

The Pursuit of Unreason: Populisms of Our Time



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If any single feature characterises today's politics, not only in India, across the world, it is populism. When it comes to populism one is constrained to remember the original 19th and early 20th century definition of populism, as an ideology against industrialisation and the development of capitalism. While fully agreeing with today's definition of populism as authoritarian, one would refer to the contradictoriness of the discourse of populism of our times. On one hand, the populist discourse talks of 'people' in general, and when it comes to economic development promotes partisan interests. In our times, one populism is also pitched against another populism. Nationalist, religious populism is arranged against agrarian populism. One religious populism is ranged against another religious populism. It therefore, compels us, to consider the contradictions of this discourse. Populism of 'people as a whole' does not include agrarian agitators. The same discourse

of people *in toto* cannot include minorities. In fact, there is a compulsion to speak in terms of 'people' *against* minorities. Totality has to be articulated, and the othering needs to be maintained. And finally, one populist discourse is arraigned against another populist discourse for example majoritarian populist discourse against the developmentalist populism. Therefore, what emphatically strikes one is the contradictory nature of populist discourse. With the same implies the logical impossibility of being consistent with the discourse. The result is a necessary breakdown of populist communication. This breakdown of communication is nowhere as clear as in the case of dealing

with farmers' movement. Populist discourse, in as much as it is addressing a fictitious totality of 'people' necessarily ends in breakdown of communication and thus, the necessity of violence, replacing communicative practice. These are inherent contradictions of populist discourse, or communication in terms of 'people', who in their difference, and plurality, and hierarchical existence, defy the unitary totality of the populist discourse, which soon finds itself as inconsistent. What is important to be cautious is about the breakdown of the discourse and its replacement, by violence. Populist discourse when it runs up against its own inconsistency, may not find the reality acceptable.

This is what happened at Capitol Hill. The tolerance of Trump, when his discourse failed was clearly limited. This is what happens whenever a mirror is held to populist discourse. Its other side, violence comes to the fore. These two are inseparable. There are two ways this takes place. Either the state or its legal apparatus is used for silencing those who call the bluff; or, again the 'people' that populism patronises can be roused to a call to arms. The connection to violence and a totally antagonistic and at best indifferent attitude to established political institutions is the core feature of today's populism. Where old style liberalism turned to parliamentary debates, populism turns to people in the streets. And 'people' in the streets, and their pent-up frustrations, are the ready material for what populism wants and uses for its ends. Democracy thus is devoid of its *institutional* calling. 'The people' cannot wait for disciplined debates of parliaments and assemblies to solve their problems. No wonder, vigilantism is what another face that populism finds in its uncomfortable mirror. Dilution of representative institutions, painstakingly built to negotiate, discuss and solve the problems of society appear as hurdles in the path of popular and instant street justice. Righteousness of unlimited nature, and simplistic indignation is the feature of this street justice. Thus, what this renders is a society of bitterness towards the projected other, and a democracy that can never wait to settle its scores with the projected other. Thus, today's populism's connection to unhesitant violence should be considered and made clear.

The apparatus of the state itself, which is painstakingly built over time and is supposed to operate with its own autonomy and rationality, becomes docile, part and parcel of the instrumentality of populist discourse. It is long way to wind it back once populism is unleashed to its original state. The damage is to the democracy and representative institutions, for they cannot be built instantly, nor can they be maintained without restraint, in everyday life and in the institutional realm. The damage is also to the psyche of the people who get to think that

their 'righteous' indignation is all there is to democracy. That representation and representative democracy with all its time-consuming procedures and formalities appear immaterial. No one has patience to wait. Communicative ethic and communicative action which is the central tenet of any liberal democracy is replaced by politics of instant justice and ordinance governance. Thus, in the name of *demos* we move far away from democracy. In the name of peace and prosperity we move towards impatience, intolerance and instant justice. The populist discourse thus is not just authoritarian; it is harmful wherever takes place, because in the veneer of *demos* it hides the violent nature of the polity that it promotes. The more its inconsistency is exposed, the more impatient it becomes.

The only response there can be is to respond robustly in terms of institutional processes. Populist opposition cannot be a solution to authoritarian populism. The answer lies in stressing the representative institutions. In stressing on dialogue and institutionally organised negotiation. Populism thrives on communicative incompetence. The answer is in calling the *agents provocateurs* to the negotiating table and in reestablishing communicative ethics. Representative democracy with all its shortfalls should be guarded against becoming rule by impatient mobs. However, indignant they are made to be, and for whatever reasons of 'the people'.

(I am indebted to Professor Gopal Guru for his editorial in EPW which provoked me to write this article)