

BHARAT RATNA FOR KARPOORI THAKUR: HOW THE BJP IS CREATING A NARRATIVE OF EMPOWERMENT AND INCLUSION

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In his speech at the consecration (*pran pratishtha samaroh*) of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya, Prime Minister Narendra Modi talked about a squirrel (*gilahari*) that finds mention in the Ramayana. He spoke of it as a symbol of the weakest and most marginal members of society and said that, like Lord Ram, we need to acknowledge the value and contributions of the weakest among us.

Soon after the event in Ayodhya, the President of India announced that the Bharat Ratna, the highest civilian award of India, would be posthumously conferred on Karpoori Thakur, a leader who had struggled all his life for the empowerment of the weakest. The announcement came a day before Thakur's birth centenary. Is the timing of both these developments coincidental? I believe they are connected, showing how the [Bharatiya Janata Party \(BJP\)](#) and its politics are moving towards the inclusion and empowerment of the most marginal social groups. These decisions are part of a well-designed plan of the BJP to create a political narrative of the empowerment of the poor and marginalised communities which, like the squirrels in the Ramayana, are not yet politically visible and assertive. The current emphasis of PM Modi and the BJP on "garib kalyan" (welfare of the poor) and social justice circulates as the central metaphor of this well-conceived political narrative.

Thakur, a former chief minister of Bihar, who died in 1988, embodies various socio-political meanings: One, as the first non-Congress chief minister of the politically important state of Bihar; two, as a non-Congress socialist politician; three, as a political icon born in a most backward caste (MBC); four, as the "Jan Nayak" who worked hard to deliver social justice to the poor and marginalised throughout his life. The announcement of the Bharat Ratna to Thakur is a message to respect all these political values and honour the dedication which he represented as a leader and public servant.

The politics of selection often reflects the nature and values of a party. The conferment of the Bharat Ratna on Thakur shows that the new BJP which has emerged under the leadership of PM Modi is trying to bring together the so-far-unheard voices from the margins and transform them into a message of democratic politics.

Thakur represented the departure of Bihar politics from the dominance of upper castes. He is also a symbol of "non-Congressism" which suits the BJP. PM Modi usually articulates non-Congressism as a critique of and alternative to Congress politics. Thakur is remembered for two political decisions that he made during his reign as a two-term chief minister of Bihar. The first was the removal of English as a compulsory subject from the matriculation syllabus in the state. The second was his implementation of the Mungeri Lal Commission's report, which recommended 26 per cent reservation for Other Backward Classes and various kinds of poor in state government jobs. This is known as the Karpoori Thakur Formula, which identified multilayered deprivation and multiple marginalities in society. It proposed a multilayered reservation formula with the clear provision of quota within quota for EBCs (Extremely Backward Castes), women and even the poor among the upper castes. This formula identified the need for the creation of the EBC-MBC category under OBC. This formula later played a foundational role in the making of [Nitish Kumar's](#) "ati pichhada" (Extremely Backward) and Mahadalit-based policies and politics. The BJP also believes in the policy of quota to address multiple levels and layers of marginalities in Indian society.

PM Modi will soon be visiting Bihar where the decision to confer the Bharat Ratna on Thakur may have a deep political impact. The recent caste survey in the state reported that OBCs form 63 per cent of the population, among which EBCs constitute 36 per cent. While Thakur was the OBC face of Bihar politics, he was also a political icon among the EBCs. An MBC youth studying in a Patna college told me that “[Thakur] was Ambedkar for us”. He is seen as a leader who was sensitive toward protecting the interests of the EBCs from the dominance of a few OBC castes. For the BJP, which is trying to expand its politics among non-dominant OBC castes, such as EBCs, in Bihar, this decision may play an important role in creating trust capital for the party. The BJP has to compete with the [Rashtriya Janata Dal](#) (RJD), which has a strong base among the Yadav community in Bihar and the Nitish Kumar-led JDU, whose caste base lies among the major non-Yadav OBC communities such as Koeri, Kurmi and Kushwaha mainly, but which also attracts EBCs and a section of upper castes. If the BJP creates an impact on the EBCs, adding them to its traditional caste base, such as upper castes, Vaishya and Nishad communities, it may succeed in forging a winnable alliance in Bihar politics.

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