



Populism, Protest and the Social Norms

Angela Kishore*

**Centre for South Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India.*

*Corresponding Email: *angelakishore326@gmailcom*

Received: 29 January 2022

Accepted: 10 April 2022

Published: 20 May 2022

Abstract: We live in an era in which women are more prominent. We can see what women want. We can see them evolving and establishing a viewpoint for themselves and the world. Although, more significantly, we can see them fighting for justice, and equality and knocking down the barriers of the past, indeed breaking the social norms. In any case, these barriers are significantly more challenging to overcome for women who come from marginalised societies or from a segment of society that is already struggling to achieve equality; being brought into the world locally confronting segregation from society and a patriarchal mindset is still a topic for debate. The struggle to raise their voice and seek justice is another part of their struggle. This paper adds to the current research by focusing on the South Asian context. As this article will expound on the concept of populist culture, a large segment of the population supports the dissatisfaction of the targeted group, making the issue more widespread in scope. In addition to addressing populist culture, this article examines populist occurrences amongst the marginalised women that arose in the previous decades.

Keywords: Dalit, Dalit Women, Democracy, Populism, Populist Culture, Movements.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century got started with the phase of achieving and establishing a democratic structure in those countries that were still maintaining distance from democracy. Whether it was an attempt by the United States in Afghanistan for democracy demonstration or the unfinished agenda of Arab spring to shatter the rule of autocracy, corruption and economic stagnation.

Likewise, in the case of women, their collectiveness is a way that got entitled as cognizant and aggregate developments and attempts to manage all those issues and ordeals through a vote based system as it becomes that path which gives them a method for representing themselves. Their uprising for the democratic system is equally clear to grasp; the oppression women endured; while under patriarchal rule requires no further reason for the war they indulged in.



Governments across the world are all seeking a way to make gender equality. Representation; of women in all walks of life, whether to elevate them in the social sphere, make them financially independent or give them equal space in political representation. According to IPU-UNWOMEN (2021), 25.5% of total seats in the parliaments worldwide are held by women, a slight rise from 24.9 per cent in the previous year's figures. This data is at an all-time high but far from gender parity; an uneven representation in the political arena is still very much visible, and pervasive gender inequalities persist, especially in developing countries.

Women from all around the world and specifically in the South Asian context, the term women cannot be considered as homogenous classification; variety endures around here; the disparity is noticeable in each circle, whether it is financial execution or instructive accomplishments. The Indian women's movement left Dalit feminism in the lurch.

Women's movements question male-dominated societies, subordination, discrimination and abortion of a female child, but the Indian subcontinent tackles with one extra facet that occurs here: casteism. Women from these strata of society bear the maximum pain. They not only have to fight with the patriarchal society but also carry the burden of being Dalit. In the Indian subcontinent, the concept of caste is still in practice; therefore, the idea of belonging to upper caste and lower caste even persists to this day. Women from the Dalit community are the most vulnerable section of the society in the Indian subcontinent; because of multiple oppressions, they hold in society. Being a woman, belonging to a lower caste, coming from a low-income family, and having a lack of education are all those factors that make them the most vulnerable.

We've seen how far people's collective behaviour can go and how they may be motivated as part of a social movement or a populist movement. An individual may connect their social cause to the collective voices of the social movement. And to break the social norms, social and populist movement both serves as the vehicle for the ordinary people to participate in public politics.

To break the threefold discrimination faced by Dalit women. The paper focuses on addressing some of the core issues that attempt to re-present, comprehend, and analyse collective voices and challenges of women in the politics of Dalit affirmation. To begin, with for what reason is social character contribution fundamental for social movement among Dalit women, and how is it manifested. Secondly, do Dalit women's social activity and the party politics intersect. Lastly, how far would activism and political issues be able to go in re-creating Dalit (women's) identity as populist politics? The approach of the study is both descriptive and analytical in character. The data was acquired from a variety of books, magazines, newspapers, research publications, and websites.

Caste Demographics:

South Asian countries have a sizable Dalit population. According to the 2011 census, Dalits constitute 16.6 per cent of the total Indian population. According to Nepal's most recent census statistics, Dalits make up 13.6 per cent of the country. In Pakistan, Jodhak states, the Dalit community is counted as a Hindu minority; according to the most recent official data, from 1998, the Dalit population is estimated to comprise 13.6% of its 2.44 million of the Hindu minority population. (Jodhak, 2010). Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, on the other hand, do not include the Dalit community in their censuses.



As a result of the Dalit struggle, emancipatory awareness has increased among Dalit women. The Dalit movement is the collective force of the Dalit people who have raised their voices against societal subjugation; to bring out a social change in society after facing continuous humiliation and exploitation. But, the question that comes into our mind is how this social movement transforms itself into the phase where the boundary of social movement blends with the populist approach. Populism itself is a contested political phenomenon that has been conceived through the prism of political strategy, how much this political strategy is giving space to the women. However, this article will accumulate the contemplations on populism from a gender perspective.

Populism as a concept has two discourses: first, it involves the populist culture and second, it acts as a strategy in politics known as populist politics. The theory of populism in an abstract way was propounded by political scientist 'Ernesto Laclau'. He argues that populism is an emancipatory social force through which marginalised section challenges the dominant power structure, it is about the popular engagement of the people from that particular section in the decision making power, and the vantage point of this political scenario lies its roots in the historical conditions of the people from that specific group. Henceforth, populism believes that the people should have an increasing influence on a decision in order to achieve the highest possible degree of conformity between the rulers and those ruled.

Prakash asserts,

Populism, with its simplistic promises of equality of all is thus, filling the gap that the liberal political script and formations have abdicated. It also needs to be underlined that populism utilises the same institutional forms that the liberal script had created and deepened – in India and across the world: that of mass democracy (Prakash, 2019).

We have seen Dalit movements actively participating in the struggle for equality on the Indian subcontinent. However, we noticed less active engagement from women. Even though women have a lower involvement rate in movements, we can observe their presence in the formation of populist culture. And they are attempting to communicate and provide a forum for all subaltern women who have walked the same path of prejudices.

Towards: Populist culture:

Even if populism is still in its abstract form or as a contested concept, structure accumulates the space to build up like a culture that sustains as a component of populist culture. As an attribute of multiculturalism, it supports understanding the idea behind different kinds of culturalism. Populist culture becomes the collective technique for Dalit women, a stage to evaluate the challenges they all confront collectively and hunt for solutions: so that the next generation may live in a society where these barriers are no longer a part of their path.

The notion of populism allows us to compare the great complexity of history. However, as previously said, populism is a socio-political discourse as well as a cultural discourse. The key argument that explains what cultural discourse is; is a method to analyse the role of communication that explores the distinctiveness of communication practises throughout the world. In the context of populist culture, practices and interests construct the idea of transformation and liberation. According to Ostiguy, populism is a two-way phenomenon mainly defined by the claims and; establishes a connection between the leaders and the supporters that depict the socio-cultural and politico-cultural as its components.



Non-Governmental Organisations serves as platforms or assists those organisations that help the target population to build a forum for their engagement in the development, planning and encouraging participatory development. Bottom-up approach of the NGOs; generally deal with welfare works that aid in the development of community engagement and grassroots activities, such as the formation of long-term community groups, such as Mahila Samiti, youth clubs, and self-help groups, which promote participatory decision making (Panda, 2007). These organisations attempt to include the perspectives and contributions of multiple aspects of social life while respecting their uniqueness and resisting pressure to assimilate into the prevailing culture.

Though, smaller platforms allow individuals to interact, stand together and establish a collective voice, immersing them in a culture. What stands out here by Populist culture is the group's goal, whether it was to lay the groundwork for the social culture we know today or to set a specific direction. Practising values and comprehending populism via the lens of gender. Govinda examines how non-governmental organisations (NGOs) become the source of building a collective identity among Dalit women and how the influx of activism became the populist culture for this group (Govinda, 2008).

From Populist culture to Populist politics:

To facilitate; the development of contemporary populist politics in the South Asian region, it becomes vital to map the growth of the populist culture that has emerged due to the role of land, caste and identities. Yet, despite the democratic structure of the country, civil society does not act on democratic lines. According to McGuigan, to analyse the role of populist culture, it becomes vital to examine the role of public communication, institutional power and, from a materialist perspective, socio-economic relations. The process; of socialisation got strengthened due to the essential communication medium, in which educational institutions played a significant job. Consequently, as populist discourse is recognised; as the "collective action frame," populist culture will now more or less enhance democracy towards a more democratic structure of society.

Participation and representation are of utmost importance for Dalit women as well. To reinforce the Dalit assertion, the Dalit people formed several forums and took the initiative to break down the obstacles. Whether it is the Dalit Women Conclave of Bangladesh, National Federation of Dalit Women, the Dalit Women fight forum, the Dalit Mahila Samiti, the Dalit Pentecostal movement in Chennai or the Dalit Women Right forum in Nepal. All such forums are working in the same direction: inclusion of Dalit Women's Rights on livelihoods and health, education, opportunities to vocation, State programs scheme and welfare programs, entrepreneurship, finance, local-level political representation and household savings. All these forums brought to light the state's failure to safeguard the rights of Dalit women.

As Purdy asserts,

Participatory programs allow populists to meet their commitment to empowering their supporters, and thus maintain legitimacy, especially among true believers. In addition, the organisations which sprout up or gather around these programs can provide much-needed support for mobilisation during times of crisis (Purdy,2015)

Populist mobilisation; might be achieved through these forums since women in these organisations are active supporters of Dalit Populism, where they find the means for their growth to be included. The development of populist actors is at the centre of attention, the



void that has been created by the dialogues of the political class; yet, to accomplish the objectives, political activism is also required, in addition to social activism.

Howarth argues that varying degrees in the social and cultural context in which populist movements operate means that populist movements can take on authoritarian, nationalist, civic or popular-democratic forms; while still exhibiting a distinctively populist style and language of politics. Moreover, populist movements, in general, promote social and political movements and could be considered a type of populist culture. As they are loosely organised and generally follow discursive patterns, even though they have sustained the protest in support of a social change, usually through the implementation of a change in society's structure or values (Howarth,2005)

Participation of Dalit women in politics is crucial to avoid proxy politics on their behalf by their husbands or members of the dominant caste. Caste marginalisation persists in mainstream feminism, which fails to recognise or comprehend Dalit women's issues. Even though mainstream feminism shunned Dalit feminism, Dalit women established themselves as journalists, novelists, poets and researchers and became a source of disseminating their voices and creating a method of communication.

In recent years: there has been an emergence of influential Dalit women in the shape of journalists, authors, and activists. Writers and scholars like Cynthia Stephen, advocate Kiruba Munusamy, activist Ruth Manorama, writer and journalist Yashica Dutt, and their years of advocacy for Dalit rights and representation are leading the battle against caste injustice and patriarchy today.

Populist politics:

Voting is an essential aspect of electoral democracy since it allows citizens to approve or disapprove of any political party or administration. Votes are effective weapons, and so are voters. To challenge the governing elites, political mobilisation is required and Gramsci, points out that political consciousness gets build up through the active political communication, political communication is required not only for the public opinion and will formation but also for socialisation and mobilization of citizens for collective action (Gramsci, 1985)

The Dalit vote is a significant participant in both Indian and Nepalese politics. Dalit women are playing important role in elections as voters and candidates (Narayan, 2011). As Dalit women candidate, they express their concerns in parliament and state legislatures. One of the major Dalit leader, Kumari Mayawati existence as the four-time chief minister of India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, is a testament to Dalit women's emancipation. Mayawati's ascent to power, statements, and social engineering to acquire political representation must be appreciated and praised; but, one must be wary of simple symbolism and iconography (Sarvesh, Singh, and Alam (2021).

Apart from Mayawati, other Dalit women leaders, such as Krishna Tirath, Shailaja, and Meera Kumar, should not be seen as representative of Dalit women's only reality in India. Even with the quota provided in India to those from underprivileged communities, the representation of Dalit women is still quite low.

Even with the quota provided in India to those from underprivileged communities, the representation of Dalit women is still quite low. A fixed number of seats are designated for women in Panchayati Raj institutions (73rd Amendment,Act, 1992). These allocated seats for women are also available to Dalit women. Through this, they find a forum to speak out



against Dalit women's oppression, even as they continue to endure the brunt of the consequences of doing so, since rape and sexual assault are still pervasive, even among Dalit women who have acquired some political representation. Discriminatory practises continue to exist in South Asian countries, with ruling caste males refusing to allow elected Dalit women legislators to govern due to patriarchal and castist views are some of the common things that exist at village level (Mangubhai,sj,Sydenham,2009).

Activism and Populism:

Popular protest and populist politics are essential tools for opposing patriarchal authoritarianism and discriminatory society. Political representation and social activity are intertwined. Populism is the struggle of the oppressed group to liberate and develop themselves: likewise, popular protest movements are about attempting to persuade the government to change its ways—to change its laws, to change its interpretation of those laws, to change its practices, to honor the results of the electoral process, it compels, asks, and obliges the state to act or even to step down and call for new elections.

Dalit 'ethics' is based on Dr. B.R.Ambedkar's principles. Ambedkar's concept of social justice has been a pillar of strength for Dalit movements and Dalit politics. Ambedkar criticised the theology religious idea of justice because it was restricted to devotees and failed to confront the "Chaturvarna system," which was primarily responsible for maintaining inequalities. Ambedkarism arose as an ideology and played a significant role as an instrument for socio-economic and political liberation of individuals.

When the Dalit community protests; they build up a collective identity consciosness that has been given by the Dr Ambedkar to all the oppressed class people, when a protest is organised by a political party; e.g., the Bahujan Samaj Party, or a protest movement called by a new emerging populist leader of Bhim Army, Chandershekar (Ravan) all the factors work towards the Dalit consciosness and to build up their confidence and to raise their voices collectively against the oppression they face, Dalit women took part in all the protest to mark their identity and establish themselves as a separate group in a collective identity by re-inventing their own.

2. CONCLUSION

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has”. - Mead Margaret

Dalit women activism has evolved themselves into a conscious group capable of leading populist culture and populist politics. Dalit collective behavior and emergence of unity among them are in the course of action to break the chains of limitation and hurdles they face in everyday life. Their collective voice helps to understand the contemporary Indian subcontinent. The continuation of caste and its ill customs will not allow a country to grow to in its full potential. Democracy cannot be performed or experienced in its full spirit and form unless historically and structurally disadvantaged individuals are included. However, in order to be effective, historically vulnerable groups and individuals must obtain the tools, knowledge, and resources required to exert more power inside the group as well as within the larger community (Kinnvall, Larking 2011). Dalit women's stories highlight their battle to overcome oppression and many identities as Dalit women in South Asia and populist



movements have become one of the tools for engaging in active participation in the Dalit struggle in contemporary India.

3. BIBLIOGRAPHY

(*Indicates the primary sources)

1. Abts, K., Stefan Rummens. "Populism versus Democracy". *Political Studies* 55, no. 2 (June 2007): 405-424.
2. Bhattachan, K.B., Tej.B Sunar, Yasso k. Bhattachan. "Caste- Based Discrimination in Nepal". Working Paper Series, Indian Insitute of Dalit Studies 3, no.8 (2009).
3. Brennan, G. and Alan Hamlin. "On political representation", *British Journal of Political Science* 29, no.1(Jan 1999): 109–127. www.jstor.org/stable/194298.
4. Brien, Thomas O'. "Populism, protest and democracy in the twenty-first century". *Contemporary Social Science, Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences* 10, no.4(2015): 337-348.
5. *Constitution of India, Article 40 Directive Principles of State Policy.
6. Canovan, Margaret. "People", *Politicians and Populism!*. *Government and Opposition* 19, no.3 (1984): 312-327.
7. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy". *Political Studies* 47, no.1(1999): 2-16.
8. "Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy". *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Mény, Y., and Y. Surel (eds.). Palgrave Macmillan. London. 2002.
9. Freedon, M. "Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach", Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
10. Gazdar, Haris. "Class, Caste or Race: Veils over Social Oppression in Pakistan". *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no.2 (2007).
11. Giddens, Anthony. "The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy". Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.
12. Govinda, R. "Reinventing Dalit Women's Identity? Dynamics of Social Activism and Electoral Politics in Rural North India", *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 427-440. 2008.
13. Gramsci, Antonio. "Selections from cultural writings". London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985
14. Guru, Gopal. "Understanding Ambedkar's Construction of National Movement". *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 4 (1998).
15. Geetha, V. "New Phase of Dalit-Bahujan Intellectual Activity". *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 3 (2000).
16. "Freedom of Expression and the Life of the Dalit Mind". *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no.10. (2013).
17. *International Dalit Solidarity Network : India, URL: <https://idsn.org/countries/india/>
18. *International Dalit Solidarity Network : Nepal, URL: <https://idsn.org/countries/nepal/>
19. *International Dalit Solidarity Network: Pakistan, URL: <https://idsn.org/countries/pakistan/>



20. *International Dalit Solidarity Network: Bangladesh, URL: <https://idsn.org/countries/bangladesh/>
21. Jodhka, Surinder S., Ghanshyam Shah. "Comparative contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia". Working Paper Series 45, no. 48 (2010) Indian Institute of Dalit Studies.
22. Laclau, Ernesto. "On populist reason", London, New York: Verso.2005.
23. Kapadia, Karin. 'Mirrored in God': Gramsci, Religion and Dalit Women Subalterns in South India. Religions. University of Oxford. 2019.
24. Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking. The "Political Psychology of Globalization: Muslims in the West". Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2011.
25. Mair, Peter. "Populist Democracy Vs. Party Democracy". ECPR Workshop on Competing Conceptions of Democracy, University of Copenhagen, 2000.
26. Mangubhai, Jayshree. SJ, Aloysius Irudayam. Sydenham, Emma. Dalit Women's Right to Political Participation in Rural Panchayati Raj. A Study of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu: Executive Summary. IDEAS, Justitia et Pax, Equalinrights, 2009.
27. McGuigan, Jim. "Cultural Populism". Routledge: New York, 1992.
28. Mudde, Cas. "The Popular Zeitgeist", *Opposition and Government* 39, 2004.
29. Omvedt, Gail. "Liberty, Equality, Community: Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's Vision of a New Social Order", New Delhi: Ambedkar Chair, Jawaharlal Nehru University. 2004.
30. Ostiguy, Pierre. "Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach" *The Oxford Handbook on Populism*, Edited by Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy. Oxford University Press. 2017.
31. Panda, Biswambhar. "Top Down or Bottom Up? A Study of Grassroots NGOs' Approach", *Journal of Health Management*, 9, 2:257-273 SAGE Publications: London. 2007.
32. Panizza, Francisco. "Populism and the Mirror of Democracy". Published by Verso, New York. 2005.
33. Prakash, Amit. "Populism as a Crisis of the Liberal Script: Reflections on Politics and Policy in India". . Amit Prakash & Manish Kumar Jha. eds. *Populism-1: Politics, Policies and Social Justice*, Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (Policies and Practices 74), 2019.
34. Purdy, Matthew Rhodes. "Participatory Populism: Theory and Evidence from Bolivarian Venezuela". *Political Science Quarterly*, July, 2015.
35. Raheja G. G. "The Poison in the Gift: Ritual, Presentation and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village". Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
36. Sarvesh, Tarushikha; Shanker Singh, Rama; and Alam, Tehzeeb. Dalit Women in History: Struggles, Voices, and Counterpublics. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(10), 91-105 (2021)
37. Silva, Filipe Carreira da, Monica Brito Vieira. "Populism and the politics of redemption" 149 no.1 (2018).
38. Tilly, Charles. "Social Movements". Boulder, London: Paradigm publishers LLC. 2004.
39. *UNWOMEN 2021 Women in politics: New data shows growth but also setbacks, Viewed on 25 March 2022, <<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/3/press-release-women-in-politics-new-data-shows-growth-but-also-setbacks>.