

## Contentious Politics and Popular Movements: Enigma of Karpoori Thakur<sup>1</sup>

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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 the foundation for anti-congress politics by invigorating backward caste politics in Bihar. He represented the political aspirations of 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 *Nai* (barber) caste that constitute less than 1.5 % of Bihar 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 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)

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and Jana 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 favour of other backward castes became much more perceptible after the 1990s, the process has diverse trajectories in different parts of the country. In Bihar, some leaders belonging to Other Backward Classes had played a crucial role in shaping the socio-political contours of backward caste politics that got flourished over decades and finally emerged as governing politics since the 1990s. In his assessment of backward caste politics, Jaffrelot (2003) 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 (Jaffrelot 2003:266). Karpoori's politics was a serious effort 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 obligation 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 1988: 62). Roy explains that the fear, distrust and recrimination among the shudra castes prevent their political coalescence and block their political ascendancy. 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, 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 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 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 activities. The paper examines Karpoori Thakur's idea 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 hitherto excluded and marginalised castes and communities in Bihar.

In order to comprehend Karpoori's contentious politics and his contribution to popular movement, the paper would explore some aspects from 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 to understand his ideological alignment with Lohia, JP and Vinoba and points of contention, 4) How did he engage with Peasant and Farmers issues 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, 9) How does one comprehend the political strategies behind 'Karpoori formula', 'Karpoori division' and elements of popular politics behind it?

To comprehend Karpoori's politics, one needs to grasp leadership conflict within 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” (Fickett 1973:829). In Bihar, most of the PSP cadres had long since defected in successive waves to the Congress - in 1964 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 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). The schema of reservation for Backward classes, in a way, widened the difference between two factions of socialist: 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 personality among central socialist leader; and also the social background of leaders had its implication in the fragmentation and realignment in socialist politics. Unlike more grounded leadership of SSP, the PSP party elite was mostly high caste, educated, and largely urbanised. Fickett (1973:831) 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, tribal, 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 ardent proponents of the slogan “*Socialist ne baandhi gaanth, pichde pave sau me saath*” (Socialists are 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 lalkaar, badlo-badlo ye sarkar*” and “*Sau se kam na hazar se*

*jyada, samajwaad ka yahi takaja*” caught the imagination of backward and downtrodden 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 country (Fickett 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. 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 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. A coalition of the SSP, Jana Sangh, Congress (O), and Swatantra Party for government formation in the late 1960s/early 1970s remained an aspect of serious contention in socialist politics. The role, relevance and strategies of leaders like Karpoori Thakur are examined in this backdrop.

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 an alliance with Congress (O), Jana 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 Karpuri 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 constituents 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; other group promoted Thakur’s candidature. The concerns about accepting an upper caste leader as CM and the coalition with right wing Jan Sangh was considered betrayal to backward class

interest and the socialist ideology. These deliberations and subsequent political development were construed as Karpoori's conspiracy. Became cognizant of the fact about the lack of acceptance as a leader, Ramanand Tiwari came out openly about SSP's internal rivalry and wrote vociferously against Jan Sangh. In his 28<sup>th</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> The Congress party exploited the internal rivalry in SSP and a government led by Daroga Prasad Roy as CM was formed; however, the government could survive only for nine months. Ironically, in December 1970, Karpoori Thakur formed a government with the support from Jan Sangh; and Ramanand Tiwari became one of the cabinet ministers in his government. In fact, the concerns around coalition, the caste identity of Chief Ministerial candidates and opposition to accept upper caste leader and the fear of a split in SSP led to working out a compromise that made Karpoori Thakur Chief Minister of Bihar. The government was a coalition of SSP, Congress (O), Jana Sangh, Swatantra, and other minor parties. The political development provided Jan Sangh the space for participation in the governance which made use of the opportunity in widening its acceptance among electorates in the years and decades to come.

The entire political development was perceived as political acumen of Thakur whereby he could establish himself as most prominent leader of Socialist Bloc. The sequence of events, political strategies behind the scene with its outcomes and the policies adopted after formation of a government by KT made it obvious that political resurgence of backward class leaders is going to persist in Bihar, at least within non-congress formations. Navigating and negotiating through these phases of factionalism with socialist leaders and demands of popular movements, Karpoori kept striving to balance between the factions and emerged as a most acceptable leader in the opposition bloc. He employed silence,

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<sup>2</sup> The letter that was published in hindi daily, Aryavarta on 12<sup>th</sup> March letter.

neutrality and ambiguity as strategies during the internal feud within the party- in the state as also in the national politics.

The day after taking over as Chief Minister, Thakur cabinet took the first major decision to implement 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*", 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 common people of Bihar faced enormous trouble due to the usage in English in official work...The gulf between government and people that is preserved by English is not letting people experience that they live in a democratic society.<sup>3</sup> The previous demand of "*angrezi main ab kaam na hoga, phir se desh ghulam na hoga*" and "*rashtrapati ka beta ya chaprasi ki santaan; bhanghi ya bhabhan ho, sabki shiksha ek samaan*" acquired its reverberation in governmental policy. Earlier, in his capacity as Deputy Chief Minister with Education portfolio, Karpoori Thakur had removed English as a compulsory subject and made it an optional paper for students in the high school. It was evident to him that children from backward communities and rural background often failed in examination 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 the opportunity for employability. Students who had completed their 10<sup>th</sup> examination during this phase were often contemptuously referred 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 (malgujari) from those having 3.5 acre irrigated and 7 acre unirrigated land. The policy pronouncement was in line with Lohia's slogan "*jis kheti se laabh nahi, us par lage lagan nahi*". The decision offered immense relief to small and marginal farmers. It evidently displayed the progressive socialist character of the government. These progressive pronouncements attenuated the apprehension that right wing Jana Sangh supported coalition government would compromise on pro-poor socialist ideologies.

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<sup>3</sup> Aaryavarta. 25 December 1970

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 (Jaffrelot 2000: 90). With his ability to manoeuvre the complex political terrain of the socialist party and after establishing his hold on state party unit, Karpoori Thakur became more aggressive and vocal in popular politics and mass movement 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 opposition voice; 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 Tata industrial company in Jamshedpur. In solidarity with the worker, 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 worker.

Though the Thakur government (1970-71) 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). While exploring 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 appeal by JP and mobilization on ground by leaders like KT influenced youth and a convention of student's 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 (Fadia 1984:51).

The consolidation of 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 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 an effective sense of purpose, through 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 the 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 Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti (BCSS) which adopted a dominant rightist stance. This 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 JP movement, and leaders like KT 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 JS by JP was confusing. While speaking in favour of a joint bloc of Janta Party and JS in Parliament, JP thanked the Jana 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 (Graham 1987: 257). The public statement of accommodation and assimilation of right wing political group in 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? (Thakur, 1975). The confusion, contradiction and complexities of this contentious politics were the greatest challenges 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 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?' (Ankit 2017).

We need to look at the intricacies of the political relationship between JP and KT. The political trajectory of two leaders, their caste and class affiliations, strategies and ideological ambiguities demands scrutiny. Nature, character and political realignments prompted KT to oscillate between active engagements to background work during 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.

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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 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 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 the educational institutions for members of the backward castes. It is important to recollect that though Bihar government had listed OBCs in two annexure 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.<sup>4</sup> The persistent insistence by OBC leaders and their growing political clout in the late 1960s and early 1970s compelled Congress government to constitute 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 Mungeri Lal Commission in 1978. The policy provided provision of 12 percent and 8 percent reservation in jobs for most backward and backward 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 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 (Blair 1980:66).

The decision resulted into 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, upper caste pretended and projected alliance with dalits that were articulated through the slogan "*agri-harijan bhai bhai, yeh pichdi jaat kahan se aayi?*" 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 Jana Sangh and put up a combined opposition against Karpoori Thakur in Bihar Assembly. The longstanding animosity of upper caste towards Karpoori Thakur and the apprehension about his political acumen got confirmed by his bold and controversial decision. Blair's (1980) 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 across around 1800 posts; and therefore the resistance to the policy and resultant widespread violence needed to be examined beyond tangible gains by way of

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<sup>4</sup> In 1953, Baijnath Singh, a congress MLA has introduced a non-official Bill that sought 25 percent reservation for OBCs in Government jobs; it was subsequently withdrawn under party pressure.

employability. The policy had a high symbolic value that caught the imagination of people with political awareness and aspirations. In the absence of adequate political support at state level, Karpoori Thakur, the pioneer of backward caste politics in Bihar, opted for decentralisation of polity and held Panchayat elections in the year 1978. It showed the sign of backward caste resurgence in politics and influenced 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 political centre of gravity could be observed in 1978 Panchayat elections (Jha and Pushpendra 2005).

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 (Blair 1980:66). 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 are not only interested in stability and control but also are much more concerned with maximising profits than the old 'twice-born *maliks*...' (ibid:71). 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" (Clement 2005). 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, Manor (1980) 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 Jana Sanghis" (Blair 1980:67). On Karpoori's political strategies, Manor (1980:207) quotes 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 importance for any political party, and it requires diverse strategies to reach out to its constituents. From the early phase of 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 communication 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 became a persuasive and committed leader of subaltern masses. In the post independence 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 raised 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 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 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 provided several instances of the imposition of Section 144 to deny permission for public meeting of the opposition leaders and noted social workers. He blamed the ruling political party for not allowing opposition party to organise peasants and workers for claiming their rights and entitlements. Elaborating further, he blamed the government for undermining people's freedom through the proposed legislation and demanded a referendum on the bill.<sup>5</sup> Participating in support of the proposal of demand for a referendum on the Bill by fellow Socialist leader, Ramesh Jha, on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1953, KT brought the importance of minority opposition voice for protecting the liberty and freedom of people. Challenging the arrogance of 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". Asserting for putting the Bill to ascertain public opinion through a referendum, he stressed upon the greater engagement of people in the functioning of state and government. Apprehension about people's disenchantment, lack of enthusiasm and sense of fatalism in the newly independent nation was elaborated in his speech, and 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 cases of the ban on meetings, processions and illustrations of infringement of civil liberties (p 76)<sup>6</sup> 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 complexities associated with nature, character, meaning and response of public order vis-à-vis 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.

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<sup>5</sup>(4th February 1953- Karpoori ka Sansadiya Jeevan (khand-1): 152-1966, pp 14-19, Bihar Vidhan Sabha Sachivalaya. 2003. )

<sup>6</sup> Karpoori Thakur ka Sansadiya Jeevan (Khand-1)

Within barely six years of India's independence and one year of 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 voice in the representative democracy can be undermined. It indicates 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. Posing 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 practice such as referendum could effectively deal with issues and concerns of poor, backward and socially excluded.

### **The Land Question, Mobilisation and challenges for KT**

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 (p 33). He also stressed upon the constitution of panchayati Raj system for revenue collection (malgujarai). He emphasised in the assembly debate 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 1<sup>st</sup> April 1953, KT wanted to fix a date for taking over all zamindari by the State in one go. 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 delay 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 truly keen to save the spaces of public usage, it has to act immediately" (p 45)



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, Koeri 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. The economic prosperity has had the positive influence towards their economic consolidation. However, their socio-economic standing in the deeply hierarchical caste society remained subordinated. The success of 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, Sinha (1978) 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 (Frankel 1989). 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.

It is significant that the demonstrators of 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 Kurmis. 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 socialist block, seats and posts to an open confrontation between the backward castes and the upper caste. There were open armed clashes, arson inter-community riots; backward caste 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 backward 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 majority of subaltern community across caste division from early 1960s to mid 1980s, the turn of political events after 1985 witnessed the assertion of dominant backward caste 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 inheritance of political legacy of Karpoori Thakur; they strategies were designed to condense his political clout.

---To be finalized and concluded.

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