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Populist policies and voting behaviour in Odisha since 1999: An Analysis

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Abstract

Populism is the new mantra. In this era of competitive populism, no political party wants to remain aloof from this. Politicians are labelled as vote maximising agents whose ultimate goal is to attempt to attract voters by using different methods prior to the election as well as after the election to sustain in power. Few examples of this could be spending huge amount of money in election campaign, distributing gifts to the electorates and commencement of various programmes, policies and schemes targeting particular section of society from whom a political party get benefitted the most during elections. Therefore, based on both primary and secondary data, the objective of this paper is to understand the impact of few selected populist policies on the success of the regional party Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in the Balasore district of Odisha since 1999. The paper would also delineate the challenges and way forward in relations to implementation of populist policies and competitive populism in Odisha.

Keywords: Populist policies, voting behaviour, competitive populism, elections, political parties, BJD

Introduction

Historical Background

The term populism has been derived from the Latin word 'Populous' which means "the people". This term has been emerged in Europe in the Mid-19th century and only became politically significant in the 21st century. Populism can be seen both in democracies and also in authoritarian regimes. The use of the term populism has a long political history. The most common framework for explaining the term populism is otherwise also known as the ideational approach which defines populism as an ideology which regards people as a good force and they are different from the elites who are corrupt and primarily focuses on self-preservation and they are only self-serving. The word populist refers to someone who puts ordinary people rights and well-being above the well-off of the society. Therefore populist policies are designed for the upliftment of the weaker section of the society with an aim of gathering their political support.

Politically in its democratic form, populism is critical of anything that mediates the relationship between the people and their leader or government and as such it favours more direct rather than mediated forms of democracy such as referendums and popular initiatives which has been adopted in some states of the United States for instance and of course in democracies such as Switzerland. In its authoritarian version populism can revolve around a charismatic ruler who claims that he embodies the people's will to consolidate his own power like many Latin American leaders (Peron, Chavez). In this authoritarian incarnation that centres on a personality, the term populism is often used pejoratively to criticize the leader/political figure for playing into people's fear or enthusiasm rather than having their long term interests at heart (The Editorial, 2019) [6].

In terms of economic redistribution, the term populism is used to denote policies that involve redistribution of resources and wealth in favour of the less privileged. This could range from progressive taxation to more direct schemes such as free health services for the poor, cash benefits, all manner of subsidies, loan waivers etc. Here the criticism is that such populist policies prioritize short term popularity over long term economic considerations of debt or inflationary pressures (Bisoyi, 2028) [2].

Objectives and Methodology

This paper will examine selected populist policies implemented in Odisha since 1999 by a party that grew out as a platform to make the dream of legendary Biju Patnaik into a reality and which aimed at all round development of Odias and Odisha. The pattern of shifts in electoral support is analysed from the field study which is conducted in the Balasore district of Odisha by means of stratified random sampling, structured questionnaire and personal interviews. The sample size is 500, collected from two blocks (i.e. Balasore and Nilagiri) of Balasore district. The secondary data needed for the study is collected both from paper based as well as from electronic sources for gaining an internal insight about the area under study.

Biju Janata Dal (BJD) is a regional party of Odisha named after the Late Shri Biju Patnaik, father of Shri Naveen Patnaik. The party was established on 26th December of 1997 as a flag bearer of secularism, value laden politics. The party is primarily devoted to the socio-economic development of the common masses of Odisha by improving the standard of living. It believes in good governance and relies on transparency and accountability. The party believes in the continuous efforts for the upliftment of the weaker sections of the society and providing them social justice. BJD always stood for the rights of women and training of young minds. The basic requirements for a living are always ensured by the party (Mishra and Mohanty, 2023)^[4].

Policies and Programmes of Government of Odisha

The populism of the BJD was manifested in multi-faceted ways since its inception. However from 2003 specific programmes and schemes targeting particular categories can be found. Few of them includes: Nua O Yuba Odisha Naveen Odisha, 2023 (Das, 2014)^[3]. Out of the many populist policies that are operational in Odisha, this paper is based on some of the important policies which we frequently recorded from the interviews with the respondents while conducting the field study. These policies are discussed below:

Policies for Farmers

Kalia Yojana: This scheme was launched by the BJD government headed on 21 December, 2018. 'KALIA' stands for Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation.

Policies on Health

Biju Swasthya Kalyan Yojana (BSKY): This scheme is a universal health coverage launched by the BJD government in 2018 and it covers around 70 lakh families. This scheme has two aspects first one is it provides free health services in selected government hospitals. The second one is annual health care coverage of 5 Lakhs per family and additional 7 Lakhs per female members of the family. While the Ayushman Bharat Yojana which is national public health insurance launched by the Government of India on 25 September 2018 covers only Below Poverty Line (BPL) families, the BSKY scheme covers all BPL and APL card holders.

Policies for Women

"If India is to lead the world, if India is to be an advanced nation like America and China, then women empowerment

is the only answer. BJD of Odisha always claims itself to be the flag bearer of women empowerment. The following policies reflect the steps undertaken by Odisha government for promoting women empowerment.

- **Mission Shakti:** Mission Shakti is a self-help mission for empowering women through promotion of self-help groups by taking up several socio-economic activities. This programme was launched by the Government of Odisha on 8th March 2001 on the occasion of International Women's Day. It is a scheme of credit and market linkage. Near about 70 Lakhs women in Odisha have been organised into 6 Lakh groups in all the blocks and urban area under this scheme. For constant supervision of this scheme, a separate Directorate of Mission Shakti has been established under the Department of Women and Child Development in April 2017. Further to strengthen it, a separate Mission Shakti Department was established on 1st June 2021.
- **Mamata Scheme:** Mamata scheme is a conditional money transfer maternity benefit scheme. It provides financial assistance to pregnant and lactating women above 19 years of age and above for improving nutrition and post-natal care. It was launched by government of Odisha in 2011. Under this scheme Rs. 5000 is transferred to the bank account of the mother.

Impact of populist policies on the Growth of BJD

People centric policies and their immediate implementation have a huge hand behind the continuous electoral success of BJD in Odisha and helped in creating a pro-incumbency for Shri Naveen Pattnaik. Table 1 and Table 2 highlights the different reasons responsible for the success of BJD in Balasore and Nilagiri Block of Balasore District of Odisha respectively.

Table 1: Reasons behind the success of BJD in Balasore

Reasons	No. of Respondents	Percent
Strong Leadership	77	28.7
Populist Policies	171	63.8
Able Bureaucrats	20	7.5
Total	268	100.0

Source: Field Study

Table 2: Reasons behind the success of BJD in Nilagiri

Reasons	Frequency	Percent
Strong Leadership	61	26.3
Populist Policies	170	73.3
Able Bureaucrats	1	.4
Total	232	100.0

Source: Field Study

From the Table 1 and Table 2, it is found that it is mainly because of the impact of populist policies like BSKY, Mamata Scheme, Kalia Yojana etc that led to the repeated success of the BJD in the Balasore district (Balasore and Nilagiri Blocks) of Odisha. From the last two decades precisely since the last four terms of BJD in power cultured an era of good governance whose main attributes are numerous populist policies offered by the party for the marginalised, weaker and underprivileged sections of Odisha.

Populist Policies in Odisha: A Critical Evaluation

From looking at the massive Sri Lankan economic crisis that

triggered by bad economic policies and populist programmes, it is quite obvious that this could be true in case India and for Odisha too. N.K Singh, the Chairperson of the Fifteenth Finance Commission of India has expressed some serious concerns regarding the Competitive populism of few states. The recently released SBI Research report contains a list of states like Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Kerala, Jharkhand, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh are spending 5%-19% of their revenue on populist policies. So does it mean Odisha has a better position over this issue? In reality the answer is 'No'.

The report does not contain Odisha as the Finance Minister of Odisha has not presented a full-fledged budget for the year 2023 to the SBI Research. The lines of SBI indicators hinting that Odisha too have a populist tooth. The 2022-23 vote on account of the populist schemes shows that Odisha is spending 7% of its total revenue receipts as well as consuming around 23% of the state's own tax revenue. This is a clear red flag for the state (Patro, 2022) ^[5].

Moreover just only to attract the voters and to increase the vote bank, announcements of new policies without looking at the long-term consequences is not advisable for a party which always dreams for a better and a secure Odisha. The strategy of announcement of grand populist policies should not be limited only to pen and paper, the efficient and effective implementation is the need of the hour and target should be to keep in view its long term implications. But the sad reality remains that these announcements are meant to deflect people's attention from the failures just before the election.

Conclusion

It is note-worthy to conclude by quoting Shri Naveen Patnaik's memorable words while receiving the award of ideal Chief Minister Award. He said, "Election is not important, but change and transformation is important. If you love your people, you do not fight for elections, you fight for a change and transformation. If you work for the people, you will continue to live in the hearts of people like Mahatma Gandhi and Biju Babu. If you keep people at the forefront, it is not a political journey, it is a spiritual experience". These words indeed hint at a wider meaning of politics.

This pro-people stand of BJD acts as the fuel for the pro-incumbency factor for Shri Naveen Pattnaik. Politics not necessarily needs to be a power game rather it should be people oriented, claims BJD and by working upon it. The party succeeded to gain the trust and love of the common people. However it is utterly important that should be served which was manifested. The populist policies should be designed and served in such a way that it should not have any bad impact on the state's and nation's economy. Continuity should be the mantra in the long-run when we look into its implications and effectiveness.

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