

(On the occasion of birth centenary of Karpoori Thakur)

Remembering Karpoori Thakur: His relevance in the present times

-Prem Singh

For the last two years, various programs are being organized to commemorate the birth centenary of socialist leader Madhu Limaye (1 May 1922-8 January 1995). January also marks the birth centenary years of two other prominent socialist leaders, Madhu Dandavate (21 January 1924–12 November 2005) and Karpoori Thakur (24 January 1924–17 February 1988). Karpoori Thakur's birth centenary celebrations began on 24 January 2023 in Hyderabad under the auspices of Jannayak Karpoori Thakur Foundation. In his speech, the chief guest, retired Supreme Court Justice B Sudarshan Reddy threw light on the politics and ideology of Karpoori Thakur while inaugurating the function. I had the opportunity to participate in the program along with many other speakers including the sociologist, Professor BC Barik, former Vice-Chancellor of Sambalpur University, sociologist Professor G Satyanarayana, who retired from Osmania University, and M Suryanarayana, the convener of Jannayak Karpoori Thakur Foundation. The beginning of the birth centenary celebrations of Karpoori Thakur from Hyderabad has a special importance. Dr. Rammanohar Lohia, whose thoughts probably had the greatest influence on Karpoori Thakur, had a close connection with this culturally and politically significant city.

Karpoori Thakur 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.

In his birth Centenary year, it is expected that various aspects related to Karpoori Thakur's personality, politics and ideology will be seriously considered and deliberated upon in government and non-government programs to be held to commemorate the same. Evaluated in the light of the current situation in the country, his contribution appears to be particularly significant. The relevance of his life and ideals could lead to the search and the discovery of certain threads of solution necessary in order to understand and resolve the present crisis.

It's the fact of the present day that current politics of the country is revolving around the vortex of corporate-communal nexus. This crisis has become still deeper because a major section of the country's intelligentsia is also trapped within the same vortex. One can find several aspects of this complex crisis affecting current Indian polity. One of them is that the country's politics

and its political discourse have become a hotbed of communal casteism (*sampradayik jativad*) and casteist identity (*jativadi asmitavad*). In order to grab political power in the elections, there is emerging a new trend of hue and cry about the myths, characters, episodes, writings, writers etc. of the distant past. Such controversies dominate the press, media, and even seminars and political discussions. This is not without reason. When the politics of a country deviates from the axis of constitutional ideology, then pointless and vexatious controversies like these take center stage instead of actually grounded politics and political discourse.

The communal casteism of the RSS/BJP and the casteist 'identityism' of the parties/leaders claiming social justice - both have consistently become an integral part and nurturer of gross privatization/liberalization policies in mainstream politics of the country during the last three decades. It is not surprising that the leaders of both the camps keep moving and shifting between each other's camp for power. To illustrate one example, Swami Prasad Maurya, a key character in the controversy over Tulsi's 'RamcharitManas', has travelled from Janata Dal (1991-96), Bahujan Samaj Party (1996-2016), Bharatiya Janata Party (2016-2022) to Samajwadi Party.

In such a political milieu, Karpoori Thakur's birth centenary year cannot be brushed aside as just another event. Karpoori Thakur belonged to a caste that is considered extremely backward and very few in numbers. Nevertheless, he created an independent political status of his own. He started his political innings by joining the Quit India Movement leaving his studies at the college midway forever. He was elected member of the Bihar Legislative Assembly in the 1952 elections. From then till his death, he continuously won the assembly elections. He won the Lok Sabha election from Samastipur in 1977, and in his entire political career he lost only the 1984 Lok Sabha elections. He played the role of Leader of Opposition in the Bihar Legislative Assembly for a long time and became the Chief Minister of Bihar twice - first from 22 December 1970 to 2 June 1971, and then from 24 June 1977 to 21 April 1979. The formula of 26 percent reservation for the backward castes in Bihar, was prepared and implemented by him. He accomplished many other important goals as MLA, Minister, Deputy Chief Minister and Chief Minister.

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:

Mobbed by a fawning crowd
that man
is someone's crazed lunatic

in his hands
the building block, the dream in his eyes
is the cross often thrust
by history

the struggle,
a quiet resistance to
respect-insult
violence-counter violence
accusations-counter accusations
of civilization
throughout the centuries
is someone's terrifying challenge

his blazing light
rips the dark night.
firm, resolute like steel.

stepping over compromise,
he embraces war to his slender frame
of mud, earth and slipping sands

a foreboding oppression
hangs dense, the sleeping city is dazed,
shushed in a hesitant stupor

does the eager crowd
recognize a bloody trophy in his nailed palms?
the scalding story
branded on his forehead,
have you even read it?

a mere mortal,
he's no risen god -
just the steadily beating heart
of those that surround him.

This poem says that the personality of Karpoori Thakur was not bound by region, caste and religion. His commitment to the country was only that it should be freed from colonial slavery 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 Karpoori 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 Karpoori Thakur, they simply devalue him.

Dr. 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 structure 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 it in the service of communal fascism and capitalist imperialism. Among the Backward/Dalit leaders, Karpoori Thakur was the only one who fulfilled Lohia's hope through his political work. This is the most important dimension of his relevance in the current crisis, which should be underlined in the centenary year celebrations.

PS: Both the poems quoted here have been translated by senior journalist Anurag Yadav, who has translated Prem Chand's *Godan* and Devakinandan Khatri's *Chandrakanta* into English.

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