

Making of a populist government: A study of Karpoori Thakur's regime.

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Papain ke paap naashai, traas yamdutan ke

Bhav-rooj-parivar nashai dhaar triveni ki.

Tihin bhaanti traas nashai, dusht anyayion ke,

Gire ko uthave neet, sangh triveni ki.

Maan o gumaan nashai, jaal dusht jaalim ke,

Sbai bhaanti sahay kare, shoshit dal shreni ki.

Desh dharm laaj raake, sabhin saman raakhe,

Yaahi hetu bahi dhaar, sangh triveni ki.

(“Triveni Sangh Ka Bigul”)

“Triveni Sangh Ka Bigul” is a curious ethico-political document. It is part manifesto, part programmatic, and a long lesson in morality. Formed in 1933 in Shahabad, Triveni Sangh was one of the earliest voices of assertion of the middle caste peasantry in Bihar that tried to articulate their demands in contradistinction with both the Congress as well as the communists. The problem that the Sangh had to resolve was how to bring a politics of collective claim making in the arena of caste which had been firmly girdled by the reformative social program of the congress. This line of politics will culminate in the thought and politics of Rammanohar Lohia and his own version of affirmative action by the government. Thus, the backbone of “social justice” will have a content that will fuse puritanical ethics with a supple form of politics of claim making that will be more tactical than strategic. This, I claim in this research project, is how we study the transformation of “social justice” from a popular demand to a form of

governmental intervention that takes upon itself the task to change the polity. The first experiments in the government of social justice in Bihar was undertaken by Karpoori Thakur in his two terms as the chief minister of Bihar. The claim of this research project is to establish that this is a moment where the *ancienregime* is weakened, the Jacobins fail to impose themselves on the center stage of the political theatre, and when the Thermidors entrench themselves in the polity to start a long process of struggle and negotiation which begins a political and economic transformation in Bihar. In another words, social justice is the child of the process of passive revolution.

The first question that the project concerns itself is with a Leninist investigation of the passive revolution. To extract from the messy changes in political economy the kernel of politics. It is a truism now to state that land reforms failed in Bihar; whether it was state intervention or the ethical *bhoodan* or *gramdan*. What it does not explain is that how the middle caste peasantry consolidated its political and economic power through these land reforms? The challenge is to demonstrate that “social justice” broadened property relations in the countryside but it also consciously stymied any radical reforms in land relations for the property-less which meant pauperization, proletarianization, and migration. A study of how caste assertion was used to remold property relations sets the limit of social justice. The Lohiaite thought around affirmative action shifted the arena of political struggles into the urban sphere and political economy of the state built around the planned economy. It was this that provided “social justice” its intellectuals, its rank and file, and the Bihar Movement.

The Karpoori Thakur regime had to refashion the notion of citizenship that was available to the aspirations of the middle castes. This citizen had, now, already broken the limits of simply being a legal rights bearing entity. The available legal rights of citizenship was not in congruence to the

demands of its egalitarian ideology. It was the political moment when the legal limits of citizenship had to be supplemented. This meant that caste will no longer remain an issue of identity and socio-economic mobility but issue of governmentality. The regime of Karpoori Thakur is when the governmentalization of caste becomes an indispensable tool in the art and science of managing the population. Thus, we can see a definite rupture from the governmental processes of the *ancien regime*; colonial and postcolonial. A new definition, new enumeration of “citizens” is required which is reflected in the many committees and commission that are formed in this period. The project will study in detail the fashioning of this new citizen

The Karpoori Thakur regime also set itself the agenda of moral regeneration of the nation on the same egalitarian principle through which it set out to rearrange political economy and polity. The two most controversial policy was its use of Hindi as a medium of instruction and total prohibition. The doing away of English as a medium of instruction and examination was not on the basis of linguistic identity and related sub-nationalism but as providing equal opportunities. The question for this project is not whether it was successful or unsuccessful, right or wrong but how it led to the politicization of students and emergence of students as a political subject, autonomous and radical. Prohibition, similarly, should be seen as an attempt to create a new subject for the new polity. A new political subject that is aware of its overdetermined citizenship laced with moral obligations. Clearly, according to this understanding the Gandhian moralist had failed in its project of national regeneration and with the fusion of caste and morality a new ethics of politics was to be forged. The project will study in detail the government of this ethical and political practice.

Finally, one should not forget the surplus violence which was used in this new art and science of government in this period especially in the case of Naxalbari movement. How “social justice”

manages violence, both state and non-state violence, becomes an important question. This will require a new conception of “just” violence. The project, in this context, will study the governmental response to Naxal violence and rise of the human rights’ movement.

The mandate of the research project is to understand the Karpoori Thakur regime as a period of transition from the *ancien regime* of the Congress to the picking up the pace of passive revolution as the promise of the revolution faded away. This will also help in understanding the complex chart of Bihar politics which, in many ways, still cannot shed its influence of Karpoori Thakur and the promise of “social justice.”