



Research Paper

## A Study on Populism and Development in a Decade (2011-2020) of West Bengal

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**ABSTRACT:** - Populism refers to demand polity. It is not a new phenomenon. Of late, it is in a rising trend all over the world. In an environment of political competition, populist polity is inevitable in practice. On one hand, it gives direct benefits to the common people and on the other hand, it imposes some challenges to democracy. But democracy wins after all. And a positive correlation between populism and human development is taken place. With the increase in population, a balance between demand polity and command polity is inevitable for creating employment opportunities, especially for the educated youth. In this perspective, a study on populism and development in a decade (2011-2020) of West Bengal is taken up as a nano-model before the globe of the rising trend of populist politics.

**KEY WORDS:** - Populism, Demand polity, Command polity, Human development, Global state of democracy, Hegemony.

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### I. INTRODUCTION:

Populism is a room for all claims to represent the interests of common people against those of the political establishment. In other words, it refers to demand polity. It is not a new phenomenon. It has been rising significantly in recent years across almost all regions of the world. Similarly, populist political forces have played significant roles in Indian politics, and have varied in their vision of political community, in the social groups they targeted, in the policies they pursued, and their impact on democracy. And West Bengal (W.B.) is a part of union of India; therefore, it is not the exception to the theory of populism.

**1.2. PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY:** - All 193 UN member states have adopted the Agenda 2030 with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 in a historic effort for international cooperation and governments pledged with these commitments to work towards a more prosperous, fair and sustainable world on behalf of the Citizens they serve, as well as at the same time many countries have witnessed a rise in populist movements in recent years that pose a challenge to liberal democracy and multi-lateral cooperation. In this context, the study of populism in democracy is very important. Therefore, it is high time to make a study on populism of Mamata Banerjee-led regime and its consequences in West Bengal where I live and in Assembly Election-2021 Mamata-led Trinamool Congress known as populist party has got 2/3<sup>rd</sup> majority which will continue up to 2026, and this populist party had come to power by replacing another populist Left-Front government in 2011. That's why, in this paper I have planned to figure out the relationship between populism and development in terms of Human Development Index (HDI) in a democratic zone with reference to the Mamata-led regime in W.B. and its consequences.

I've used secondary data and information to analyse the populist government and its consequences in society of West Bengal as a whole, taking simple mathematical and statistical tools.

**1.3. POPULIST POLITICS OF MAMATA BEFORE COMING TO POWER:** - For better understanding, first I have to highlight the populist policies of Mamata when she was not in power of West Bengal.

Mamata Banerjee's first emergence in Indian Parliamentary Politics was in General Election-1984 by defeating veteran Communist Politician, Somenath Chatterjee and at that time, she was recognised and popularized as a giant-killer.

She held cabinet portfolios like Union Minister of State for Human Resources Development, Youth Affair and Sports and Women and Child Development in the 1991 government led by Atal Behari Bajpayee.

Due to differences within the Congress Party, Mamata left the congress and started a new political innings, founding All India Trinamool Congress (TMC). It didn't take long time for TMC to become the primary opposition in the state of West Bengal.

Mamata joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at the centre in 1999 and became the Railway Minister.

Mamata left the NDA in 2001, allying with the Congress in the W.B. Elections of 2001, only to return to the saffron party alliance in 2003. She was given charge of the Ministry of Coal and Mines.

TMC's alliance with the BJP in 2004 Elections turned sour as the latter lost, and she became the only TMC member elected to Parliament from the State of West Bengal.

Mamata also became Railway Minister of union government for the second time in 2009. She won the Bengal Assembly Election in 2011, ending 34 years of Left-Front rule in the State of West Bengal. Banerjee became the first women Chief Minister (CM) of W.B. But, for more than 40 years the Left built its popular base and political and moral ideological hegemony through a politics of militant mobilization, unionisation, party-building and intellectual, cultural and political interventions. It dislodged the old hegemony of the bhadrak (educated upper middle class)-landlord axis, but not by a proletariat-peasant alliance. The Left firmly put in place a new hegemony of the left-oriented lower middle classes centred on government employees and teachers; later an emerging rural middle class joined this ruling block. It remained in power a record time because the Left came to represent the workers, peasants, minorities, Dalits and Adivasis – the poor and the marginalized generally. In other words, it built a political and moral hegemony over the people. The Left government's policies and welfare measures for a considerable period ensured the continuation of this model of politics in West Bengal. By the end of 1980s the popular base of the left in urban areas was eroding due to lack of economic opportunities and the narrow partnership of the government.

Since the 1990s the Left went for a major course correction; globalization, liberalization and the success of the Deng Model in China inspired the Left-party to woo private capital in a major way. The Promise of Industrialization by Buddhadeb Bhattacharyya (Chief Minister of West Bengal) in the 2006 Elections seemed to have once again re-established the stressed left hegemony. Armed with the record mandate in this election, the Leftists went on an investment overdrive. Without any consultation with the peasant's land was forcibly acquired for the Tatas in one of the Bengal's most fertile regions- Singur and in Nandigram for a chemical hub. Besides, a slew of grand projects was announced.

The peasants treated it as an act of betrayal by the govt, they had trusted so long; a section of left intellectuals felt that the Left-Front had completely surrendered to capitalism. The government faced popular resistance and resorted to violent suppression of the movement, which in turn further alienated its traditional support bases.

Mamata joined these protests in a major way and undertook a 25 day fast to demand the return of land to the peasants. Such protest movements spread to large parts of the state of West Bengal and Mamata was fast emerging as the voice of these people.

In this way, the left-oriented political and moral hegemony was rapidly decaying and a new block of hegemony over the people had been emerging especially during the period of 5 years from 2006-07 to 2010-11, that is, the period of protest movements especially in Singur and Nandigram. And last of all, in 2011 Assembly Election of West Bengal, Mamata came to power by a huge margin.

#### **1.4. POPULAR POLICIES TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT DURING THE PERIOD FROM 2011 TO 2021:**

- After coming to power, on the one hand, Mamata has assiduously built and nurtured the major social support bases of the left and on the other hand, she has sought to challenge the political and moral hegemony of the Left-led public funded bhadrak ruling elite. In her bid to build her social base and with over the traditional left support bases, she has undertaken a well thought out strategy combining economic, political, cultural and ideological concessions and rewards.

In her period, she has introduced the flagship schemes such as –

- **Gitanjali** – in 2011 (i.e. a housing scheme for providing shelter to people belonging to economically weaker sections).
- **Sabala** – in 2011 (i.e. a scheme for adolescent girls, which aims to improve the nutritional and health status of girls between 11 to 18 years of age and equip them with life skills training and knowledge on family welfare, health and hygiene).
- **Anandadhara** – in 2012 (i.e. anti-poverty programme for the rural poor, implemented through the organising of women into Self-Help Groups).
- **Fair Price Medicine Shops** – in 2012 (i.e. a scheme to ensure round the clock availability of quality medicines, consumables, surgical items, implants etc at pre-approved discounted rates over the maximum retail price to enable people from all economic backgrounds to buy them).

- **Shishu Aloy** – in 2012 (i.e. a type of advanced kid centres aimed at making children ready for school at the age of 6 years as well as provided with nutritious food and also get medical assistance).
- **Yuvashree** – in 2013 (i.e. financial assistance of rupees one thousand and five hundred per month to one lakh of the job seekers registered in the employment bank portal).
- **Kanyashree** – in 2013 – It is globally acclaimed (i.e. a cash transfer scheme aimed at retaining girls in schools and preventing their early marriage).
- **Sikshashree** – in 2014 (i.e. one-time financial grant to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes' students from class-V to class-VIII to go to schools).
- **Gatidhara** – in 2014 (i.e. a loan providing scheme aimed at supporting financially to the low-income group people by providing loan up to rupees ten lakh to buy cars, small trucks etc for commercial purpose).
- **Lokprasar Prakalpa** – in 2014 (i.e. a rejuvenate scheme for folk artists between 18 to 60 years of age who receive a retainership fees of rupees one thousand and in addition an opportunity for four performances per month with rupees one thousand paid for each and senior artists above 60 years receive a similar sum as monthly pension).
- **Sabuj Sathi** – in 2015 (i.e. distribution of cycles to all students).
- **Khadya Sathi** – in 2016 (i.e. rice at the rate of rupees two per kilogram for ensuring that almost 90% of the population comes under food security).
- **Swasthya Sathi** – in 2016 (i.e. a cashless group health, insurance scheme including families for all those employed by the state government's departments, both permanently and part-time).
- **Samabyathi and Baitarini** - in 2016 (i.e. a scheme for providing money to the next of kin of poor people in rural regions for organising their funerals).
- **Sabujshree** – in 2016 (i.e. an innovative scheme which connects two noble causes- protecting the environment and promoting girl children).
- **Swabalamban Special** – in 2016 (i.e. a scheme implemented through non-government organisations and companies for imparting vocational training to socially marginalized and distressed women, victims of trafficking, sex workers, transgender community and women in moral danger).
- **Safe Drive Save Life** – in 2016 (i.e. a programme to bring down road accidents in the state and appreciated by the supreme court of India).
- **Khelashree** – in 2017 (i.e. a developmental initiative to encourage sporting activities).
- **Rupashree** – in 2018 (i.e. one-time financial grant of rupees twenty-five thousand for economically stressed families at the time of their daughter's marriage).
- **Pathasathi** – (i.e. a project consists of developing wayside facilities for travellers on national and state high-ways and other important roads, run by self-help groups, societies, West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation or certain designated agencies).
- **Donation to traditional youth clubs** for their overall development.
- **Mission Nirmal Bangla** (i.e. an international recognised initiative of the state government has constructed the most number of toilets and used up the highest amount of funds for constructing toilets and many more).

From these we can say that she has set up a series of direct material benefit programmes among the poor and generally in the districts. This has included socially revolutionary moves like distributing cycles to every student, monetary incentives to girl students, schemes for peasants, folk artists, artisans, fisherfolk, for the sick and the destitute etc. Mamata and her government literally reaches out to the people by holding government-people public interactions in each of the districts to address people's grievances. She has created a large number of official bodies and councils to give representation and a share of power, status and dignity to different marginal communities and backward regions. Her tough authoritarian style has actually made her more credible among the masses.

**1.5. ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POPULISM AND DEVELOPMENT:** - In the democratic set up of a country, there is generally a political competition. Side by side, each political party wants to come in power or the ruling political party wants to retain the power. As a result, every political party within a political competition takes the path of populist politics either to come in power or to retain the power. In the environment of political competition, the common people get direct benefits from the populist policies taken by the government. Now we have to take an attempt to study the relationship between populism and development in terms of Human Development Index (HDI) for the period from 1990 to 2018.

In calculating HDI, the United Nation has considered three dimensions – health, education and per capita income. Here HDI is a composite index of the three – health, education and per capita income.

The HDI serves as a frame of reference for both social and economic development. It is a summary measure for monitoring long term progress in a country's or state's or region's average level of human development in three basic dimensions – a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of

living. The HDI was introduced in 1990 to emphasize that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not just economic growth.

Since its introduction in 1990, the HDI had been the arithmetic mean (AM) of the three component indices. This method of aggregation allowed for perfect substitutability – i.e., a poor performance in one dimension could be compensated for by good performance in another. The revised HDI uses a geometric mean (GM) of the component indices.

Adopting the geometric mean produces lower index values with uneven development across dimensions. This is because the GM takes into consideration differences in achievement across dimensions. With this new method of aggregation, poor performance in any dimensions is directly reflected in the HDI value. Thus, the level of substitutability between dimensions is reduced, while at the same time ensuring that a rate of change in one of the dimensions of HDI has the same impact on the HDI as the same rate of change in other dimensions.

Although the Trinamool Congress-led regime in West Bengal from 2011 to 2021 has been taken here for consideration, yet data have been accounted for from 1990 to 2021 to show the real trend of human development, i.e., the quality of life of the people in West Bengal in the perspective of the former populist government, i.e., Left Front Govt and the present Mamata-led populist government.

**Table-I**  
**Statement of HDI and Population of West Bengal for the period from 1990 to 2020**

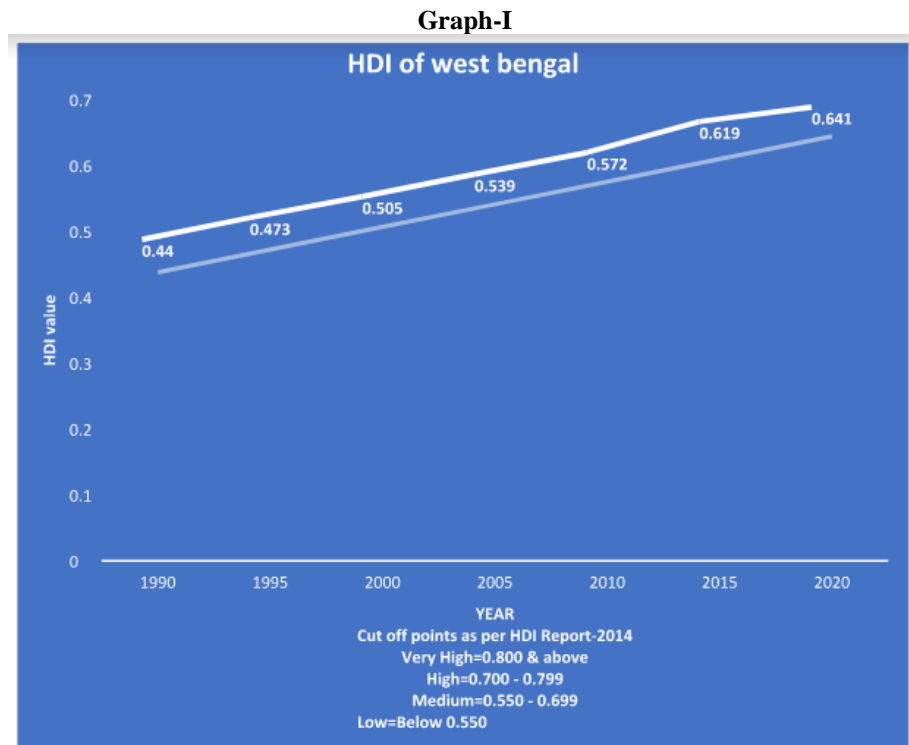
Year	HDI	Growth rate of HDI	Population (in million)	Increase in Population (in million)	Growth rate of population
1990	0.440	-	68.078	-	-
1995	0.473	-	-	-	-
2000	0.505	14.77%	80.177	12.099	17.77%
2005	0.539	-	-	-	-
2010	0.572	13.27%	91.277	11.100	13.84%
2015	0.619	-	-	-	-
2020	0.641	12.10%	100.897	9.620	10.54%

**Source:** Compilation and Computation of data as per Census Reports of India and UNDP- Human Development Report.

From the above table it is clear that –

- From 1990 – 2010 HDI has been calculated on the basis of arithmetic mean. It implies that during this period uneven-development across dimensions has not been considered here. As a result, poor performance in any dimension is not directly reflected in the HDI value, i.e., the poor performance in one dimension can be compensated for by good performance in another.

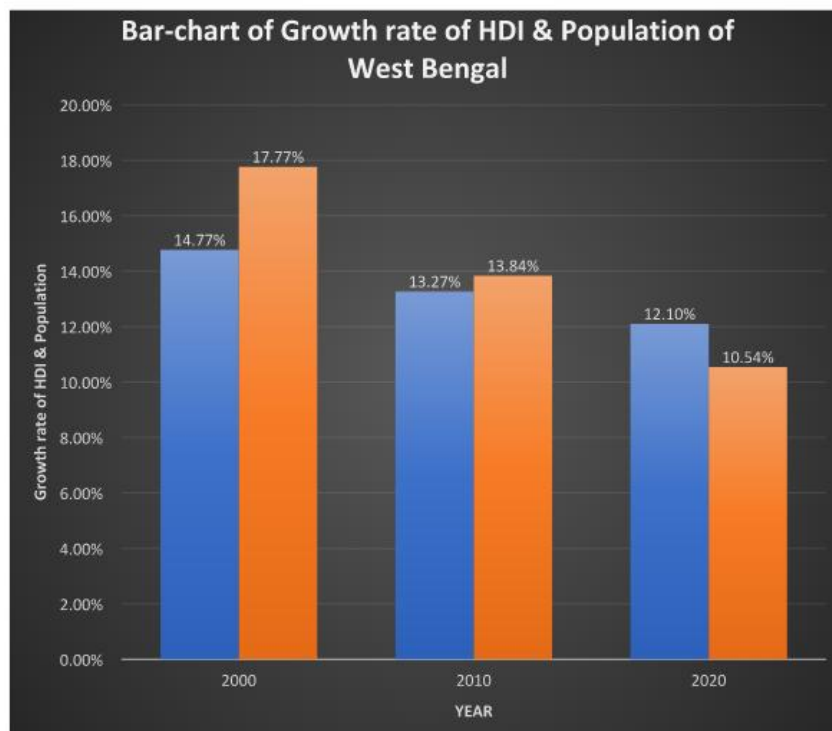
But from the period just after the 2010 in calculating HDI value geometric mean has been adopted. This method takes into consideration differences in achievement across dimensions. With the adoption of this method uneven-development across dimensions is directly reflected in the HDI, i.e., poor performance in one dimension could not be compensated for by good performance in another. From the above statement the values of HDI are put in **Graph – I** to show the trend of human development in West Bengal as well as growth rate of HDI and growth rate of population of West Bengal are also put in **Graph – II** as follows:



**Source:** Compilation of data as per UN- Human Development Report and Self-made Graph.

The **Graph - I** shows that the HDI is in an increasing trend, but it is remarkably pointed out that the state of West Bengal has been gradually moving towards the upper level of HDI. In the case of moving towards the upper level of human development, it is a difficult task to keep the rising trend of HDI, because with a 10 years' interval, population has been increased by at least ten million. A huge additional social infrastructures and other facilities for human development of the increased population is required.

**Graph-II**

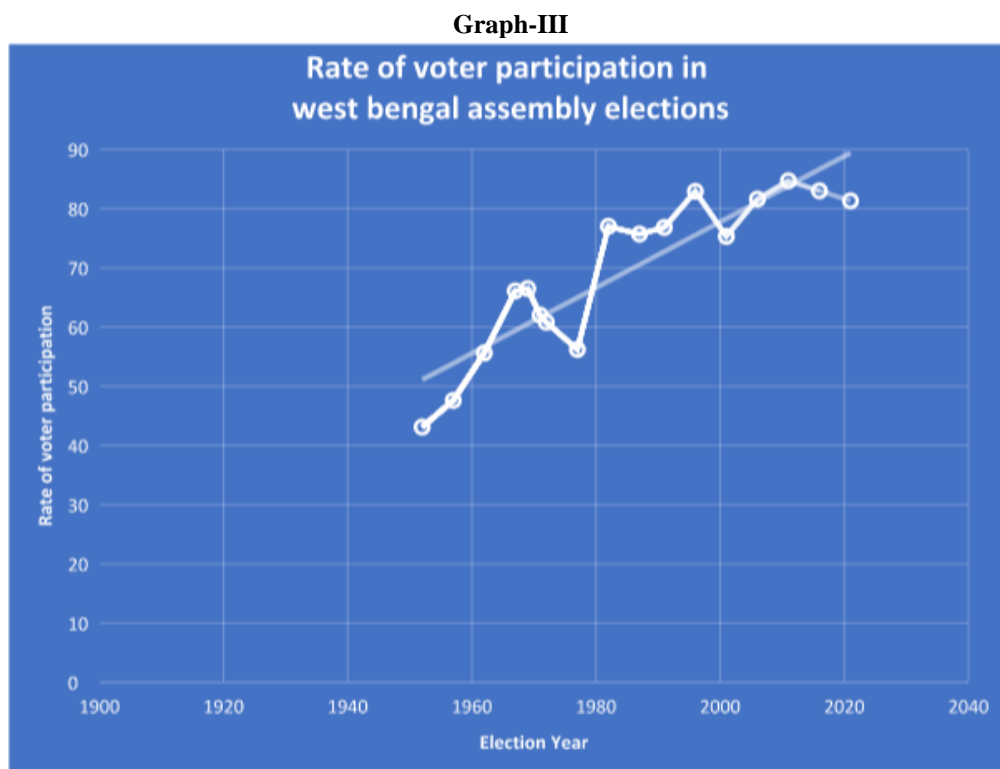


**Source:** Compilation and computation of data as per Census Reports of India and UN-Human Development Report as well as Self-made Graph.

The **Graph – II** shows that with the growth of population, the growth rate of HDI has not been proportionately taken place up to 2010, but during the period of last 10 years the growth rate of HDI has been happened more than that of population. It does not mean that even-development across dimensions has been taken place because there is a large number of unemployment of educated-skilled youth as per office record of the government of West Bengal. It indicates that the expansion of educated and healthy people has been made, but adequate opportunities for their employment have not yet been created; their growth potential remains unutilized – which has created a great loss of potentiality of educated youth. Therefore, side by side it also indicates that a balance between demand polity and command polity is highly needed to create employment opportunities for educated and skilled youth in West Bengal. In spite of that we can say that in the last 10 years, i.e., the financial year 2011-12 to 2020-21, the government of West Bengal has performed good with the introduction of a lot of popular policies, i.e., the increasing trend of HDI values indicates the positive correlation between populist politics and human development.

It is noted that the united nation has introduced inequality-adjusted human development index (IHDI) since 2010 to remove the limitation of HDI. Since till today all updated data for calculating IHDI of West Bengal are not available, the calculated HDI of West Bengal as per UN Report have been used here.

It is important to mention that in the first phase of Left Front Government (1977-82), the Three-tier Panchayati Raj (village level known as Gram Panchayat, block level known as Panchayat Samity and district level known as Zilla Parishad) was introduced in West Bengal for decentralization of power at the grass-root level which motivated the rural people of Bengal in political participation and encouraged them to take part in political activities. It was the footing stone of political participation at the grass-root level. The voter participation in West Bengal Assembly Elections from 1952-2021 are put in **Graph-III** as below:



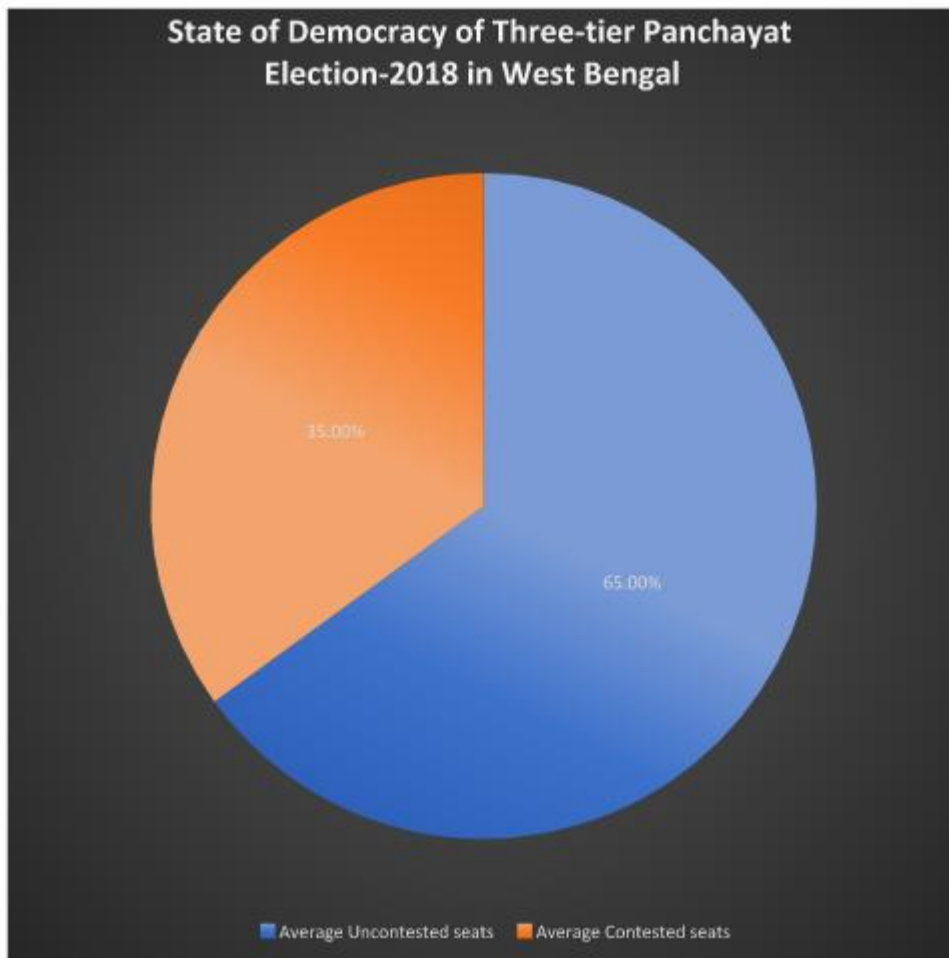
**Source:** Compilation and Computation of data as per Reports of Election Commission of India and Self-made Graph.

The **Graph-III** shows the increasing trend of voter participation. The Three-tier Panchayati Raj System has stimulated the increasing voter participation gradually in each next election after the first phase of the Left-Front government and it has been able to reach at a satisfactory level. Increasing voter participation could create pressure on a government to deliver better public goods and services in the state. It compels the government to adopt more and more popular policies not only for welfare of the people, but also for retaining the power in the environment of political competition. Therefore, there is also a positive correlation between populism and human development due to political competition.

**1.6. IMPACT OF POPULISM ON DEMOCRACY:** - As per International Institute for Democracy and Electorate Assistance, a study on the Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices (2019) has shown that the quality of democracy declines under populist governments. The study has also shown that the periods with populist governments in office entail declines on 22 aspects of the 28 aspects of democracy measured by the GSoD indices. Only 6 aspects of democracy have improved under populist governments. Of these, only electoral participation has increased more than that under non-populist governments, while the other aspects (direct democracy, inclusive suffrage, basic welfare, gender equality and local democracy) have shown an increase during both periods, but improved more during non-populist governments.

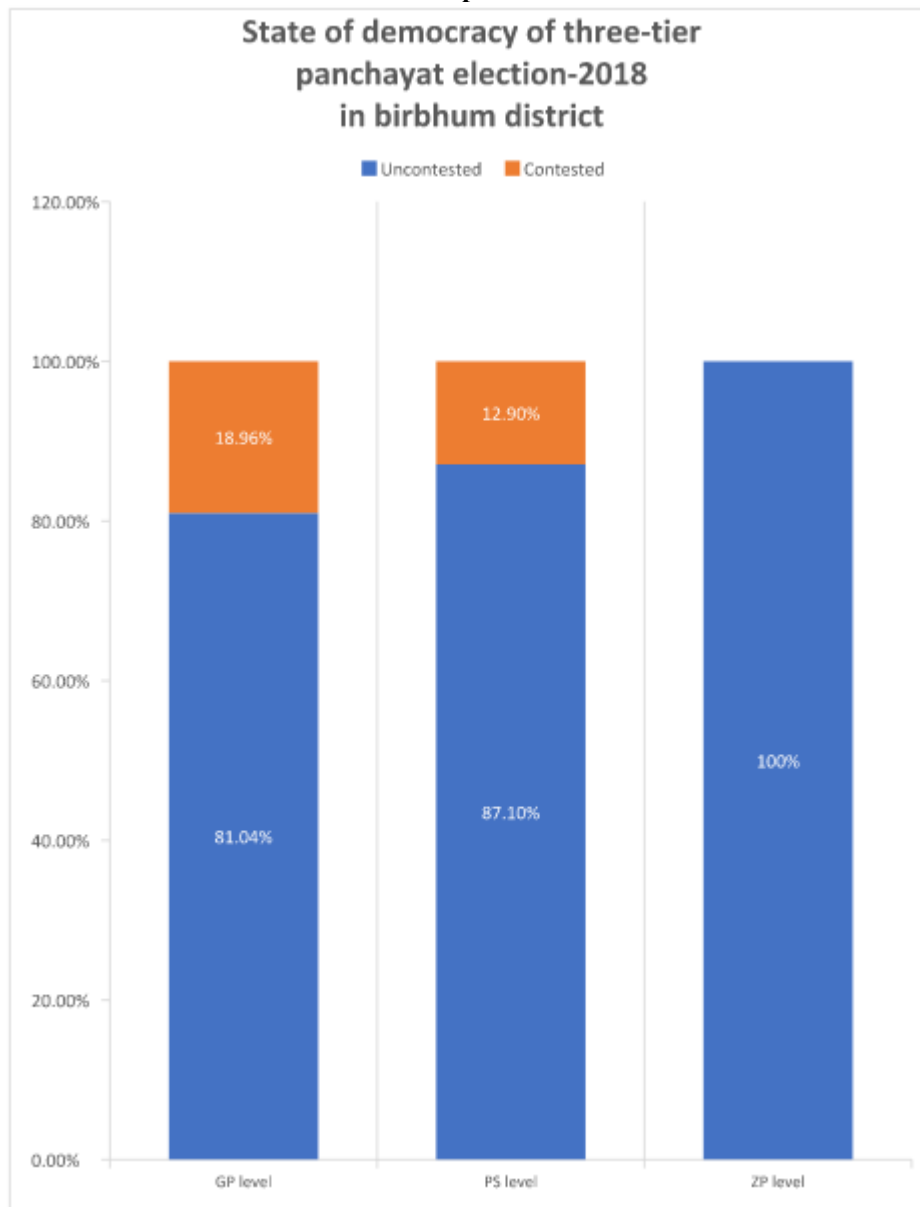
Therefore, West Bengal, a democratic state of Union of India is not the exception to the universal rule of populist government. The health of democracy of West Bengal would be tested if the situation of democratic space in West Bengal Panchayat Election-2018, along with reference to the situation of Birbhum district in that election is observed. The state of democracy in Panchayat Election-2018 of West Bengal and the district of Birbhum are shown in **Graph-IV** & **Graph-V** as follows:

**Graph-IV**



**Source:** Compilation and Computation of data as per Reports of West Bengal State Election Commission and Self-made Graph.

**Graph-V**



**Source:** Compilation and Computation of data as per Reports of West Bengal State Election Commission and Self-made Graph.

The **Graph-IV** shows that on an average the democratic space in Panchayat Election-2018 of West Bengal is 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of total seats because the uncontested seats won by the ruling party is 65%. It does not indicate that there is no willing candidate from the opposition party for contesting the local level election. Rather it implies a lot of factors against democracy.

The **Graph-V** shows an about-to die-democracy of a district of a democratic state like West Bengal. In Three-tier Panchayat Election-2018, at Gram Panchayat Level the democratic space is only 18.96%, at Panchayat Samiti Level only 12.90%, but no space for democracy at Zilla Parishad Level. This situation establishes autocracy rather than democracy.

Therefore, such activities of populist government are the challenges to democracy. In this case the civil society has an important role to create a new block of hegemony in favour of democracy.

**1.7. EVALUATION:** Although populism does not always work as a positive factor of human development, yet there is a positive relation between popular policies and human development in Mamata regime in West Bengal. But if the present popular government of West Bengal is able to make a balance between demand polity and command polity in near future, an ample scope of creating employment opportunities for increasing educated



youth is to be widen. Besides, the democracy faces tough challenges in the populist regime, but the democracy wins at last with the help of civil society creating a new block of hegemony over the common people.

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