

Contentious Politics and Popular Movement: Enigma of Karpoori Thakur¹

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Exactly two years after the imposition of internal emergency in India in 1975, on June 25, 1977, Arun Sinha reported in Economic and Political Weekly:

“Located on the western fringes of Patna, in the Braj Kishore memorial, 235 legislators of Janata Party had met to elect their leader...Even before the voting was completed, it was clear that Karpoori Thakur was winning. With the solid support of about 50 BLD legislators and about 68 belonging to Jan Sangh, he had a head start over the other candidates...Despite this foregone conclusion the air was thick with speculation while the voting was in process. Karpoori Thakur was a barber by caste, wasn't he?”

The caste background of Karpoori Thakur always shadowed his leadership despite his unparalleled acumen and competence to deal with the contentious politics of Bihar. The questions that continue to be argued during and after the lifetime of Karpoori Thakur revolved around his influence in shaping foundation for anti-congress politics by invigorating backward caste politics in Bihar. Karpoori was one of the foremost socialist leaders of the state who provided impetus to the idea of social justice and influenced the contours of backward caste politics that demonstrated its first electoral triumph as early as in 1967; and continue to dominate state politics since 1990. Born in a family belonging to *Nai* (barber) caste that constitute less than 1.5 % of Bihar population, Thakur managed to occupy the centre stage of socialist party and backward caste politics in Bihar between 1960 to 1987. Similar to other socialist leader of the time, his initiation in politics started with engagement in independence movement but his ideological moorings gravitated towards socialist party from early on in his political career. During the decade of 1960s, he emerged as a representative of the political aspirations of the intermediate (read backward) castes and thus posed a serious challenge to political parties like the Congress (I), the Congress (O) and Jana Sangh that were largely dominated by upper caste leaders. Influenced by and socialized in 'Lohiaite' political tradition, Thakur was instrumental in challenging the

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dominant conception and visualization of politics in Bihar. This challenge came in the form of setting agenda against given political tenet and system.

Though the phenomenal success of caste based mobilization and its macro implications in favour of other backward castes became much more perceptible after 1990s, the process has diverse trajectories in different parts of the country. In Bihar and U.P., a number of leaders belonging to Other Backward Classes had played crucial role in shaping the socio-political contours of backward caste politics that got flourished over decades and finally emerged as governing politics since 1990s. Karpoori's politics was a serious effort towards building coalition among the caste groups for political recognition and assertion, however, the process met with numerous complexities and impediments. The personal ambitions of the backward caste leaders, demands of political career of different leaders and their ideological commitments made it very difficult for them to set aside the differences. This kept the different lower caste groups apart and they were unable to forge a stable and reliable political coalition on the basis of economic or ideological factors (Roy 1988: 62). Roy explains that the fear, distrust and recrimination among the shudra castes prevent their political coalescence and block their political ascendance. Against the odds, influenced by Lohia's politics, Karpoori Thakur emerged as a young and persuasive face of socialist politics in Bihar. Lohia's effective articulation about the relationship between the socialist political tradition and lower caste movements, recognizing "the political potential of the horizontal mobilization of lower castes on issues of social justice and ritual discrimination" became the guiding principle of Karpoori's politics. The electoral success of Thakur has been exemplary and he won all election that he contested since 1952 except the one in 1984 Lok Sabha election. His fiery and argumentative contribution inside the legislative assembly on varied issues and concerns of underprivileged section of the society was matched by his direct engagement with people and communities on margin of society and polity. The conception of social justice and the idea of development and people's mobilization around it were inextricably interlinked in his thought. Most of his political action was informed with those ideas and understanding. The paper examines Karpoori Thakaur's idea and articulation about social justice. Though Thakur was the vanguard of collective mobilization and assertion through popular movements, it demonstrated the power of hitherto excluded and marginalized castes and communities in Bihar.

Karpoori's politics also require assessment of leadership conflict within Socialist block in the country. Explaining the fragmentation among socialist leaders, Fickett wrote in 1972 "The great Socialist leaders—Jayaprakash Narayan, Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, J. B. Kripalani, and Asoka Mehta—all tended to be *prima donnas*, each espousing his own kind of political salvation, each indulging in the fruitless ideological abstractions so characteristic of Indian intellectual politicians and each unwilling to compromise with the others. Consequently, over a period of time, these leaders have all renounced, defected, or been expelled from the Party, each time leaving it a little weaker by taking with them their loyal supporters" (Fickett 1973:829). In Bihar, most of the PSP cadres had long since defected in successive waves to the Congress - approximately one-third in 1964 when Asoka Mehta left the PSP with his supporters, taking with him an estimated one-third of PSP cadres. The defection in Bihar, in a way, created greater space for backward caste leaders as many upper caste socialist leaders defected to congress in 1964. In fact, since the merger of Bihar State Backward Classes Federation with Lohia's Samajwadi Party in 1957, and the subsequent adoption of the resolution by Lohia's supporters in 1959 to secure 60 percent reservation for OBCs, SCs, STs, religious minorities in the organizations and government jobs became the main agenda of the socialist politics (Frankel 1989:88-89). Karpoori Thakur became one of the proponent of the slogan *Socialist ne baandhi gaanth, pichde pave sau me saath* and became the principal campaigner for the same.

However, forceful demand and insistence on preferential treatment for the backward classes had accentuated the difference among socialist factions. The SSP insisted upon 60% reservation for these groups, but the PSP opposed a rigid percentage approach. The language question also kept the Socialists apart. The SSP, reflecting its North Indian base, took a very hard line in favor of an unconditional acceptance of the Hindi language. While agreeing that Hindi should be the national language, the PSP opposed the imposition of Hindi on unwilling regions of the country (Lewis 1973: 831). Elaboration on problems with socialist politics, Brass (1976:21) argued that the Socialist split demonstrates the complex interconnectedness of power, personal interest, and principles in politics. Defection of one section of leaders followed by merger of Praja Socialist Party (PSP) and Socialist Party (SP) in Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) in June 1964, the question of leadership of Lohia and issue of alliances with Jan Sangh and CPI were vigorously debated and contested within the

party. The debate, dialogue and confusion around alliances have had its implications in shaping popular politics and movement as also its leadership question. Coalition of the SSP, Jana Sangh, Congress (O), and Swatantra Party for government formation in late 1960s/early 1970s remained an aspect of serious contention in socialist politics; the role, relevance and ideologies of leaders like Karpoori Thakur will be studied in this backdrop.

Navigating and negotiating through these phases, Karpoori tried to balance between the factions and emerged as most acceptable leader in the opposition bloc. He employed silence, neutrality and ambiguity as strategies during internal feud. Between 1965 and 1972 Karpoori Thakur, Ramanand Tiwari, and Bhola Prasad Singh were leading force of SSP in Bihar but they differed on question and issues around alliance. "The wing for which Bhola Prasad Singh was spokesman argued for alliance with Congress (O), Jana Sangh, and Swatantra against Congress (R), whereas the wing led by Ramanand Tiwari favoured alliance with Congress (R) and the PSP...At this time Karpuri Thakur was not identified strongly with either side" (Brass 1976:31). The issue around coalition, the caste identity of Chief Ministerial candidates, opposition around it and the fear of split in SSP led to working out a compromise that made Karpoori Thakur Chief Minister of Bihar in December 1970. The government was a coalition of SSP, Congress (O), Jana Sangh, Swatantra, and other minor parties. Though the Thakur government was short-lived, the backward caste political leaders tested success between 1967 and 1972; SSP made 'backwardism' into a near-creed. It was able to emerge as the second largest party in the 1967 elections and again in the 1969 mid-term poll. Of the seven Chief Ministers of Bihar since 1967, four have been of backward castes and one belonging to Scheduled Caste. Though the rise of this politics was temporarily arrested after 1972 victory of Congress; the socialist strategy of people's mobilization got re-activated during the movement led by Jayapakash Narayan in 1974. JP led movement was one of the most decisive political phenomenon in post-colonial India. The outbreak of "people's agitation" in Bihar leading to call for "Total Revolution" by JP and subsequent imposition of internal emergency clearly exhibited the potential and limit of popular movement in the state/country. Viewed as challenge to the threat to parliamentary democracy and response to governmental drift and corruption, the movement led to violence and repression. Perceived and articulated as expressions of

popular protests, the outcome of the movements wherein “the people,” disdaining partisanship and uniting across social barriers, rose to challenge the political - economic establishment (Wood 1975:315). Investigative the 1974 political development, Wood explains that populist agitation is a collective attempt to bring about change in political-economic institutions. “It implies that much if not all of the initiative for change comes from below and from outside established political institutions...The justification for all strategy and goals is in the name of “the people”, and a premium is placed on the capacity of leaders to create and placate the popular opinion.”(p 315). How does one understand this politics and its leadership in the name of “people” which was different from conventional party system? During 1974 movement, hundreds of trade unions, including those of industrial workers, teachers, engineers, journalists, government and university employees, railway union, etc, participated in the demonstration. The main slogan of the procession was: *Pura Rashaan Pura Kaam, Nahin To Hoga Chakka jaam* (full ration to ensure full work or else all work would come to a grinding halt). Echoing the popular sentiment, Karpoori Thakur appealed to the opposition parties, intellectuals, students, and youths to declare 'jehad' (crusade) for ending "the Congress misrule" in Bihar (The Indian Nation 1974).

The consolidation of admired support by leaders like Thakur needs to be seen in the backdrop of series of incidents occurred during the popular movements in Bihar. On March 16, 1974, in Bettiah, five people were killed by police firing. In next weeks, more than twenty-five people were killed in firing during riots in Monghyr, Ranchi, Deoghar, and elsewhere. The students, looking for direction and effective purpose and their organizations 'Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti' had succeeded in persuading JP to assume leadership of the movement. JP's idea was broad based and he claimed to utilize this opportunity to shift contours of policies from *rajniti* to *lokniti*. Within weeks, Students' and People's Struggle Committees were formed in every university and district headquarters in Bihar. Populism was clearly evidenced not only in the rhetoric of the "people's struggles," but in the broad social base, spontaneous thrust, and diffuse goals of the agitations (Woods 1975: 322). The fact that JP facilitated the two dominant youth organisations, the Samajwadi Yuvajan Sabha (SYS) and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the youth wings of the SSP and Jan Sangh respectively to come together added confusion about ideological contour of the movement. In February 1974 the CPI broke away from this

conglomeration; the ABVP, SYS- and TSS then formed into the Bihar Chattra Sangharsh Samiti (BCSS) which adopted a dominant rightist stance. This indeed has implications for the popular movement and politics in the years to come.

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However, as the agitation proceeded, and as its goals expanded and took on a distinctly political character, people also began to ask questions. Who would be the harbingers of the 'total revolution? (Thakur, 1975). The confusion, contradiction and complexities of this contentious politics were greatest challenge for JP who tried to cast it within foundational issues of democracy. Samaddar (2008:50) explains "JP was posing the problem of democracy in an age of distrust, and secondly, he was bringing forward the issue of political will with which the power of the representative sovereign was to be confronted. By raising the question of social majority vis-a-vis the representative majority, and therefore the issue of mediation, double figures and double wills, he was suggesting nothing short of a re-politicisation of democracy". What happened to the intent of re-politicisation of democracy and what effort was made by leaders like Thakur? What were instances that need to be examined while looking at the challenges and opportunities in these processes? Some of the questions posed during the movement help us to understand the shape of things to come 'post movement. A party functionary of the Congress (O) from Bihar wrote to Asoka Mehta, party secretary: 'How are we to participate in the movement? Are we to function in an amorphous manner? What would be our position as a political party in the post-movement stage? Do we have to eschew politics altogether? (Ankit 2017).

Needless to say that the idiom, the signs, the symbols and the slogan of the politics during the movement galvanized a section of the society, hitherto alert vis-à-vis politics but remained at the receiving end of political processes led by dominant castes. After 1977 Janata Party victory, Karpoori Thakur, became chief minister and he attempted to build a political constituency for ensuring stability of the altered political situation of the state. To promote a pro-poor, loosely socialist agenda, he brought policy to reserve seats in government jobs and in educational institutions for members of the backward castes. In 1978, Thakur implemented the 1971 Bihar Backward Classes Commission Report - known

as the Mungeri Lal Commission - which recommended affirmative action quotas in the state civil services and universities for the OBCs. In addition, the OBC category was divided into two "Annexures" with special reservations for "Annexure One" castes considered to be "backward" within the OBC category (popularly referred to as Extremely Backward Castes). This action though was critiqued as and an alternative to (politically unattainable) land reform, it turned out to be a political masterstroke for the decades to come. Two features of Taker's program were significant. "First, his mobilization along caste lines was a tactical move informed by socialist principles. Second, he aimed to divide the benefits of government employment more fairly, not to use government programs to improve conditions for his constituency" (Clement 2005). It was rather comprehensible that Thakur was pursuing the Lohia Line of mobilization of the backward classes. Lohia's prediction that caste-based reservations will lead to profound political transformations proved to be exact.

In order to comprehend Karpoori's contentious politics and his contribution for popular movement, the paper would explore some aspects from past:- 1) What was his engagement and contestation with contemporary colleagues from 1952-1964 (when a section of Socialist leader defected to Congress), 2) What was his articulation of socialism and its implication for the backward castes and communities that helped him occupy the centrestage of competitive socialist politics in Bihar, 3) How to understand his ideological alignment with Lohia and points of contention, 4) How did his interaction with JP evolve and shape his political decisions in 1970s, 5) How did he engage with students' politics and movement as a form of popular politics, 6) How does one situate the evolving conception of subject-hood/emergence of political subject and citizenship among students, peasants and backward castes in urban settings through aggressive politics/popular movements, 7) How does one explore his connect with minor and major figures of phase of non-conformism, insurgency, and rebellion, 8) How did the dominant social structures deal with his 'controversial' decisions, 9) What has been his specific contribution in preparing ground for political mobilization that was capitalized during JP's call for 'Total revolution' 10) How does one understand Karpoori's politics vis-à-vis coalition of extremes and politics of pragmatism, 11) How does one comprehend the political strategies behind 'Karpoori formula', 'Karpoori matriculation' and elements of popular politics behind it?

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