2009 Lok Sabha elections.

Chapter Four: Ascendancy of Trinamool Congress Institutionalism

Centre-Left Populism and the Trinamool Congress: According to Islam, Trinamool evolved as a centre-left populist party during the 2006 Singur movement.⁷¹ The centre-left populism may reflect a form of social democracy.⁷² The TMC's election manifesto also reflected their aspirations to restore social democracy in Bengal. Trinamool's aversion to Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and state-led land acquisition, along with its opposition to foreign direct investment (FDI) in the retail sector, indicated the party's focus on the informal sector. The TMC grew in popularity due to its opposition to the central government's policies of cutting interest rates on savings, raising fuel prices, delaying the implementation of the National Rural

⁷¹ Maidul Islam, "Electoral Democracy and the Nature of State Populism in West Bengal," (unpublished working paper), presented at the Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata conference on 1 September 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.

⁷² Óscar García Agustín, *Left-Wing Populism: The Politics of the People* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2020), 23–24.

Employment Guarantee Act and other social welfare policies, and advocating for strengthening federalism. Furthermore, Trinamool's humanitarian stance on the Rohingya issue and its resistance to the Citizenship Amendment Bill in Assam have become a clear and consistent response to the right-wing populist politics of the centre under Narendra Modi's prime ministership. In contrast to right-wing populist rhetoric, Trinamool's centre-left populism combines a pluralistic political approach with distributive measures that significantly benefit the underprivileged.⁷³

After 2011, the TMC-led West Bengal government began providing numerous forms of support to the poor, four of which have garnered broad public support: Khadyasathi (rice and wheat at a price of Rs. 2), Sabooj Sathi (free bicycles for children in schools), Kanyashree (cash benefits for girls to complete their studies), and Yubashree (financial aid to the youth). Such schemes have helped TMC consolidate its mass support base in the midst of an agricultural debt crisis in rural Bengal. At the same time, Trinamool was able to attract informal workers, many noncorporate entrepreneurs, and the reserves of unemployed labour. A post-election study conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies revealed that voters felt that the TMC government performed significantly better than the Left Front in three areas of public services: road conditions, power supply, and water supply.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Examining populism in power through the discursive/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,

⁷³ Islam, "Electoral Democracy and the Nature of State Populism in West Bengal,"

⁷⁴ Jyotiprasad Chatterjee and Suprio Basu, *Left Front and After: Understanding the Dynamics of Poriborton in West Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage, 2020), 193.

above all, how a sense of community is constructed in a relational manner.”⁷⁵ The primary inquiry is how populists manage to successfully present themselves as outsiders while operating within established institutions. 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 those on the bottom and those on top.”⁷⁶ Therefore, to examine institutionalized 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.

Similarities between Left Front and Trinamool Congress Populism: In both regimes, when they came to power, a discursive construction appeared to divide society into two parts. This division heavily emphasizes social antagonism. This social antagonism serves as the foundation for creating two antagonistic fronts. On one side are the people, i.e., those who are underprivileged, and on the other side, there are the elite, i.e., those who hold established power. Both regimes have endeavoured to represent the popular will in opposition to the established powers. Discursive practices construct these two categories of people and the elite, leading to changes in their ideas across regimes. However, the concepts of equivalence, emptiness, and antagonism remain consistent in both the Left and the Trinamool discourses.

Differences between Left Front and Trinamool Congress Populism: The populist upsurge in West Bengal from the 1950s until the end of the Left Front government in 2011 was largely party-centric. The Left Front, under the leadership of the Communist Party of India in the 1950s and early 1960s and later the collective leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) from the mid-1960s, primarily initiated the popular upsurge. By the mid-1970s, the restoration

⁷⁵ Venizelos, *Populism in Power Discourse and Performativity in SYRIZA and Donald Trump*, 36.

⁷⁶ Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia, *Seven Essays on Populism: For a Renewed Theoretical Perspective*, trans. George Ciccariello-Maher (Medford, USA: Polity Press, 2021), 67.

of democracy in Bengal served as an empty signifier and a nodal point. It was especially effective in bringing together individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds in both rural and urban West Bengal. The Left was able to create a popular frontier, mainly between the lower and middle classes, against those of the Congress government of the time and the Jotedar and Zamindar classes by uniting the various unfulfilled democratic demands into a chain of equivalence. This contributed to their victory in the 1977 elections. At this time, the leftists joined the struggle to establish justice for all the oppressed and marginalised groups rather than working for just one class.

On the other hand, Srimati Mamata Banerjee, the supremo of the Trinamool Congress party, spearheaded the populist uprising in West Bengal in 2011. It was a leader-centric rise. Here, the word ‘Paribartan’ (change) acted 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. Later in the 2016 assembly elections, the party leader’s name, ‘Mamata’, acted as a nodal point when the popular slogan, *Jonogoner Khomota tai Banglay chai Mamata* (To ensure people’s power Bengal needs Mamata).

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. They did not present themselves to the public as elites. Instead, they tried to establish their prowess as the power of the people and discursively constructed a view that the elites had occupied power so far. Finally, it is returning to the people. However, they aim to demonstrate that true power does not reside in their hands but belongs to outsiders, i.e., the central government is the power centre, which deprived West Bengal on different fronts. And by fighting them, they are trying to free the people from various deprivations.

Difference between Left Front and Trinamool Congress Institutionalism: According to Ray Chaudhry,⁷⁷ 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. In 2016, voters re-elected the TMC to power for a second term with a greater majority than in 2011. The assessment of the mandate gives insight into the increasing interplay between populist politics and bureaucracy. People familiar with Mamata have stated that she saw the victory as an endorsement of the bureaucracy’s efforts to ensure the delivery of state services to communities. She also desired to collaborate more extensively.⁷⁸ The TMC’s notion of politico-bureaucratic relations positioned the bureaucracy as the primary catalyst 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. In contrast to the previous Left Front rule, this strategy has greatly enhanced the delivery of public services in West Bengal.

Populism and its potential to alter the existing hegemonic order: According to 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,⁷⁹ 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

⁷⁷ Proma Ray Chaudhury, “The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India,” *Politics & Gender* 18, no. 4 (2022): 942–977.

⁷⁸ 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.

⁷⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *I am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 144.

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 the 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. Even prior to 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.

Countersigned by the

Supervisor:

Candidate:

Dated:

Dated:

