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Karpoori Thakur



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People, Politics and Protests VI

Karpoori Thakur

**Manish Kumar Jha
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2017

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Contentious Politics and Popular Movements: Enigma of Karpoori Thakur

Manish Kumar Jha *

Exactly two years after the imposition of internal emergency in India in 1975, on June 25, 1977, Arun Sinha reported in the *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?”¹

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 revolve around his influence in shaping the foundation of anti-congress politics by invigorating backward caste politics in Bihar. He represented the political aspirations of the intermediary castes and posed a formidable challenge to upper caste/class politics in the state. 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 continues to dominate state politics since 1990. Born in a family belonging to the *Nai* (barber) caste that constitute less than 1.5 % of Bihar's population, Thakur managed to occupy the centre stage of the socialist party and backward caste politics in Bihar between 1960 to 1987. Similar to other socialist leaders of the time, his initiation in politics started with engagement in the independence movement, but his ideological moorings gravitated towards the socialist party from early on in his political career. During the decade of the 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 Jan Sangh that were largely dominated by upper caste leaders. Influenced by and socialised in 'Lohiaite' political tradition, Thakur was instrumental in challenging the dominant conception and visualisation of politics in Bihar and started persuading the political agenda of the state.

Though the phenomenal success of caste-based mobilisation and its macro implications in

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favour of other backward castes became much more perceptible after the 1990s, the progression acquired diverse trajectories in different parts of the country. In Bihar, some leaders belonging to the Other Backward Classes had played a crucial role in shaping the socio-political contours of backward caste politics that flourished over decades and finally emerged as governing politics since the 1990s. In his assessment of backward caste politics, Jaffrelot² underlines the fact that Bihar has been a socialist laboratory where socialist parties together polled 20 to 25 % of votes, even during the initial phase of Congress dominance. On the socialist side, Karpoori Thakur played a leading role in the assertion of OBCs, and his activities explained the rise of SSP at the expense of the Congress.³ Karpoori's politics was a serious attempt towards building a coalition among the backward caste groups for political recognition and assertion. However, the endeavour met with numerous complexities and impediments. The personal ambitions of the backward caste leaders, the obligations and demands of real politics, career prospects of different leaders and their ideological commitments made it very difficult for them to set aside the differences. This differentiation kept the diverse 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 explains that the fear, distrust and recrimination among the shudra castes prevent their political coalescence and block their political ascendancy.⁴ Against the odds, influenced by Ram Manohar 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, recognising "the political potential of the horizontal mobilisation 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 the elections that he contested in since 1952 except for the 1984 Lok Sabha election. His fiery and argumentative contribution inside the Legislative Assembly on varied issues and concerns of the underprivileged section of the society was matched by his direct engagement with people and communities on the margin of society and polity. The conception of social justice, the idea of people-centric development and mass mobilisation around it was inextricably interlinked with his thoughts. Those ideas and understanding informed most of his political actions. The paper examines Karpoori Thakur's ideas and articulation about social justice, popular politics, and assertion by subaltern groups. Thakur was the vanguard of collective mobilisation and assertion through popular movements, and his strategies demonstrated the power of the hitherto excluded and marginalised castes and communities in Bihar.

In order to comprehend Karpoori's contentious politics and his contribution to popular movements, the paper would explore some aspects from the past:- 1) What was his engagement and contestation with contemporary colleagues? 2) What was his articulation of socialism and its implication for the backward castes and communities that helped him occupy the centre-stage of competitive socialist politics in Bihar? 3) How do we understand his ideological alignment and points of contention with Ram Manohar Lohia, Jayaprakash Narayan and Vinoba Bhave? 4) How did he engage with the issues of the peasants', farmers' and students' politics, and movement as a form of popular politics? 5) 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? 6) How does one comprehend his legislative engagements as a vocal opposition leader and as Chief Minister of the State? 7) How did the dominant social structures deal with his 'controversial' decisions? 8) How does one understand Karpoori's politics vis-à-vis coalition of extremes and politics of pragmatism? And finally, 9) How does one comprehend the political strategies behind the 'Karpoori formula', 'Karpoori division' and elements of popular politics behind it?

To comprehend Karpoori Thakur's politics, one needs to grasp the leadership conflict within the Socialist bloc 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".⁵ In Bihar, most of the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) cadres had long since defected in successive waves to the Congress - in 1964 Asoka Mehta left the Praja Socialist Party with his supporters, taking with him an estimated one-third of PSP cadres. The defections in Bihar, in a way, created greater space for backward caste leaders as many upper caste socialist leaders defected to Congress. 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, securing 60 percent reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and religious minorities in the organizations and government jobs became the main agenda of socialist politics.⁶ The schema of reservation for backward classes, in a way, widened the difference between two factions of socialists: Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) and Praja Socialist Party (PSP). It also alienated a large number of upper caste socialist leaders. A sense of restricted political prospects prevailed among these upper caste leaders who were subsequently co-opted by the Congress party. The SSP vociferously insisted upon 60% reservation for these groups; the approach of PSP was quite subdued on this. Besides, the clash of personalities among central socialist leaders and the social background of leaders had its implication in the fragmentation and realignment of socialist politics. Unlike the more grounded leadership of SSP, the PSP party elite was mostly high caste, educated, and largely urbanised. Fickett⁷ opined that due to the social background of leaders along with other historical and ideological considerations, PSP responded only reluctantly to the demand of a predetermined degree of representation for the underprivileged groups in Indian society (backward castes, tribals, women). The context offered a better space and scope for the kind of politics espoused by leaders like Karpoori Thakur. He became one of the fervent proponents of the slogan "*Sansopa ne baandhi gaanth, pichde pavan sau me saath*" (Samyukta Socialist Party is determined to secure 60 percent reservations for the backwards) and became the principal campaigner for the same. Other popular slogans, such as "*Lohia-Karpoori ki lakkar, badlo-badlo ye sarkar*" (Lohia-Karpoori have given a clarion call for change of political regime) and "*Sau se kam na hazar se jyada, samajvaad ka yahi takaj*" (Neither less than hundred nor more than thousand, this is the socialist ideology) caught the imagination of backward and downtrodden sections of the society.

Furthermore, the language question also kept the socialists apart. The SSP, reflecting its North Indian base, took a very hard line in favour 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 country⁸. Elaborating upon the predicament with socialist politics, Brass⁹ argued that the socialist split demonstrates the complex interconnectedness of power, personal interest, and principles in politics. The defection of one section of leaders followed by the 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 the issue of alliances with Jan Sangh and CPI were vigorously debated and contested within the party. The debate, dialogue and misunderstanding around alliances have had its implications in shaping popular politics and movements as also the leadership question. A coalition of the SSP, Jan Sangh, Congress (O), and Swatantra Party for government formation in the late 1960s/early 1970s remained a feature of severe contention in

socialist politics. The role, relevance and tactic of leaders like Karpoori Thakur are scrutinized in this backdrop.

Between 1965 and 1972, Karpoori Thakur, Ramanand Tiwari, and Bhola Prasad Singh were the leading forces of SSP in Bihar but they differed on questions and issues about alliance. “The wing for which Bhola Prasad Singh was spokesman argued for an alliance with Congress (O), Jan Sangh, and Swatantra against Congress (R), whereas the wing led by Ramanand Tiwari favoured an alliance with Congress (R) and the PSP...At this time Karpoori Thakur was not identified strongly with either side” (Brass 1976:31). The general camaraderie and simultaneous internal rivalry between two socialist stalwarts, Ramanand Tiwari and Karpoori Thakur, around the vexed issue of the composition of coalition dominated the political scene during 1969-1971. Whereas one group of SSP, Congress (O), Jan Sangh came together to support Ramanand Tiwari as CM candidate, the other group promoted Thakur’s candidature. The apprehension about accepting an upper caste leader as CM and the risk of a coalition with right-wing Jan Sangh was considered betrayal to backward class interests and the socialist ideology. These deliberations and subsequent political developments were construed as Karpoori’s conspiracy. After he became cognizant of the fact about his lack of acceptance as a leader, Ramanand Tiwari came out openly about SSP’s internal contention and wrote vociferously against Jan Sangh. In his 28th February 1970 letter to the president of SSP parliamentary board, Tiwari underlined that Jan Sangh intended to push the country towards Hindu fascism. He wrote, “the foundational edifice of Jan Sangh is communal tension and hatred. It is unacceptable for SSP to form a government with JS...we should always remember that forming a government is only the means and not the end. It looks like that we have started considering it as an end.”¹⁰ The Congress party exploited the internal rivalry in SSP and it managed to form a government led by Daroga Prasad Roy as CM; however, the government could survive barely for nine months. Ironically, in December 1970, Karpoori Thakur formed a government with support from Jan Sangh and Ramanand Tiwari became one of the cabinet ministers in his government. In fact, the apprehension around coalition, the caste identity of Chief Ministerial candidates, opposition to accept an upper caste leader as CM and the fear of a split in SSP led to the working out of a compromise that made Karpoori Thakur Chief Minister of Bihar. The government was a coalition of SSP, Congress (O), Jan Sangh, Swatantra, and other minor parties. The political development provided Jan Sangh with the spaces for participation in the governance, an opportunity that the party could astutely utilize in widening its acceptance among electorates in the years and decades to come.

The political development displayed the political craft and acumen of Thakur whereby he could establish himself as the most prominent leader of the Socialist Bloc. Despite accusations of political manoeuvring, Karpoori Thakur emerged as a most acceptable leader by different factions of the party. Brass¹¹ found it intriguing that “in most disputes at the central and state levels, Karpoori Thakur cast himself and was cast by others in the role of mediator and peacemaker rather than as a principal protagonist”. The sequence of events, political strategies behind the scene and its policy outcome determined the future of Bihar politics in the decades to come. The policies adopted after the formation of a government by Karpoori Thakur made it apparent that political resurgence of backward class leaders was going to persist in the state, at least within non-congress formations. Navigating and negotiating through these phases of factionalism within the party, one-upmanship among socialist leaders and demands of popular movements, Karpoori kept striving to balance between the different factions and came out as a most acceptable leader in the opposition bloc. He employed silence, neutrality and ambiguity as strategies during the internal feud within the party in the state as also in national politics.

The day after taking over as Chief Minister, Thakur's cabinet took the first major decision to implement the Official Language Act strictly and made it mandatory to use Hindi for all official communication. With the caption "*Janta ki bhasa ka aadar, loktantra ka aadar*" (respecting the people's language is respecting democracy), the newspaper's editorial reported "Chief Minister Karpoori Thakur has informed the press that adverse comment will be mentioned in the service book of all those who would violate this directive...needless to state that the common people of Bihar faced enormous trouble due to the usage in English in official work...The gulf between government and people that are preserved by English is not letting people experience that they live in a democratic society".¹² The previous demand of "*angrezi main ab kaam na hoga, phir se desh ghulam na hoga*" (we will not allow usage of English, we will not let the country be colonized again) and "*rashtrapati ka beta ya chaprasi ki santaan; bhangi ya bhabhan ho, sabki shiksha ek samaan*" (President's child or peon's child, sweeper or Brahmin, everyone will have common education) acquired its reverberation in governmental policy. Earlier, in his capacity as Deputy Chief Minister with the Education portfolio, Karpoori Thakur had removed English as a compulsory subject and made it an optional paper for students in high school. It was evident to him that children from backward communities and rural background often failed in examinations due to English as a compulsory subject. As the students couldn't qualify in matriculation, the students were not eligible for higher education and hence lost out on employment opportunities. Students who had completed their 10th standard examination during this phase were often contemptuously referred to as "Karpoori Division". The condescending upper caste and a dominant section of the society accused Thakur of bringing anarchy in the education system. As Finance Minister, he decided to discontinue the collection of revenue (*malguzari*) from those having 3.5 acres of irrigated and 7 acres of unirrigated land. The policy pronouncement was in line with Lohia's slogan "*jis kheti se laabh nahi, us par lage lagan nahi*" (No tax on those farms from which there is no profit). The decision offered immense relief to small and marginal farmers. It manifestly exhibited the dynamic socialist character of the government. These progressive pronouncements attenuated the apprehension that the right-wing Jan Sangh supported coalition government would compromise on pro-poor socialist ideologies and agenda.

To consolidate the backward caste electorate, SSP nominated a large number of candidates from non-elite groups, and the socialists had a larger number of OBC Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) elected; in the 1967 elections, the SSP had almost 40 percent of its MLAs coming from the lower caste in Bihar.¹³ With his ability to manoeuvre the complex political terrain of the socialist party and after establishing his hold on the state party unit, Karpoori Thakur became more aggressive and vocal in popular politics and mass movements in the decade of 1960s. In 1965, he led a powerful movement against 'anti-people' and 'anti-student' policies and the repressive act of Congress government which could galvanise massive mass support. The anxious state took recourse to violence and suppression of the voices of opposition; the incident of lathi-charge on prominent leaders like Thakur and Ramanand Tiwari became an exceptionally controversial issue for the ruling regime. Another instance of his commitment to people's cause and confidence on popular politics was manifested during his protest for ensuring job security of employees in the industries run by the Tata company in Jamshedpur. In solidarity with the workers, he started fast-unto-death that continued for 28 days. As a result, the management agreed to enhance minimum wages, weekly holidays and job security for the workers.

Though the Thakur government (1970-71) was short-lived, the backward caste political leaders tasted success between 1967 and 1972; SSP made 'backwardism' into a near-creed. The party became 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 from backward castes and one belonged to

Scheduled Caste. Though the rise of this politics was temporarily arrested after the victory of Congress in 1972, the socialist strategy of people's mobilization got re-activated during the movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan in 1974. The movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan was one of the most decisive political phenomena in post-colonial India. The outbreak of a "people's agitation" in Bihar leading to a call for "Total Revolution" by Jayaprakash Narayan and subsequent imposition of internal emergency visibly revealed the potential and limit of popular movements in the state/country. Viewed as challenge and threat to parliamentary democracy and in 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 was that "the people," disdaining partisanship and uniting across social barriers, rose to challenge the political-economic establishment.¹⁴ While exploring the 1974 political developments, 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".¹⁵ How does one understand this politics and its leadership in the name of "people" which was different from the conventional party system? During the 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 Roshan 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 appeal by Jayaprakash Narayan and mobilization on the ground by leaders like Karpoori Thakur influenced youth and a convention of students' representatives from all over the state was organized in Patna on 17-18 February 1974. Over five hundred delegates from 135 colleges came to Patna to attend the convention where two parallel students' bodies, viz. Bihar Pradesh Chhatra Sangharsha Samiti and Bihar Pradesh Chhatra Naujawan Morcha were formed. The latter represented the students of the Communist Party of India and other leftist parties, whereas the former was made up of those owing allegiance to the Jan Sangh, the Congress (O), and the Samyukta Socialist Party.¹⁶

The consolidation of support by leaders like Thakur needs to be seen in the backdrop of a series of incidents that occurred during the popular movements in Bihar. On March 16, 1974, in Bettiah, five people were killed in police firing. In next weeks, more than twenty-five people were killed in firing during riots in Munger, Ranchi, Deoghar, and elsewhere. The students, looking for direction and a sense of purpose, through their organizations Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti had succeeded in persuading Jayaprakash Narayan to assume leadership of the movement. His idea was broad-based and Jayaprakash Narayan claimed to utilize this opportunity to shift the 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 diffused goals of the agitations.¹⁷ 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 the ideological contour of the movement. In February 1974, the CPI broke away from this conglomeration; the ABVP, SYS and TSS then formed the Bihar Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti (BCSS) which adopted a dominant rightist stance. These developments had implications for the popular movement and

politics in the years to come. On the pretext of the exigency of the situation, several ideological and strategic compromises were made. Ideological confusion was all pervasive during Jayaprakash Narayan's movement, and leaders like Karpoori Thakur had to encounter complicated questions from their respective constituencies. Though non-congress politics had previous experiences of a coalition with Jan Sangh (JS), an overt expression of accommodation for Jan Sangh by Jayaprakash Narayan was confusing. While speaking in favour of a joint bloc of the Janata Party and Jan Sangh in Parliament, JP thanked the Jan Sangh for the support which it had given to his movement during the Bihar agitation. He further said, "if you are fascist then I too am a fascist", in effect giving the party an assurance that he considered that there was no longer any stigma attached to it because of its association with the RSS.¹⁸ The public statement of accommodation and assimilation of the right-wing political group in the anti-Congress front by the tallest leader of the movement crafted a complicated political terrain for the months and years to come.

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'?¹⁹ The confusion, contradiction and complexities of this contentious politics were the greatest challenges for Jayaprakash Narayan who tried to cast it within foundational issues of democracy. Samaddar²⁰ 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-politicization of democracy and what were the efforts made by leaders like Thakur? Some of the questions posed by 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?"²¹ Such complexities and ambiguities hovered around the political scene and made matters difficult for the Janata Party experiment. The differential strategies, approach and style have some room for exploration of the political relationship between JP and KT. The political trajectory of the two leaders, their caste and class affiliations, strategies and ideological ambiguities demand scrutiny. Nature, character and political realignments prompted KT to oscillate between active engagements to background work during the heightened phase of JP movement. Immediately after imposition of internal emergency in India, he went underground in Nepal and continued his initial organising endeavour from there itself.

Needless to say that the idiom, the signs, the symbols and the slogan of the politics during the JP movement galvanised a section of the society, hitherto vigilant vis-à-vis politics, but who remained at the receiving end of political processes led by dominant castes. After the 1977 Janata Party victory, Karpoori Thakur became chief minister, and he attempted to build a political constituency for ensuring the stability of the altered political situation in the state. To promote a pro-poor socialist agenda, he introduced a policy to reserve seats in government jobs and educational institutions for members of the backward castes. It is important to recollect that though Bihar government had listed OBCs in two annexes as early as in 1951 that contained 79 castes in Annexure I and 30 castes in Annexure 2, the subsequent Patna High Court held the list unconstitutional in 1964. The demands for OBC reservation in government jobs continued to find space in political discourse intermittently; it didn't get actualized though.²² The persistent insistence by OBC leaders and their growing political clout in the late 1960s and early 1970s compelled the Congress

government to constitute the Mungeri Lal Commission which listed 128 castes as OBC and 93 castes as MBC. The commission recommended 26 percent reservation in jobs and 24 percent reservation in educational institutions. However, the Congress government didn't take any action on the recommendations. It was Karpoori Thakur who implemented the recommendation of the Mungeri Lal Commission in 1978. The policy provided provision of 12 percent and 8 percent reservation in jobs for most backward and other backward classes respectively. Additionally, 3 percent for women of any group and 3 percent for those who were 'economically backward' were reserved. The layered reservation policy of the KT government symbolised a significant success for the backward classes. After being grossly underrepresented at the echelons of state bureaucracy for the entire period of independence and the British rule as well, the 'Backward' finally gained a modicum of their fair share of the posts.²³ Lohia's 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"²⁴ finally got actualized. However, JP had concerns and reluctance against the manner Karpoori implemented the reservation policy and he expressed his disagreement with his confidant. The political analyst even argued that JP let the agitation against OBC reservation flourish.

The decision resulted in a ferocious agitation against the reservation by the upper caste and a virtual caste war between the 'forward', and the 'backward' dominated the political scene of the state. Interestingly, in their opposition to reservation for OBCs, the upper caste pretended and projected alliance with Dalits that was articulated through the slogan "*agri-Harijan bhai bhai, yeh pichdi jaat kaban se aayi?*" (Upper caste and harijan castes are brothers, from where has the backward emerged) The upper caste leaders, across the political spectrum, were wary of Thakur's politics and they craftily mobilised the disgruntled MLAs from ruling and opposition groups. A significant number of SC MLAs aligned with Jan Sangh and put up a combined opposition against Karpoori Thakur in Bihar Assembly. The longstanding animosity of upper castes towards Karpoori Thakur and the apprehension about his political acumen got confirmed by his bold and controversial decision. Blair's²⁵ assessment of governmental posts created in Bihar per year showed the number as 9000, and with 20 percents seats reserved for BCs, the figure comes to around 1800 posts; therefore, the resistance to the policy and resultant widespread violence needed to be examined beyond tangible gains by way of employability. The policy had a high emblematic value that caught the imagination of people with political awareness and aspirations. In the absence of adequate political support at the state level, Karpoori Thakur, the pioneer of backward caste politics in Bihar, opted for decentralisation of the polity and held Panchayat elections in the year 1978. The outcome of the result of the election showed that there was a large scale ouster of the old officeholders. They were replaced by a new set of office bearers, with allegiance to Karpoori and his politics, which gained ground. It confirmed the sign of backward caste resurgence in politics and further influenced and enunciated the socio-political discourse in Bihar. Against the backdrop of the implementation of Mungeri Lal Commission's recommendations by the Karpoori Thakur government, an initial shift in the political centre of gravity could be observed in 1978 Panchayat elections²⁶ at the village level.

Through the reservation policy and Panchayat election, KT asserted that the Backwards had displaced the Forwards as the dominant force in Bihar politics; that the old days of dominance in public affairs from village to Vidhan Sabha by the 'twice-born' were gone forever...The Forwards interpreted things this way as well, fearing that their days of dominance might indeed have departed, and responded with a volatile mixture of fear and rage.²⁷ Besides, the Backwards had a broader class interest. As middle and small farmers, or cultivators who essentially work on their holdings themselves and as a new group in power, they were not only interested in stability and control but

also were much more concerned with maximising profits than the old 'twice-born' *maliks*....²⁸ As CM, KT was well aware of these interests and was upfront in articulating the same. He could establish himself as a campaigner of the interests of rural middle caste/class.

The policy initiative, though, was critiqued as an alternative to (politically unattainable) land reform; it turned out to be a political masterstroke for the decades to come. Two features of Thakur's program were significant. "First, his mobilisation 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".²⁹ It was rather comprehensible that Thakur was pursuing the Lohia line of mobilisation of the backward classes. Lohia's prediction that caste-based reservations will lead to profound political transformations proved to be exact. However, a critical appraisal of Thakur's preparedness shows that he took bold decisions without firm consolidation of backward classes in socio-political arena. While analysing pragmatic and progressive leaders in regional politics, Manor³⁰ explained that Thakur's early offer of preferment inflamed feelings among both forward castes and scheduled castes who felt threatened by it, lead to its premature collapse. It was replaced by a government dominated by "forwards and Jan Sanghis".³¹ On Karpoori's political strategies, Manor ³²quotes Karnataka Chief Minister, Devraj Urs: "Karpoori climbed into the ring before he learned how to box".

Post –Independence Bihar State and Politics of Assertion through Assembly Debates

Proficient and effective communication of political agenda is of crucial consequence for any political party, and it requires diverse strategies to reach out to its constituents. From the early phase of his political career, Karpoori Thakur, on the one hand, believed in the strength of mobilisation and collectivization of peasants and labourers against the dominant caste and landed gentry, and on the other, he employed his sharp oratory and analytical intervention through assembly debates. His initial mobilisation endeavour was directed against the Zamindars that led to release of land which was subsequently distributed among poor Dalits. Informed by grounded rural realities and initiated in the politics of struggle, Thakur turned out to be a persuasive and unswerving leader of subaltern masses. In the post-colonial phase, as a young and articulate socialist leader in Bihar Assembly, his questions, comments, intervention and overall participation in assembly debates are testimonies of his comprehensive knowledge, understanding and assertiveness.

Two illustrations from his intervention in Bihar Assembly in February and March 1953 (second year of his parliamentary life) are apropos here. While speaking on the government proposal of Bihar Maintenance of Public Order (Amendment) Bill, 1953, Thakur underlined concerns of arbitrariness and misuse of state's authority by the party-in-power in the newly independent nation-state. In the name of maintenance of public order, the high-handedness of the ruling party (in this case, Congress) was exemplified by Thakur. He vehemently countered the governmental claim that the Bill had a correctional element and it intended to undo the repressive elements of the Colonial Detention Act. Arguing against the proposed Bill, Thakur opined that though the Detention Act had the provision of scrutiny by higher judiciary against wrongful detention, such remedy got undermined in the proposed Bill. To substantiate his argument against misuse of power by the government, he illustrated numerous occurrences of the imposition of Section 144 through which the state denied permission for public meetings of the opposition leaders and noted social workers. He charged the ruling political regime for not permitting opposition parties to organise peasants and workers for claiming their rights and entitlements. Elaborating further, he blamed the government for

undermining people's liberty through the proposed legislation and demanded a referendum on the bill.³³ Participating in the assembly debate in support of the proposal for a referendum on the Bill by fellow Socialist leader, Ramesh Jha, on 16th September 1953, KT brought out the importance of minority opposition voices for protecting the liberty and freedom of people. Challenging the arrogance of the ruling regime that considered "democracy is the rule of the majority", he cited political thinker, Harold Laski, who said, "Friends of liberty are always in the minority in human society". Emphasizing the need to put the Bill for ascertaining public opinion through a referendum, he stressed upon the greater engagement of people in the running of state and government. Apprehension about people's disenchantment with government and lack of enthusiasm and sense of fatalism in the early phase of post-colonialism was elaborated in his speech. A case was made for ensuring "continued consent of the electorate" in the phase between two general elections. In his elaborate speech, Thakur presented numerous instances of prohibiting meetings, processions and illustrations of infringement of civil liberties³⁴ by the state and its agencies.

The debate exemplifies Thakur's wide-ranging understanding about the norms and values of the democratic polity as also the various facets and limitations of representative politics. Through his intervention in the assembly debate, KT invoked the complexities associated with the nature, character, meaning and response of public order vis-à-vis the state's response. He brought into discussion the limits of governmental engagement with liberty, freedom and public opinion. The deeper sense of justice in the context of a parliamentary form of government and electoral politics were examined with nuanced political commitment. Within barely six years of India's independence and one year of the first elected government formation in Bihar, anxiety about the state against democracy and larger concerns of subaltern masses were poignantly highlighted in the debate. The debate brings forth the tension between direct and mediated forms of democracy and explains the ways through which minority/subaltern voices in the representative democracy can be undermined. It indicates the peril of "democratic malaise" in which citizens were getting alienated from the political process and a sense of fatigue and frustration was already setting in among the electorate of the newly independent nation-state. In this milieu, direct democracy tools, such as a referendum, consultation and negotiation can enhance the popular involvement in representative mechanisms. Underlining faith in people's continued engagement with politics and policy-making, KT emphasised that unlike representative democracy that was hierarchical, partisan and authoritarian, direct democratic practices such as referendum could effectively deal with issues and concerns of the poor, backward and socially excluded.

The Land Question, Mobilisation and Challenges for Karpoori Thakur

On March 20, 1953, while responding to the cut-motion brought by a senior socialist leader, Ramanand Tiwari, on "Management of Estates consequent upon the abolition of Zamindari", Thakur asserted that only through redistribution of land, the existing inequity and mismanagement could be dealt with.³⁵ He also laid emphasis upon instituting Panchayati Raj system for revenue collection (*malguzari*). In the assembly debate, he underscored that the rent collection from farmers by Zamindars needed to be withdrawn with immediate effect. Again speaking on the proposal of Bihar Land Reforms (Amendment) Bill, 1953 by the then Chief Minister on 1st April 1953, KT wanted to determine a fixed date for taking over all Zamindari by the State. He stated "If the Government wants to make obvious that the Zamindari system is abolished, it has to abolish all Zamindari in one go. I understand that the postponement is adversely affecting the interest of the state. Since the time the discussion about Zamindari abolition was initiated, lakhs of acres of land, fallow, public common

land, water bodies and irrigation channels, cremation ground, etc has been appropriated, managed and settled by the Zamindars in their favour. Whatever is remaining will also be controlled by the Zamindars soon. If the government is genuinely keen to save the spaces for public usage, it needs to act instantaneously”.³⁶

In the land question and emergence of backward caste politics of Bihar, Zamindari abolition in 1956 has had a critical importance. Post- Zamindari abolition, a class of rich peasants emerged from among bigger tenants belonging to backward castes such as Yadavs, Koeris and Kurmis. Unlike most upper caste landowners who would not touch the plough, the backward caste peasants and even their wives and children worked in the fields. Economic prosperity has had positive influence towards their economic consolidation. However, their socio-economic standing in the deeply hierarchical caste society remained subordinated. The success of the Socialist Party after 1967 election, in a way, provided impetus to the assertion of backward caste politics and finally by 1977, it gained prominence in Bihar politics. Elaborating the complex reality of select backward caste, Sinha³⁷ explains, “Since this class of rich peasants from the backward castes is a rising class, it is very aggressive. It has to fight two battles. Socially and politically, it is struggling against the upper castes; and economically it is facing the harijan agricultural labourers and sharecroppers are now organising themselves.” Post-independence development depicts that though some OBCs had attained the status of rich peasants owing to their investments in agriculture, OBC peasants, by and large, occupied subordinated position vis-à-vis the landed groups from privileged castes. The affirmative action facilitates the group to appropriate the institutions of the state that were dominated by the landlord classes.³⁸ Therefore, the interest among OBC groups varied and their engagement, demands and resistance came across in numerous forms. The series of conflict between sharecroppers and agricultural labourers on the one hand and labour-hiring rich peasants on the other along with backward-forward caste antagonism complicated the situation for Thakur in managing the governance of the state. Blair³⁹ emphasized that the Backwards also had an agenda of class interests that was broader than merely opposing other class/ caste groups. “As middle and small farmers, or cultivators who actually work their holdings themselves and as a new group in power, they are not only interested in stability and control but also are much more concerned with maximizing profits than the old ‘twice-born’ maliks...As chief minister, Karpoori Thakur was well aware of these interests and was not at all shy in articulating them...Indeed, he has been a champion of the rural middle-class interests as well as of the rural middle caste interest”.⁴⁰

The diverse class/caste interests and its political repercussion had its obvious reverberation during Karpoori’s ruling regime. It is significant that the All-India Backward Classes’ Federation marched through the streets of Patna on March 14 demanding, along with reservation of jobs, also the release of all the accused in the Belchhi massacre case, particularly of Inderdeo Chaudhary, MLA, the main accused in the case and a caste hero of the Kurmi caste. This was a clear indication of caste conflict that reflected a rupture in backward caste and schedule caste relationship. The major outrages against harijan sharecroppers and agricultural labourers since March 1977 have occurred in Kargahar, Belchhi, Pathadda, Chhaundadano, Gopalpur and Dharampura and in almost all cases the accused belonged to these aggressive backward castes. What does this explain about the coalition of assorted political formations, the nature of the state and the conduct of government and limits of popular politics? Thakur’s 26% reservation as a masterstroke, though attempted to address the political constituents of the socialist bloc, it led to an open confrontation between the backward castes and the upper castes. There were open armed clashes, arson, inter-community riots; backward castes vs forward castes became the defining moment of the phase. Forward castes league and backward caste federations were formed to mobilise castes/communities against and for the

reservation respectively. Karpoori Thakur was opposed both by the upper castes and by the advanced sections of the backwards and turned out to be a misunderstood leader towards the close of his political career. Though he continued to be a representative political figure for the majority of subaltern communities across caste divisions from the early 1960s to mid-1980s, the turn of political events after 1985 witnessed the assertion of dominant backward castes that subsequently undermined his influence and authority over oppositional space. The character, intention, language and assertion by political leaders coming from Yadav and Kurmi caste groups, though gave an impression of competition for the inheritance of the political legacy of Karpoori Thakur; the strategies were designed to condense his political clout.

Conclusion

The dynamic politics of Karpoori spanning four decades, from the mid-1940s to mid-1980s, demonstrated his inventive approach in awakening the lower orders of the society. The strategies largely revolved around bringing a semblance of caste and class awareness in rural Bihar that was restraining the upward mobility of socio-economically deprived caste groups. In fact, the argument, articulation and agenda-setting seem to reflect that Karpoori's politics was informed and influenced by the conduct of government and the effort was always to persuade these conducts. He, not only tried to influence the governmental conduct through vociferous engagement in policy/legislative deliberations but also through oppositional demands and plan of action. Situating himself within the governmental framework, Karpoori employed governmental rationality so as to advance the position of the subaltern population. Quite often he defined the purpose of government and highlighted limits and potentialities of governmental omission and commission. In most of his political articulation and strategies, the penchant for underlining state against democracy was apparent. However, in his approach to governing as also in opposing, emphasis upon population calculation, political arithmetic and rationality in the name of care and welfare of excluded population was always discernible. Mitchell Dean⁴¹ emphasizes that calculation is central because the government requires that the "right manner" be defined, distinct "finalities" prioritised, and tactics finally tuned to achieve an optimal result. The centrality of calculation and calculated programmes of intervention portrayed governmental rationality and turned out to be the defining character of whatever Thakur championed as Chief Minister. During his brief stints in governing Bihar as Chief Minister/Deputy CM, Thakur came into sight as a populist leader in a great hurry. Sharp political estimation and ground-breaking craft of governance were all pervasive in his policies and prescriptions. The implementation of OBC reservation, grouping the castes into annexure, making English as an optional subject, carrying out panchayat election, etc. were all well calculated, populist decisions that were executed with urgency and alacrity. These decisions transformed the social category of caste into 'caste political' that magnified caste within the class and actively pursued caste-conflict to challenge the dominance of upper castes in electoral politics⁴² (Jha and Pushpendra 2015). Under the influence of socialist ideology, Karpoori was instrumental in redefining the idea of governing society by expanding caste coalition on the basis of the power of the backward castes. Even as opposition leader, he always kept a close watch on the state and the manner in which it conducted its conduct. The government, through socio-economic and biological processes, (i.e. governmentalisation of the state is not only the prerogative of the party in power, rather also requires engagement of the opposition), is required to be shaped on similar lines. Karpoori believed in a calculated programme of intervention that combines vernacular political understanding, pragmatic knowledge, with practices of assessment and

calculation. In spite of calculation and proper management, the effect of governmental intervention runs the risk of contradiction and potential confrontation.

A close scrutiny of the political developments in postcolonial Bihar shows evidence of the dominant influence of Karpoori in the rise and fall of socialist politics in Bihar, and in the backward caste sway in Bihar politics that laid the foundation for subaltern politics. While engaging with political competitors within the socialist party as also with the opposition Congress leaders, he seemed to be in an incessant 'war of position'. Gramsci's elucidation of 'War of position' and its triumph as the doctrine of political success within socialist and social democratic parties seems to have had a subtle influence on the socialist leaders like K.T. Karpoori's tactics gave an impression that he was in the continuous war of position through slow, hidden conflict and kept seeking to gain influence and power. Here, influence and power need to be understood and examined within his own socialist bloc as also vis-a-vis the ruling Congress, party-in-power. In the early post-colonial phase, the State had natural hegemony and legitimacy. Early on, Karpoori recognized the extraordinary influence of state and government in shaping the discourse of society. The government and its ruling class' vision shaped people's consciousness, as the 'common sense' of that society. This is what was needed to be challenged and Karpoori's engagement inside the legislative assembly and outside, in public as also within his party demonstrate exemplary urge for influencing and challenging that 'common sense'. The war of position, then, is the struggle to gain positions of influence that can develop counter-hegemony for the socialist movement. The gain was translated to establish backward caste influence in Bihar politics. To quote Blair⁴³ "Sachhidanand Sinha, who led the struggle culminating in the separation of Bihar from Bengal in 1912, could be said to be the creator of Modern Bihar. Sri Krishna Sinha, who shepherded the province into independence and through its first decade and a half thereafter, could be described as the creator of a Forward Raj in Bihar. And Karpoori Thakur may well turn out to have been the creator of a Backward Raj."

Notes

¹ Arun Sinha, "Janata Elects a Leader", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 12, no. 26 (Jun. 25, 1977), p. 1001.

² Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003.

³ Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, p. 266.

⁴ Ramashray Roy, "Structural Rigidity, Social Mobilization and Political "Immobilise" in Bihar". *Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 49, no. 1 (Jan. - March 1988), p.62.

⁵ Lewis P. Fickett, (Jr.) "The Praja Socialist Party of India -- 1952-1972: A Final Assessment". *Asian Survey*, vol. 13, no. 9 (Sep., 1973), p.829.

⁶ F. Frankel, "Decline of a Social Order", in F. Frankel & M. S. A. Rao (Eds.), *Dominance and state power in India* (vol. 2). New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.

⁷ Fickett, (Jr.) "The Praja Socialist Party of India", p.831.

⁸ Fickett, (Jr.) "The Praja Socialist Party of India", p.831.

⁹ Paul R. Brass, "Leadership conflict and the disintegration of the Indian Socialist Movement: Personal ambition, power and policy". *The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*. vol. 14, no. 1. (1976) p.21.

¹⁰ The letter that was published in the Hindi Daily, *Aryavarta* on 12 March 1970.

¹¹ Brass, "Leadership conflict and the disintegration of the Indian Socialist Movement", p.32.

¹² *Aryavarta*, 25 December 1970.

¹³ Christophe Jaffrelot, "The Rise of the other Backward Classes in the Hindi Belt". *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 59, no 1. (2000) pp. 86-108.

¹⁴ John R. Wood, "Extra-Parliamentary Opposition in India: An Analysis of Populist Agitations in Gujarat and Bihar". *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 48, no. 3 (Autumn, 1975), p.315.

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- ¹⁵ Wood, "Extra-Parliamentary Opposition in India", p.315.
- ¹⁶ Babulal Fadia, *State Politics in Bihar*. Radiant Publisher: New Delhi, 1984, p.51.
- ¹⁷ Wood, "Extra-Parliamentary Opposition in India", p.322.
- ¹⁸ B.D. Graham, "The Jan Sangh and bloc politics, 1967-80". *The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*. vol. 25, no.3, (1987) p.257.
- ¹⁹ Janardan Thakur, "Total Revolution". *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 10, no. 8 (Feb. 22, 1975), pp. 344-345.
- ²⁰ Ranabir Samaddar, "Jayaprakash Narayan and the Politics of Representative Democracy". *Economic and Political Weekly*. vol. 43, no. 31 (2008) p.50.
- ²¹ Rakesh Ankit, "Janata Party (1974-77): Creation of an All-India Opposition". *History and Sociology of South Asia*. vol. 11, no. 1.(2017) p 39-54.
- ²² In 1953, Baijnath Singh, a Congress MLA had introduced a non-official Bill that sought 25 percent reservation for OBCs in Government jobs; it was subsequently withdrawn under party pressure.
- ²³ Harry.W.Blair, "Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar: Social Change in the Late 1970s". *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 15, no. 2, (12 January 1980) p. 67.
- ²⁴ D L. Sheth, Changing Terms of Elite Discourse: The Case of Reservation for 'Other Backward Classes' in Sathyamurthy (ed.) *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1996, p 108.
- ²⁵ Blair, "Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar".
- ²⁶ Manish K. Jha and Pushpendra, "Governing Caste and Managing Conflicts: Bihar, 1990-2011", in Ranabir Samaddar (Ed) *Government of Peace: Social Governance, Security and the Problematic of Peace*. New York: Routledge, 2005
- ²⁷ Blair, "Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar", p.66.
- ²⁸ Blair, "Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar", p.71.
- ²⁹ P. Clements, "A Rawlsian analysis of the plight of Bihar", *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 39, No. 4. (2005) pp. 3-29.
- ³⁰ J. Manor, "Pragmatic Progressives in Regional Politics: The Case of Devaraj Urs". *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.15.no.5-6-7 (16 February 1980) pp.201-213.
- ³¹ Blair, "Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar", p.67.
- ³² Manor, "Pragmatic Progressives in Regional Politics", p.207.
- ³³ "Karpoori ka Sansadiya Jeevan", Khand-1: 1952-1966, Patna: Bihar Vidhan Sabha Sachivalaya, 2003, pp 14-19.
- ³⁴ "Karpoori ka Sansadiya Jeevan", p.76.
- ³⁵ "Karpoori ka Sansadiya Jeevan", p.33.
- ³⁶ "Karpoori ka Sansadiya Jeevan", p.45.
- ³⁷ Arun Sinha, "Advancing Class Interests in the Name of Caste". *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 13, no. 16 (April 22, 1978), pp. 675-676.
- ³⁸ F. Frankel, "Decline of a Social Order".
- ³⁹ Blair, "Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar", p.71.
- ⁴⁰ Blair, "Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar", p.71.
- ⁴¹ Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*. London: Sage, 1999, p.33.
- ⁴² Jha and Pushpendra, "Governing Caste and Managing Conflicts".
- ⁴³ Blair, "Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar", p.72.

Making of a Populist Government: A Study of Karpoori Thakur's Regime

Mithilesh Kumar *

In January 2015, Amit Shah, the president of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) began the poll campaign in Bihar for the assembly election by launching a frontal attack on Mahagathbandhan (Janata Dal (United), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Congress) on betraying the legacy of Karpoori Thakur. BJP had started claiming Karpoori Thakur since 2014 when it started celebrating Thakur's birth anniversary. The usual demand to confer Bharat Ratna on Karpoori Thakur was now replaced by laying claim to the politics and government of Karpoori Thakur. Amit Shah in his remark said, "Jan Sangh helped Karpoori Thakurji become the chief minister of Bihar and he dedicated his whole life in opposing the Congress. But see how his disciples have sacrificed his principles just to be in power (Gupta 2015)".¹ When Amit Shah was making this remark, another former chief minister of Bihar, Jitan Ram Manjhi, who belongs to the Mahadalit, caste accompanied him. There was a distinct political point that Shah was making in the presence of Manjhi. Jitan Ram Manjhi was made the chief minister of Bihar following the defeat of JD (U) in the general election and was considered close to Nitish Kumar. However, once Manjhi assumed the chief ministership, he started asserting himself and refused to vacate the seat to make way for Nitish Kumar creating a political crisis in the state. Manjhi was finally dethroned as he did not have the required numbers in the assembly. This whole chain of incident had a resonance with how Karpoori Thakur was pushed out of chief ministership in 1979. K C Tyagi, the spokesperson of JD (U) reminded BJP of their own role in bringing down the government of Karpoori Thakur, "It was the Jan Sangh component of the Janata Party that had dethroned Karpoori Thakur as CM, replacing him with Ram Sundardass. After including Congress icons like Sardar Patel in its own pantheon at the Centre, the BJP is now trying to wrest Karpoori Thakur's legacy in Bihar".²

The question is why should the BJP and Mahagathbandhan lay claim on the legacy of Karpoori Thakur. What is also of interest is that the legacy both political alliances laid claim to was less the Socialist Karpoori Thakur and more the chief minister and opposition leader Karpoori Thakur. The question is more puzzling because the regime of Karpoori Thakur as chief minister lasted less than a year from December 1970-June 1971 and just about one and a half years from December 1977-March 1979. If one considers his highly eventful and controversial regime as the education minister and Deputy Chief Minister of Bihar from March 1967-January 1968, it is a total of less than three years that Karpoori Thakur was actually part of a government. The significance of his

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time in government, as this paper claims, is that he made populism procedural during a period where popular movement succeeded in displacing the *ancient regime* but the social classes that made the popular movement possible were still in the process of solidifying themselves as ruling classes. This period is not unknown in either history or political thought. In the 1895 introduction to *Class Struggles in France*, Frederick Engels articulated the problem which historical materialism has to face in the analysis of politics:

[I]t is only too often necessary, in the current history of the time, to treat the most decisive factor as constant, to treat the economic situation existing at the beginning of the period concerned as given and unalterable for the whole period, or else to take notice only of such changes in this situation as themselves arise out of events clearly before us, and as, therefore, can likewise be clearly seen. Hence, the materialist method has here often to limit itself to tracing political conflicts back to the struggles between the interests of the social classes and fractions of classes encountered as the result of economic development, and to show the particular political parties as the more or less adequate political expression of these same classes and fractions of classes.³

Taking a leaf from Engels' book it can be suggested that the struggle between the social classes played out in the arena of elections and government formation was not as yet decisive which allowed populism to play a decisive role in functioning of the government. At this stage, when social classes were still struggling to form alliances, identify friends and enemies in politics, formations of government became more of a tactical rather than a strategic exercise. In this situation, Karpoori Thakur drove a wedge of populism into the government.

Before, we go into the details of Karpoori Thakur's various policy measures that still to a large extent defines politics and government in Bihar—reservation, prohibition, instruction in Hindi, etc.— it is important to give a picture of the complexity of social classes and their representation in the electoral arena. Harry Blair in his study of elections gave the following picture:

The 1977 election meant a noticeable decline in the Forwards' representation, to 48.6 per cent, though a look at the figures for the individual caste groups shows that all that decline was borne by the Brahmans, who dropped from 18.3 per cent of the general seats in 1975 to only 7.6 per cent in 1977, or in numerical terms from 36 MLAs to 19. The other three castes among the Forwards even gained a bit; in fact their collective share (for Bhumihars plus Raiputs plus Kayasthas) went up from 36.5 to 40.9 per cent. As the Forwards declined in strength, the Backwards grew, but just as the Forwards' loss was really the drop of just one caste group, so the advance of the Backwards was actually the progress of only one- community, the Yadavs, who by 1977 had become the second largest group in the Assembly, next only to the Raiputs. For the other Upper Backwards, representation has been essentially stationary over the period (Banias and Koiris) or even declining, as with the Kurmis. The category labelled other Shudras has consisted of a different mix each time, with never more than two from any caste group. They are primarily the Annexure I Backwards, such as Dhanuks, Hajjams, Kahars, Kewats, Mallahs and Noniyas. Among the Backwards, the Upper Backwards have been consistently overrepresented. Even back in 1962, the four Upper Backward castes had 28.8 per cent of the general MLA seats, as against only 24.3 per cent of the non-Scheduled population. By 1977, their percentage of seats had grown to 34.9. The Lower Backwards, on the other hand, are 40 per-cent of non-Scheduled population, but have never had more than 3.6 per cent of the general seats. Backward participation in state politics, then, has been a very uneven business, confined for all practical purposes to the Upper Backward community.⁴

It is clear then that in the period from mid-1960s to late 1970s and perhaps even till later, the social classes as reflected in caste groups were still realigning where the powerful old caste groups

although declining had not declined to a situation where they become either ineffective or are co-opted by the rising power. Similarly, the rising caste group had not yet been able to stake claim in making of the government. These social struggles as reflected in the election results were both the fissures within the popular movement that defined this period as well as the basis on which contingent alliances were formed that made an unmade governments within a matter of months. As Blair points out, the “combination of a Forward-Harijan alliance in the Assembly and the national-level Jana Sangh/BLD conflict within the Janata party brought down the Thakur government. It was succeeded by a ministry headed by a Harijan, Ram Sunder Das, but dominated by the same combination of Forwards and Jana Sanghis that had defeated the Thakur government.”⁵ In short, although popular movement was strong enough to install a government, the fissures that underlined the movement became accentuated when the time for delivery on popular promises came. Karpoori Thakur who belonged to the EBC caste emerged as that political figure who could momentarily act as a compromise, but highly respected figure to lead a precarious government which also had to be populist. It also meant that the exercise of populism was severely curtailed and when Karpoori Thakur tried to transcend the balance of social classes as was evident in the case of giving reservation within reservation based on the recommendations of Mungeri Lal Commission, he was swiftly brought down. However, as Walter Hauser pointed out what Karpoori Thakur had done by providing reservations based on the “Karpoori formula” made sure that “politics was changed beyond recognition”.⁶ Hauser also showed through his conversation with Jayaprakash Narayan on reservation policy pursued by Thakur how Socialist politics itself had changed as caste emerged as the most important element of political mobilization. JP had told Hauser about Karpoori Thakur, “He is moving too fast. These things will all come in good time. We Socialists have been pushing these social interests for many years, and will continue to do so”.⁷ Hauser correctly points out that backward classes politics were no longer in the mood to follow the old Socialist pattern of politics when it came to caste. It is a matter of conjecture, though, as Hauser, does not clarify whether JP was making his observation based on his analysis of the way in which social classes were arrayed against each other. But even if JP based his analysis on the indeterminate nature of the social struggle what he missed was the very governmental nature that populism had taken under Karpoori Thakur. Through the Karpoori formula, Thakur had put caste and reservation as a procedure of government. This was a decisive moment in making of the popular government under Karpoori Thakur.

Another measure that Karpoori Thakur undertook as the education minister of Bihar in 1967 was removing the condition of passing the paper on English as part of securing the matriculation exams. “Pass without English” or the “Karpoori division” as it came to be known played a huge role in emergence of students as a political subject in the stormy period of 1967-77. According to one estimate, 25,000 students passed under the “Karpoori division” every year and became eligible for Intermediate courses that allowed them to enter college and universities. This was done on the advice of Ram Manohar Lohia who thought that as a result of the contradictions within the alliance it was highly unlikely that the government would last its full term hence it was necessary that certain measures be undertaken that would not only increase the popularity of the government but would also allow it to mobilize sections of the society. With Karpoori division, students were turned into a political subject through populism which made them even more politically active as was evident in the series of students led agitation from 1967 which culminated in the Bihar Movement. College and universities became spaces which were now within the reaches of the social classes which found it difficult to enter these spaces and education itself became a political demand. One must remember that the Bihar Movement started with students demanding better conditions of higher education and to make it accessible to all.

Language itself became a matter of politics when Karpoori Thakur became the chief minister in 1977. His government made it mandatory to conduct all administrative work in Hindi. Sachchidanand Singh, the irrigation minister, sent out a circular that officers using English in administrative work would be punished and that all communication between the central government and the state should be done in English and that English could be used only after obtaining special permission. M G Ramachandran reacted sharply to this proposal of *angrezi batao* and in some ways it brought the role of Hindi as a “national” language to the fore. Karpoori Thakur himself clarified that the use of Hindi, in no way, meant the abandoning of the three language formula and he introduced Tamil as one of the languages taught. It is possible to have a different analysis of *angrezi batao* pursued by Karpoori Thakur and this has to do with the ways in which the debates around Hindi were carried before and during the Bihar Movement. In the earlier research on Bihar Movement as part of this project, it was indicated that leaders, intellectuals, and writers like Phanishwar Nath ‘Renu’ undertook the task of using local dialects in Hindi to make the written language more popular both as a political and cultural project. The pamphlets and political journals shunned the Sanskrit laden use of Hindi in written language which was considered to be more literary and adopted words which were colloquial. In this debate on use of Hindi as administrative language, an opportunity was lost for Hindi to emerge as a strong “regional” or Bhasha language and decisively shed its pretention to be the “national” language. Hindi which was being used in literary and political journals during this time does suggest after all that Renu himself brought the “aanchalik” into the literary tradition of Hindi. In that sense, although it might be a conjecture, it can be contended that the Hindi that Karpoori Thakur wanted was a Hindi which was a strong Bhasha language with its own aesthetics and not a blanket “national” language which in any case is more rhetoric than substance. However, whatever may be the advantages and disadvantages of the Karpoori division and his insistence on Hindi what cannot be denied is that it did galvanize and mobilize the students as a political group that made claims on the state and in the process emerged as one of the most radical and organized political subjects of the entire decade of 1967-77.

Most observers and scholars have pointed out to the fact that Karpoori Thakur who was a *nai* (barber) by caste did not have the required constituency to take on the rising political power of the upper backward castes. This might be true but it also meant that Karpoori Thakur could take positions which transcended the boundaries of prescribed or tolerated political demands. One such demand that Karpoori Thakur made was the repealing of Arms Act. He was also a votary of arming the dalits especially in the wake of Naxalbari movement when the landlords were killing dalits. He was acutely aware that the Jagannath Mishra government was giving arms license to landlords which led to series of mass killings in Bihar. He was not able to pass a government order which would have allowed for the arming of dalits. This also shows the limit of the populist government and also demonstrates that there are populist measures that a populist leader cannot turn into a procedure of the government. However, it showed Karpoori Thakur’s skill in formulating a populist demand and linked the question of carrying arms to the social struggle in Bihar. In his speech on September 16, 1955 in the Bihar Assembly he pointed out that there was a definite discrepancy in which arms license was being allotted to people in Bihar. He then made the question of bearing arms as a test for democracy. He exposed the hypocrisy of those who made the point that repealing of the Arms Act would make the rich more violent against the poor. He went on to say that even when Arms Act was in force there were incidents where rich landlords have killed sharecroppers in Purnea. He then made the startling point that arms could be used to organize sharecroppers and workers. He said, “If this act is repealed then poor can make cooperatives and there are also gram panchayats being made these

days and it is possible that arms can be bought collectively. Labour unions can collect money to buy a gun and a responsible person can keep the gun in possession which will be advantageous to all... [Arms Act] is a legacy of slavery. Do we want to keep alive this legacy?"⁸ What explains this position? At this time there was no other socialist leader who made this demand. I think it was possible for Karpoori Thakur to make this demand precisely because of his position as a political leader belonging to the EBC. He was aware of the social struggle and emerging equations of power and what Harry Blair has clearly identified as emergence of the Kulaks in Bihar. Thakur was aware too of the vulnerability that the so-called untouchable castes were under in Bihar. In this sense, Karpoori Thakur both reflected the limit of socialist thought and popular politics that was emerging in Bihar during this period.

Any study of populist government under Karpoori Thakur has to grapple with a question of method. As mentioned earlier, Karpoori Thakur as a figure in the government had a very small stint of less than three years. This was a result of the flux which was evident in the politics of Bihar. This paper has only focused on Karpoori Thakur's stint in government and not his long political career as a Socialist. This gives a researcher only few governmental policies in the Karpoori Thakur's regime to work with. Jagpal Singh has divided the political life of Karpoori Thakur in three phases:

Karpoori Thakur's lifespan can be divided into three phases: (a) from his birth in 1921 till 1967; during this phase he participated in the Indian national movement for Independence, students' and peasant movements, and as a prominent socialist leader articulated the common interests of the underprivileged, (b) from 1967-80 when he got identified as a leader of the backward classes, and (c) from 1980 till his death in 1988 when he became a helpless leader in search of new political support base, as a section of the dominant OBCs challenged his leadership.⁹

While this division might capture the political life of Karpoori Thakur, it has almost nothing to say about Thakur as a leader of a populist government no matter how precarious. Similarly, in the reminiscences of his comrades, opponents, and myriad politicians and academics he comes across as a figure who is perpetually in the opposition—uncompromising, honest, and idealist. After all Paul Brass claimed that he admired Karpoori Thakur along with Charan Singh and Ram Manohar Lohia because they took politics as vocation and never enriched themselves in the process. The claim on Karpoori Thakur was moral.¹⁰ A politics shorn of realpolitik and pursuit of power. This, according to me, is a fallacious understanding of Karpoori Thakur as a political figure especially a leader who also leads a populist government when the social struggles have not been decided yet. His Karpoori formula and Karpoori division was an attempt to create political subjects of populist government which props that government. One can only speculate what would have happened if he had indeed allowed dalits to arm themselves in their struggle against the landlords. Would it not have been a case when the most radical peasant struggle in postcolonial India (Naxalbari movement) would have found an articulation in the procedure of the government? But this is the limit of populist government in India. As Ranabir Samaddar has pointed out:

The rich political concept of justice suffers a deficit in a double absorption: justice subsumed under law, and politics subsumed under constitutionalism. The result is the emergence of what I call the notion and practices of governmentality in the area of justice. Since the justice-bearing provisions in the constitution do not form a coherent whole, they depend too much on the governmental procedure of justice.¹¹

This was the problem of Karpoori Thakur as well. The populist politics that he stood for could not make the final rupture with “politics subsumed under constitutionalism.” Thus, he could only try and proceduralize some populist demands like reservation and pass without English. In that sense Karpoori Thakur was not able to make a regime but created a space for future practices of governmentality practiced by more astute socialists who came to power in the 1990s. This paper concludes with a gesture to a further study. Karpoori Thakur as a leader of a populist government also signifies a distinct development within socialist thought in India away from the Marxist tradition. Thakur’s stint in power also points to the first experiments in “socialist” government and the importance of Thakur as a leader of populist government will become perhaps more clear if we see it in the light of the shift in socialist politics with the advent of liberalization in India. Maybe, Karpoori Thakur’s greatest contribution as a socialist head of government was to point out the other possibilities which Lohiaite socialism and social justice could have taken.

Notes

¹Smita Gupta, “Battle for Karpoori Thakur's Legacy on in Bihar”. *The Hindu*, 25 January, 2015. See: www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/battle-for-karpoori-thakurs-legacy-on-in-ihar/article6818866.ece.

²Smita Gupta, “Battle for Karpoori Thakur's Legacy on in Bihar”.

³Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, “1895 Edition Introduction by F. Engels”. *Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850*, Rahul Foundation, 2006, p. 7. See Engels, Frederick. “Introduction by Frederick Engels.” *The Class Struggles in France - Engels 1895 Introduction*, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/intro.html.

⁴Harry W. Blair, “Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar: Social Change in the Late 1970s”. *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 15, no. 2, 12 January, 1980, p. 67.

⁵Harry W. Blair, “Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar: Social Change in the Late 1970s”, p. 67.

⁶Walter Hauser, “Changing Images of Caste and Politics”. *Seminar*, no. 450, February 1997, pp. 47–52, See: www.asianstudies.github.io/area-studies/SouthAsia/Misc/Sss/whcastep.html.

⁷Walter Hauser, “Changing Images of Caste and Politics”.

⁸Karpoori Thakur, “Arms Act Par Vichar”. *Mahan Karmyogi; Jannayak Karpoori Thakur*, edited by Bhim Singh, Prabhat Prakashan, (First Edition), 2014, p. 390. (Translated by the author)

⁹Jagpal Singh, “Karpoori Thakur: A Socialist Leader in the Hindi Belt”. *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 50, no. 3, 17 January 2015, p. 55.

¹⁰Paul R. Brass, *An Indian Political Life: Charan Singh and Congress Politics, 1937 to 1961*, SAGE India, 2011, p. xxi

¹¹Ranabir Samaddar, *The Materiality of Politics: Volume 2: Subject Positions in Politics*, vol. 2, Anthem South Asian Studies, 2007, p. 65.

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