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- ❖ **Act East Policy and Indo-Myanmar Border Trade in Arunachal**
- ❖ **Food Security in GCC Countries**
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Designed by: Pt. Tejpal

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Bharat Ratna to Karpuri Thakur

Socialist icon and known affectionately as “Jan Nayak” (people’s leader) Late Karpuri Thakur of Bihar has been conferred the Bharat Ratna posthumously on his birth centenary on 24th January 2024. A product of India’s freedom struggle, and an embodiment of ‘Social Justice’ in independent India, Thakur became the 49th Indian to be conferred this award. Thakur has been the tallest backward caste leader in Bihar and considered to be the mentor of contemporary leaders like Nitish Kumar, Lalu Prasad Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan. Karpuri’s village *Pitaunjhia* has been renamed as Karpuri Gram in Samastipur district of Bihar. He became member of the Legislative Assembly in 1952 and continued to be so till his death in 1988, excluding his stint as Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha in 1977, and when he lost the Parliament election in 1984. He also served as Education Minister of Bihar during March 1967 to January 1968.

Karpuri Thakur was the son of a barber (Extremely Backward Caste) who lived a principled life and served twice as Chief Minister of Bihar: first for six months in 1970 when he was leader of the Samyukta Socialist Party; second for two years during June 1977 and April 1979 when leading the Janata Party government. His stint as CM was too short; yet his radical policy decisions had long-term impact and resonate till today in Indian politics. Some of his policies include: removal of English as compulsory subject for the matriculation examinations; preferential treatment for unemployed engineers in government contracts; prohibition of alcohol; and layered reservation policy through implementation of the recommendations of Mungeri Lal Commission (1976). His policies perpetuated polarization (among upper castes) against his decision, yet he continued to be respected for his clean corruption-free image and his denial of getting rich on government funds. On his death, his village home was a mere hut.

He was an architect of social justice and had life-time commitment to work and uplift the downtrodden. His visionary leadership has left an indelible mark on social-political and socio-economic matrix of Indian politics. Though late, the award is indeed an honour to crores of poor people belonging to the extremely backward and backward communities.

Decision to confer the awards generated mix reaction in Indian media. Janata Dal (United) hailed the honour and thanked Prime Minister Modi. Rashtriya Janata Dal and Bihar Congress accused it to be politically motivated in view of impending Lok Sabha elections this year and also for stalling caste census. Congress though has welcomed the decision, but advocates for necessity of caste census to ensure participatory justice. On the other hand, ruling dispensation claimed that Thakur’s contributions would inspire them to create a more just and equitable society.

Award would certainly have a bearing upon the political landscape of the Country as caste continues to be social infrastructure of Indian politics. The decision acquires increased significance owing to recent caste survey of Bihar that has revealed the population of EBC at 36% of the total population. Appropriation and misappropriation of icons have emerged as new normal in Indian politics. Competitive appropriations of Thakur’s legacy by different shades of political players have begun in Indian politics. The combines of JD (U) and RJD while have honoured Thakur’s legacy through policy actions; the predecessor of present political dispensation the Sangha-affiliated sections of the Janata Party withdrew support from Karpuri’s government, with ranting of slogan: *Karpuri Kar Poora, chhod gaddi, dhar ustura*. Solace is that the honour has come to messiah of Social Justice, a deserving soul even though may be politically motivated.

— BK



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