

Bharat Ratna to Karpoori Thakur: Appropriating icons for political end

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On the occasion of the birth centenary of Karpoori Thakur (24 January 1924–17 February 1988), several programs have been organized at different parts of the country from January 2023 till now. But the coverage of those programs in the mainstream media was negligible. Information about those programs was available only on social media. Articles and comments discussing Karpoori Thakur's personality, politics and ideology were also published on social media and in a few small magazines. As soon as the BJP-led NDA government announced the award of Bharat Ratna posthumously to Karpoori Thakur, he became the subject of discussion in the mainstream media as a 'socialist icon'.

Particularly English newspapers published the news, reporting, articles and editorials about him with great enthusiasm. The reactions of many leaders and parties on this sudden decision of the government also became a subject of the media. In all this, the government's "politics" behind the decision to award Bharat Ratna to Thakur was also mentioned and discussed. It was said that the government has used Bharat Ratna to blunt the opposition's caste-based census card. That is, the feat of immersing *mandal* into brimming *kamandal* with the construction and inauguration of Ram Temple has been accomplished by awarding Bharat Ratna to Thakur! The RSS/BJP has tried to prove through this award that there is no conflict between 'Hindutva' and social justice. By conferring the same award on LK Advani is in line with its well thought out plan.

However, it is worth noting that the central government did not commemorate Karpoori Thakur in Bihar or any other state during the entire birth centenary year, which ends on 24 January 2024. Despite being awarded the Bharat Ratna, it does not seem that the government will have any serious concern with Karpoori Thakur even in future. Actually, this is just an election maneuver of the government.

The politics of Bharat Ratna has also engulfed the Grand Alliance government of Bihar. There was a tussle between the claimants to the inheritance of Thakur. Nitish Kumar, an 'engineer' of Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs), while commenting on the award, took a dig at RJD's dynastic politics by saying that Thakur never did dynastic politics. He, in fact, declared himself the real heir of Thakur by saying that he himself too never took his family forward in politics. In order to further strengthen his claim he also stated that he made Thakur's son Ramnath Thakur a member of the Rajya Sabha, who always follows him. He also conveyed a message to the BJP that he alone has the patent on EBC votes in Bihar. That is, the benefit of giving Bharat Ratna to Thakur passes through the corridor of his rightful heir!

There was a tussle going on between JDU and RJD for some time. Apart from this, Nitish was upset that despite being a "tallest leader" in the opposition camp, the India alliance did not declare him as the prime ministerial candidate. He was not even made the president of the alliance. Even before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, he expected that the Congress would go ahead accepting him as the Prime Ministerial candidate of the combined opposition. When this did not happen, he left the Grand Alliance and went back with the BJP. He again returned to BJP-led NDA, picking up the bale of legacy of Thakur. The interesting thing is that Thakur, who suddenly came into limelight after the announcement of Bharat Ratna, has been ostracized, and Nitish Kumar has gained the centre-stage. Editorials and articles in newspapers are now throwing light on *mandal-kamandal* politics and its various variations. Thakur and his persona, politics and ideology are no more topics of interest. Political analysts seem to have accepted that the future of social justice politics lies not with the socialist ideology of Thakur, but with the politics of 'Hindutva', which carries their cherished agenda of "development" and "good governance".

In such a situation, it would be appropriate to ask the question whether the Bharat-Ratna, that came out of the womb of power-greedy politics of communalism, casteism, individualism and *vanshavad* (dynasty rule) while sitting in the lap of corporate houses, to Thakur enhances his honor or diminishes his dignity posthumously. In fact, this episode once again explains that in the era of corporate-communal nexus in politics the national icons are being humiliated by being used in undignified power-politics.

A little discussion of Thakur, the politician, would not be out of place here. He has been a leader of great versatility. As much as he was involved in politics and socialist ideology, he was equally learned in literature, art and culture. People in academia and literature often noted that he always used to travel with a heavy bag of books. He had his own ideological and political training in socialist thoughts and movement. However, he used to imbibe all the transformative ideas coming from various sources including the ideas of Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar. He had

a deep commitment towards basic modern values like democracy, secularism, civil liberties and human rights. His simplicity and his insistence on not taking the slightest advantage of his political position for the benefit of his family and friends was a clear indication of his link with the Gandhian-Socialist stream. Thakur belonged to an extremely backward and small in numbers the barber caste. Despite such a background, he could develop an independent political personality of himself.

Thakur was actually a child of the freedom movement and the socialist movement. He started his political innings by leaving college and participating in the Quit India Movement. He was elected member of Bihar Legislative Assembly in 1952 elections. From then till his death, he always won the assembly elections continuously. He won the Lok Sabha election from Samastipur in 1977. In his entire political career, he lost only the 1984 Lok Sabha elections. He played the role of Leader of Opposition in Bihar Assembly for a long time. He became the Chief Minister of Bihar twice – from 22 December 1970 to 2 June 1971, and from 24 June 1977 to 21 April 1979. He had a deep knowledge of parliamentary rules and processes, and was sincerely adhered to them.

He had made a provision of 8, 12, 3, 3 percent reservation for extremely backward classes, other backward classes, women and economically poor of general category respectively. This is known as Karpoori Formula, for which he had to face even abusive language from people with upper caste feudal mindset, especially the Jan Sangh cadres. Not only did southern leader Devraj Urs take a dig at Thakur's reservation policy, it also became a subject of controversy among socialists. Some people say that the provision of sub-quota within the quota had the consent and inspiration of JP, whereas some hold the opposite opinion. Both Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar, who claim to be Thakur's heirs, have proven to be leaders who only settle the electoral calculations of castes. They have not been moved by Thakur's commitment to socialism and social harmony.

Being a committed socialist, he always tried to bring the marginalized groups forward, but considered himself mainly as a representative of the people of Bihar. Many obstacles came in his way, not to forget his 'low' caste, but he overcame them all with his political and ideological commitment. Never in his life did he resort to communal casteism and casteist 'identityism'. He emerged as a leader of the people - *jannayak*, not a leader of any caste. This particular merit of his personality can be viewed through a poem titled '*Bheed Se Ghira Adami*' (A man surrounded by the crowds) by Jabir Husain.

This poem, the best among many poems written on him, shows that the personality of Thakur was not bound by region, caste and religion. He used to call himself a casteless person. Even his commitment to the country was only that it should be freed from colonial subjugation so that a society of equality can be established by transforming the multi-layered feudal-hegemonic system. The poem also suggests that his personality is not meant to evoke worship but to be an inspiration for struggle. During the freedom struggle Karpoori Thakur himself composed a famous poem titled '*Hum Soe Watan Ko Jagane Chale Hain*' (We walk to stir the nation awake):

We walk to stir the nation awake/ breathe life into the dead/to through the gauntlet at the powerful/who ignore the helpless ill-fed/don't push us further o tyrant/lest we burn it all to ground/ unbent, headlong we rush/to raise the listless from the ground/we walk to stir the nation awake. This poem too suggests that he was a leader of the underprivileged-exploited masses with a deep ideological understanding.

Dr. Lohia's thesis - "Class is mobile caste. Caste is immobile class" - is about Thakur's understanding of caste and class question at a practical level. When the leaders who openly play dynasty politics in a feudal style claim themselves as the heirs of the legacy of Thakur, they simply devalue him. Lohia's offer to bring Dalits, Adivasis, backward castes, women and poor Muslims ahead in politics was an epoch-making idea to transform the socio-economic-political-cultural structures of the country forever. Lohia hoped for de-brahmanization and de-colonization of the minds of these marginalized communities because this 'mind' had been largely free from the clutches of old brahmanical and the new colonial value systems. In this way, that 'mind' could have been a permanent deterrent to communal fascism and capitalist imperialism. But this idea of Lohia, full of possibilities of epoch-changing, was turned into a blatant casteism by the leaders playing politics of social justice. They, in fact, put the same in the service of communal fascism and capitalist imperialism.

Among the Backward/Dalit leaders, Thakur was the only one who fulfilled Lohia's hope through his political work. This is the most important dimension of his relevance today. It is to be hoped that this dimension of his relevance will not be allowed to disappear in the politics of Bharat Ratna.

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