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## Welfare, Populism and Freebies in Today's India

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#### ABSTRACT

The current welfare populism is an acknowledgement that more than 30 years of economic reform has not delivered trickle-down to the poor. In addition, what is important to note is not only the welfare being delivered, but the modus operandi of the welfare. It is sought to be delivered by means of caste-counts rather than class-numbers. This clearly indicates that identity politics is combined with welfare. This mode of delivery of welfare not only is temporary, and is likely to increase demands for more populism, but also strengthens the primordial identities of the social groups that are being addressed. What is at stake in this debate is not whether or not welfare is needed, which is unquestionable, but the ways and means through which welfare is being delivered. This mode of delivery of welfare, is likely to increase caste and religious identity politics in the future, while welfare itself would be short lived, as fiscal and financial constraints emerge to the fore all too quickly. In this context what is needed is to re-think, not the question of whether or not welfare--which is not questioned here-- but how and through what means. A more sustained welfare through long term safeguards, that does not depend on the vagaries of identity politics, is called for in this address.

**Keywords:** Welfare, Populism, Identity politics, Liberal democracy, Indian politics

### INTRODUCTION

Of late the nature of Indian politics has been changing. More and more governments are adopting welfare measures of some kind or the other. This is the policy environment in which both the Central and State governments have been announcing and adopting welfare measures. This raises many questions. Why welfare measures? Why now? Are they populist measures? Are they simply momentary, electoral freebies? My argument is that political parties both at the Centre and the State levels have not only been announcing implementing some or the other kind of welfare measures, they also are implementing them according to the logics of identity politics. The point is that these measures are often used to bolster the identity-based vote banks. In the process some

welfare is delivered, but the identitarian basis of democracy gets strengthened. This is true of both the political party at the Centre, which identifies itself with a particular majoritarian community and the opposition-led state governments which often emphasize the plurality of politics in India but all the same play identitarian politics. Therefore, I address the questions raised above in the following.

### WHY WELFARE? WHY NOW?

Indian political parties current focus on welfare is born of the fact that more than 30 years of liberalization has not benefited a major section of the people. The current emphasis is a recognition of the fact. Earlier on Hariss and Corbridge<sup>3</sup> argued that both liberalization of the economy



and rise of Hindu nationalism are nothing but elite led movements to protect their interests in a polity where there has been a constant rise of the lower classes. The thesis forwarded by Harriss and Corbridge<sup>3</sup> may only be partially true, for liberalization has lifted considerable numbers from poverty by creating some opportunities for employment. The same however can no way be said of the second aspect emphasised by them: the Hindu nationalism. The latter has been both identitarian and populist, in a democracy where the Hindu religious population constitutes nearly 80 percent. Therefore, the twin 'revolutions from above' or reactions of the elite to the emergence of masses into politics have heralded both the questions of relative poverty and identitarian politics.

The question of liberalization is that it has benefitted the erstwhile middle class more than it has the erstwhile poor. The emergence of the 400 million middle class has raised the questions not only of inequality but also of poverty. As is common knowledge poverty and inequality always are relative terms. They are experienced economically, socially and politically as relative terms. The point is that liberalization by lifting the incomes of the middle class has increased relative poverty and inequality while at the same time increased the aspirations of the poor to reach the income and life opportunities of middle and upper classes. Thus, today's call for welfare is an attempt to meet the desperate call for bridging the gap between the middle class that benefited from economic growth and the vast majority of the people that did not.

Reasons for the failure of liberalization to lift the lower classes from relative poverty are the lack of structural transformation in the country; the slowdown of agricultural growth; the relatively slow growth of industry. And the low participation rate of women in economic activity. All these have limited the scope of widespread participation of a majority in the economic activity—the 600 million – these are left out of the growth process. And this population is aspirational and the welfare policies of today fill the gap created by the liberalization process that benefited the 400 million middle class and the 600 million that are left out from benefiting the process. The point is not only economic but also political. And part of the political answer to the bridging of the increasing economic gap and containing the unrest resulting from it comes from populism.

### POPULISM: THE INDIAN VARIANT

Populism is defined in many ways. The contemporary connotation of populism is very different from that of the Narodniks of the nineteenth century Russia or the Peoples Party of the United States. The current definitions are closer to those provided by Muller and Edward Shils in the mid-twentieth century and differ somewhat even from that. Muller defined populism as

The core claim of populism is [...] a moralized form of anti-pluralism. Populist actors not committed to this claim are simply not populists. Populism requires a *pars pro toto* [i.e.] argument and a claim to exclusive representation, with both understood in a moral, as opposed to empirical, sense. There can be no populism, in other words, without someone speaking in the name of the people as a whole. (Müller, 2016,p.20)

(as quoted in Oswald, Shafer and Borda,2022)<sup>7</sup>

Edward Shils defined populism as:

Populism proclaims that the will of the people as such is supreme over every other standard, over the standards of traditional institutions, over the autonomy of institutions and over the will of other strata. Populism identifies the will of the people with justice and morality [...] and in the ,direct relationship of the people and their leader unmediated by institutions. Populism is not confined to the left and is not confined to the lower classes. (Shils, 1956 (1996), p. 98).

(as quoted in Oswald, Shafer and Borda,2022)<sup>7</sup>

Current populism in India, both on the left and the right, follows the above criteria. The trend is towards denying pluralism, overriding the liberal democratic institutions and to speak in terms of the authentic and pure people versus the corrupt elite. Justice and claims concerning justice form the sole monopoly of the pure and authentic people vis-à-vis the corrupt elite. This discourse has been going on India for some time now. And this is par of both the discourse of the extreme right as well as that of the extreme left.

While Jafferlot and Tillin<sup>5</sup> argued that populism is not a new phenomenon in India, the 'neo-politics' in India have quite a number of features that are new(the word 'neo' meaning new). These are that the politics emphasize not only welfare but identities. The dispersal of welfare is sought to be done through identitarian markers. For the ruling BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party) the principal identitarian group is the Hindu majority. And for the opposition Congress party it is caste identitarian marker. The Congress party seems to have taken the arguments made in the early 1990s of 'Mandal versus Kamandal' to the logical extreme. The argument put forward by the Congress Party is that 'rights—according—to—the—numbers' or the same in Hindi—*Jitni aabadi--utni haq---* thus while the BJP intends to mobilize the people and dispense welfare in terms of Hindu – defined in a very expansive territorial sense—the Congress party seems to mobilize people in terms of caste numbers. Both the parties and their coalitions thus define the nation in exclusionary terms. Because both religion and caste operate not in an inclusive manner but in exclusionary



ways. And both parties are intolerant of liberal opposition to their agendas.

Thus, Indian variant of populism—espoused by both dominant parties—have some common features. They identify the fact that more than 30 years of liberalization has not benefited all the population in equal measure. Second that welfare has to substitute the structural change in the Indian economy—the latter which is not taking place. Therefore, the question is how to go about welfare. The dominant paradigm identified in welfare by the BJP is through the Public- Private-Partnership route. Many types of health and welfare policies are designed this way. While the Congress party, intends to dole out welfare directly by identifying the beneficiaries through the markers of caste. It is my view in the long run, both are unsustainable; and instead of laying foundations for sustainable welfare end up increasing the identitarian expectations and politics.

What can be done about the phenomenon of populism? This question depends on the very nature of populism. Populism denies plurality; overrides the liberal democratic institutions to the extent of undermining their institutional integrity. Populism while operating within the liberal democratic system is against the same. Therefore, the best way to deal with populism, at any rate in my view, is to emphasize the institutions and processes of liberal democracy. Both the liberal democratic political institutions that are built through tremendous hard work over the years have to be defended and strengthened. And so are the processes of liberal democracy. It is true that the delivery of social and political justice is a slow and tardy process when we choose liberal democratic institutions. However, in the long run the best way to ensure justice and better governance—including rule of law and due process of law, --for which populists have so much contempt both on the extreme right and the left.

All said, do we have to be contemptuous about the 'Neo'-policies? I do not think so. The populist welfare policies, even when they are not really fiscally or politically sustainable, do deliver some welfare. The ordinary people who benefit from them do see improvement in their immediate circumstances; in that sense there is a reason to see them in positive light. The point is that the damage they do to the polity and economy is in the long run. They are often found not only fiscally unviable, but they also strengthen the identitarian basis of liberal democracy, which robs the prefix 'liberal' from liberal democracy. Populist democracies are often illiberal democracies.

The populism that we are debating today is not agrarian populism as was the case with Narodnik theorists and the American populists. What we are witnessing is a mild form of welfare populism with identitarian overtones. What we need to worry about is not the consequences of welfare—for welfare should always, always be welcome—but the

identitarian sub-text to the welfare. In the case of BJP, it is religious identitarian politics; in the case of the Congress party, it is the caste-based identitarian politics. Both are deleterious to the long run health of the Indian polity. Neo policies thus, hurt liberal democracy—to the extent that they breed an illiberal democracy—more than the welfare that they deliver.

So far, we have discussed only the right populism of the Congress and the BJP. Which champion the markets, market-based welfare in the case of BJP and direct caste-based welfare in the case of the Congress party. But populism is not the preserve of the right-wing parties alone. Populism is also to be found in the extreme left-wing policies. The same phenomenon of monopolizing the voice of 'the people' and speaking in terms of 'the people' is to be found in the extreme left-wing politics as well. Thus, when we are critiquing populism of the right, we should also be cautious about the populism of the left. Populist 'moral coercion' (Gramsci's phrase) and even moral violence, is common among both the right as well as the left in India and elsewhere.

It is often said in that in India politics, whenever a party of extreme views comes to power, the same is forced to take a centrist stance on many issues by the circumstances of polity. This has been the case thus far, but not any further. Slowly, but surely, we are entering a phase in Indian politics when the Hindu nationalist politics definitely takes a more pronounced right wing welfarist position than otherwise. As a reaction to this the Congress party and the parties led by the same take more extreme caste-based positions as well. The middle ground of Indian liberal politics is lost forever in the process.

What we have to fear is that-- unlike Marxists who have all along held that society shapes politics—it is politics that shapes the nature of the society. If populist politics on the right and the left shape the society, the society can become more and more intolerant. Tolerance in society, for which Indian society is generally known, is a essentially a liberal virtue. If Indian politics loses that virtue, soon the Indian society too will lose the virtue. Therewith social groups and individuals tend to become more and more intolerant. The only hope therefore is to remember the founding premises of the Indian polity and the founding liberal and democratic principles of the polity and strive to strengthen the same by emphasising on the institutional, procedural and processual integrity of the polity. That is the only assurance against impatience of populism that aims to overthrow the institutions from inside the polity.

## WELFARE OR IDENTITY: WHAT TRIUMPHS

In the forgoing I have argued that the current welfare policies are delivered through identitarian means. I contend that the long-term consequence of this *modus*



*operandi* of welfare is to strengthen the narrow identities within the Indian polity, thereby leading to more and more an identitarian populist democracy. This goes against the grain of welfare as we know it<sup>4</sup> and liberal democracy as we understand it. This does not, however, mean that we are against welfare. True welfare would mean building a lasting infrastructure for lasting welfare: the educational institutions, the health care delivery institutions, sports and cultural institutions and incomes and leisure for citizens to avail all of them affordably. The million-dollar question is can the Indian state, led by whichever political formation, either the BJP or the Congress, deliver such welfare in the neoliberal capitalist circumstances. That is a farfetched scenario. The compulsions of neoliberal capitalism foreclose the possibilities of genuine welfare even when relative incomes are rising. Therefore, the welfare that is being doled in the form of Neo policies compensates to some extent the absolute poverty created by the neoliberal development. That too while in the long run strengthening the identitarian, majoritarian basis of Indian liberal democracy. We may and perhaps will remain a democracy. But can we remain a liberal democracy is one question. The second question is can this welfare gradually lead to a welfare state? This is unlikely even as a speculation. The welfare state is premised on regulated capitalism. Not free-market capitalism. Regulated capitalism with free and liberal political institutions is the achievement of mid-twentieth century post-colonial India. We can only be nostalgic about such a regulated capitalism and free and liberal democracy. Therefore, the one, the current welfare is piece-meal and does not lead to welfare state. Two the current welfare also in the long run strengthens the caste and religious identities. Rendering the society and as well as the polity more and more intolerant towards the constantly projected 'other'. For populism to build a unified 'people' it needs an inevitable 'other'. Therefore, in both the cases, what the Neo policies, welfarist gestures and freebie-ism in the long term—perhaps even in the medium term, if not immediately, is the provocation of identities often playing constantly one against the other. This as we wondered all along in this writing renders democracy an illiberal democracy. For the loss of liberal values, including tolerance is not only a concern for liberals but in a country such as India, that

should be a concern for every sane Indian. Populism and construction of a unified people are as much the concern of this politics as is delivery of welfare. What are to be concerned about are not the economic fall outs in the short run, which the economy make take in its stride, but the political losses on the front of liberal democracy and society. In the end to repeat, we are not against lasting welfare, what we are wondering is whether the neoliberal order allows for such welfare; if not, the political inventions of freebies and welfare gestures, within the neoliberal order and constructed in terms of identitarian overtones, of caste and religion, end up by strengthening those identities. In which case, there is as much reason to be concerned as is to celebrate them<sup>1, 2, 6, 8</sup>.

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