

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

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." 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, 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 Karpooriji's legacy in Bihar.”

The question is why should 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 time in government, I claim in this paper, is that he made populism procedural during a period where popular movement succeeded in displacing the *ancien 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.

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.

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 it was 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.” 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.” 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.” 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 advise 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 hatao* 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 was 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 hatao* pursued by Karppori 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 I showed that leaders, intellectuals, and writers like Phanishwar Nath 'Renu' took 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 emerging in literary and political journals during this time do suggest after all Renu himself brought the "aanchalik" into the literary tradition of Hindi. In that sense, although it might be a conjecture, I think the Hindi that Karpoori Thakur wanted was a Hindi which was a strong Bhasha language with its own aesthetics and not be 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 that it did galvanize and mobilized 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 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?" (translation from Hindi mine). 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 which 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. In this paper I have only concerned myself with Karppori 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.

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. 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.

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. I would like to conclude this paper with a gesture to a further study. Karppori 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, Karpooari 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.

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