

A FITTING TRIBUTE TO KARPOORI THAKUR — RETHINK THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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The central government's decision to posthumously award the Bharat Ratna to the socialist leader Karpoori Thakur is a wholly welcome move. Hailed as a "jan nayak" during his lifetime for championing the cause of the backward castes, Thakur was an early pioneer of the politics of social justice.

A mentor in part to Lalu Prasad and [Nitish Kumar](#), Karpoori Thakur belonged to a now mostly departed generation of leaders who not only emerged from the freedom movement, but also continued to uphold its legacy by maintaining the high standards of probity in public life that it had set. Despite being a two-time chief minister of Bihar, Thakur remained, throughout his life, scrupulously honest in his conduct and absolutely frugal in his lifestyle — a politician who practised politics not in order to enrich himself, but as a vocation.

While the government's decision should be welcomed, the irony involved in it surely cannot be lost on anyone. A life-long advocate of caste-based reservation is being honoured by a government that wishes to prevent the true picture of caste inequality from emerging, as is evident from its reluctance in carrying out a caste census. No prizes, then, for guessing how Karpoori Thakur, were he still alive, would have reacted to the announcement of the award.

What, then, should we make of the government's decision? To begin with, the move is in line with the ruling party's policy of appropriating a wide range of political icons from opposing parties, which those parties have themselves forgotten or forsaken. By appropriating Thakur's political legacy for itself, it hopes to attract votes from the OBCs in Bihar and elsewhere.

But there is more to this political "masterstroke" than meets the eye. Given that the demand for the Bharat Ratna for Thakur has been on the JDU's agenda for years, the government's act of concession just before the Lok Sabha elections is at the same time a friendly gesture aimed at Nitish Kumar. By inviting the Bihar CM to align with it, the [BJP](#) seeks to drive a wedge between the JDU and the RJD in Bihar, and to throw the fledgling Opposition alliance (INDIA) off balance.

But there is also a deeper design here, understanding which requires some familiarity with Thakur's politics, in particular the so-called "Karpoori Thakur Formula". The latter, as is well known, had arisen out of Thakur's awareness of a danger built into reservations for OBCs as a whole, that it would disproportionately benefit the more prominent castes among the OBCs, in particular Yadavs, to the detriment of the more marginalised caste groups within the category. In order to correct this tendency, Thakur had proposed within the larger quota for the OBCs, a sub-quota for the more marginalised castes.

Even though it was never implemented, the formula evoked much controversy and intense reactions. In particular, it was met with staunch opposition from Yadav leaders within his own party, and ultimately led to his political downfall. The "Karpoori Thakur Formula" thus revealed the fault lines of the politics of caste-based reservations. Indeed, it would not be wrong to read Thakur's political career as a story of the progressive opening up of this fault line.

Herein lies the deeper intention behind the government's move. What appears on the surface as a gracious act of honouring a tall OBC leader is, in fact, an attempt to open up the fault lines of Mandal politics in Bihar and beyond. By pitting the more marginalised castes among the OBCs

against the dominant ones (Yadavs, in particular), the BJP seeks to scramble the caste configurations, the so-called jatiya samikaran, ahead of the 2024 election season. In this way, it seeks to take the sting out of the Opposition's strategy of countering Mandir with Mandal.

Whether the Opposition manages to outmanoeuvre this "masterstroke" depends on what lessons it draws from Karpoori Thakur's political career, and more generally from the history of Mandal politics. The lesson to be learnt from this history is not the one that the critics of reservation have generally drawn, namely, that reservation inevitably seems to call for more reservation, and hence must be abandoned. I believe a more politically salient lesson is on offer here.

What started out as an instrument at the disposal of the politics of social justice — reservation — has increasingly become its principal goal. When the politics of social justice becomes reduced to a politics of caste-based reservation, it tends to undermine itself. To be sure, this does not mean that reservation ought to be done away with entirely. Caste-based reservation remains a powerful tool. But it is surely a travesty of the politics of social justice when reservation no longer remains an instrument at its disposal, but instead becomes its end all.

If the politics of social justice is to find its way out of the aporia in which it finds itself today, the core demand at the heart of this politics must be re-articulated in a more abstract idiom. While remaining awake to the nature of caste inequalities in our society, and endeavouring to paint as accurate a picture of them as possible, the politics of social justice must rise above pandering to particular caste groups, inevitably pitting one caste against another. Instead, it must offer a new vision of social justice that appeals not only to this or that caste, but more generally to the most marginalised sections of our society, and do so in the abstract idiom of the janta. Not a mere revival of his formulae or slogans, then, a fitting tribute to Karpoori Thakur would be to rethink the politics of social justice afresh.

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Five days after Chandigarh IAS officer Rupesh Kumar ordered the sealing of establishments and suspension of liquor licenses of ten major vend owners, the Home department shunted him out of the Excise department. Sources said that on January 19, of the twelve cases decided, sealing was ordered in ten cases by Kumar for violating the breach of terms and conditions of the Liquor Act.

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