

WITH BHARAT RATNA TO KARPOORI THAKUR, THE BJP IS CO-OPTING SOCIAL JUSTICE AGENDA

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Perhaps, it is only coincidence that the Union government's announcement of the Bharat Ratna to the late Karpoori Thakur came the day after the spectacular inauguration of a temple at Ayodhya. After all, the legendary Bihar backward-caste leader's birth centenary fell on January 24, and the announcement of national awards usually happens a few days before Republic Day. Even otherwise, it is quite plausible that the date for the pran pratishtha — a far more important event for this government — was decided independently. But it is no coincidence that both events are part of the lead-up to the imminent Lok Sabha elections.

Whether it was by accident or by design, the juxtaposition of these two events invites attention to the central question facing our polity today: Will the almost-successful Hindutva agenda seal its victory by co-opting and engulfing the social justice agenda? Or, put more bluntly, will the campaign to manufacture (and weaponise) a newly homogenised Hindu identity manage to overcome the hierarchical hatreds of Hindu caste?

The question is important and must not be treated as already answered (despite claims to the contrary) because the Hindutva agenda, at this point, remains dependent on state power. Another 10 or even five years of control over state organs may be enough to future-proof it. But as of today, elections remain the only durable and legitimate route to state power, and therefore numbers — in the shape of electoral majorities — matter. So far, the only tried and trusted constituency for Hindutva are the Hindu "upper" castes, who have been, and remain, an electoral and demographic minority. It is the so-called lower-caste Hindus who have the numbers and are, therefore, key to an electoral majority. Cobbling together such a majority is not easy because electoral politics demands at least a minimally credible rhetoric of implicit equality, whereas the institution of caste is all about the reproduction of explicit inequalities.

To make matters worse, the broad segments of the caste spectrum may allow the blurring of older internal distinctions but remain committed to guarding their external boundaries. As is well known, the middle castes are actively oppressing the bottom castes across India today, but rivalries and resentments between the top and middle, or the top and bottom have hardly disappeared, despite temporary local alliances. Finally, none of these caste segments is homogenous or singular, with many fractions within them, which in turn allows for complex strategies of electoral alliance-building by poaching existing coalitions to build new ones.

The Bharat Ratna to Thakur is a shrewd move because it is costless and yet offers multiple gains. It appropriates some of the ideological capital of RJD and JDU, given that Thakur was the political elder brother of both [Nitish Kumar](#) and Lalu Prasad. It reminds all the current players that both these leaders (especially Lalu Prasad) climbed to power on Thakur's shoulders — and at his expense. Third, it amplifies the [Bharatiya Janata Party](#)'s claims of representing the interests of the backward castes elsewhere, without ceding anything substantial to them.

But even a cursory look at the actual political agenda that Thakur pursued as a leader in the 1970s will bring out the glaring contrasts with what the [BJP](#) is trying to do today. In the statements about the award, Thakur is praised for his integrity and his pioneering role in expanding reservation policy beyond the then constitutional bounds of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes through a disaggregated distribution of benefits to different caste clusters. It is this policy of the sub-division of the backward caste quota (rejected by the Mandal

Commission) that has been revived in the post-Mandal phase of UP-Bihar politics.

What is obscured here is that, whatever his flaws, Thakur was following a popular-leftist caste agenda which is emphatically not the popular-rightist communal agenda of the BJP today. He was trying — and he was the first to succeed at the symbolic level — to break the monopoly of the Brahmin-Rajput-Kayastha-Bhumihar monopoly on power in Bihar. By contrast, the BJP is trying to recruit other castes or caste-clusters to an essentially upper-caste political programme that must necessarily be dressed up as a populist one for electoral reasons.

This contrast is even clearer when we consider another significant policy of the Thakur era, on official language. Thakur, like other Lohia acolytes, is one of the leaders associated with a vigorous campaign that focused on reducing the influence of English and on promoting Indian languages, and national integration through multilingualism. One of his controversial initiatives was a proposal to introduce Tamil as a second language in Bihar, partly in response to Tamil Nadu chief minister M G Ramachandran's strong objections to the removal of English and to the use of Hindi as the sole official language. Earlier proposals in Bihar included the recognition of Urdu as an official language, which prompted the Jana Sangh to withdraw support and launch protests. In short, Thakur is remembered — and respected or reviled — as the enemy of the upper castes; he is not associated with communal politics of any kind.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that if a Bharat Ratna were to be awarded for the advancement of backward castes, then Devaraj Urs, the father of today's viksit Karnataka, and its chief minister in the 1970s, would arguably be a better candidate. Breaking the stranglehold on power of the dominant Lingayat and Vokkaliga caste-conglomerates, Urs pioneered a development-centric social justice agenda that prioritised land reform over reservation, though he was also a vigorous proponent of the latter. His politics certainly involved compromises, concessions and corruption, but he built alliances between Muslims, backward castes and Dalits without preaching hatred towards any community.

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Sunny Deol, known for his professionalism on film sets, shared a funny incident where he got agitated when co-star Sridevi tried to pull a prank on him during the shoot of their 1989 film Chalbaaz. He also talked about actors' insecurities and how it can ruin a film. Sunny will be seen in Aamir Khan's production Lahore 1947, directed by Rajkumar Santoshi.

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