

Revisiting the legacy of Chaudhary Charan Singh: Lessons for Contemporary Peasant Politics

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Chaudhary Charan Singh is frequently identified as the preeminent *kisan* (peasant) leader in the post independent India. Throughout his life, he relentlessly fought for peasant interests and emerged as their principal spokesperson, ideologue and political representative. Besides being the champion of peasant politics, he was an outstanding intellectual (Byres 1988: 139) and produced substantial body of written works in the form of books, articles and pamphlets on economic policies, agriculture, caste and politics. In his writings, he articulated a complex and sophisticated model of economic development, elaborated the need and method of *zamindari* abolition in his home state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), peasant proprietorship, increasing agricultural production and labor intensive small scale industries.

Importantly, though the political legacy of Charan Singh is well recognized his written works remain less known and unrecognized. In the backdrop of crisis in rural-agrarian sector and the peasant politics disappearing from Indian politics, the need is to revisit both the intellectual and political legacy of Charan Singh. Being a peasant icon and a rooted intellectual, Charan Singh's writings throws substantial light on the mistakes made in the past. Thus revisiting Charan Singh's legacy is significant for articulating economic policies to overcome the persistent crisis in the agriculture sector on the one hand and to reclaim the space which peasant politics once enjoyed in India on the other.

Brief Life Sketch of Chaudhary Charan Singh

Charan Singh was born on 23rd December 1902 in a tenant peasant family, in village Noorpur (then in Meerut district) of Western Uttar Pradesh. Throughout his life, he chose to emphasize his peasant origin and remained proud of it. Deeply entrenched in rural-peasant life, he developed profound understanding of rural-agrarian life, and nature of exploitation by *zamindars* (land lords), moneylenders and city based government employees. His peasant background introduced him to the simplicity and self-sufficiency of village life, a way of being he pursued for the rest of his life. After his initial education in Meerut, he went to Agra to pursue higher education. He completed his LL.B. in 1927 and started practicing civil law at Ghaziabad city court. As a lawyer dealing with cases of village folk, he came in contact with people and their problems, especially those of the

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peasants. Trained as a lawyer, he articulated his arguments never without evidence. Accordingly, his subsequent writings are full of facts, figures and statistics support in favor of his arguments.

Since his early life, Charan Singh was drawn most towards Mahatma Gandhi and Dayananda Saraswati. Inspired by the Gandhi led national movement, he left his legal practice within a decade and joined the Indian National Congress and went to jail during Salt Satyagraha and Quit India movement. For the first time, he was elected to United Province legislative assembly in the year 1937 from Meerut on the Congress ticket. After independence, he assumed several important ministries, like, agriculture, revenue, finance and others in Uttar Pradesh before becoming the Chief Minister in 1967. After breaking away from Congress, he formed several peasant oriented parties, like, Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD), Bhartiya Lok Dal and Lok Dal with strong base in North India. He was the first non-Congress Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, who later on became Prime Minister.

Critique of Zamindari System

First, Charan Singh was most vocal critique of *zamindari* system in thought and deeds. He observed that, "The landlords are parasites in the truest sense of the term" (Singh 1947: 15). Advancing powerful and passionate critique of *zamindari* system, he argued that agriculture production was in no way dependent upon the class of landlord which themselves take no part in tilling and production process. It was a class which simply lives upon the labor of others and whose profession was idleness. He held *zamindari* system to be responsible for abject poverty and degradation of peasants, who hire land for cultivation at very high rate of rent. Also under *zamindari*, tenants had no security over land and therefore no incentive to make any improvements on their holdings, proving detrimental for agricultural production.

When assumed the office of Agriculture and Revenue Minister, Charan Singh played the pivotal role in framing, passage and execution of landmark *U.P. Zamindari and Land Reforms Bill* (1952). He considered it to be the principle achievement of his life. After that, he took other initiatives to serve the interest of peasant and rural population, like successful implementation of the *UP Consolidation of Holdings Act of 1953*. Providing relief to peasants, he exempted land revenue for farmers owning land up to three and half acres and exempted fertilizer from sales tax.

As a member of the Union Cabinet (1977-79), he exempted unmanufactured tobacco from excise duty and reduced excise duty on all chemical fertilizers up to 50 per cent. He also established the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development with a view to providing loans for agriculture and rural development schemes.

Critique of Joint and Cooperative Farming

Second, Charan Singh was an ardent critique of Nehru's proposal of joint and cooperative farming. Attending Congress's annual session in Nagpur in 1959, he gave an hour long speech against the resolution bringing in cooperative farming. Though his speech was appreciated by newspapers and privately by Congress leaders and rank-and-file, it was decried by many in Congress' national leadership. Offering powerful critique of joint farming, he wrote full length book- *Joint Farming X-Rayed: the Problem and its Solution* in the same year.

He criticized joint farming on several grounds. One, he contended that peasant was too independent and attached to his land that pooling of individual land holdings could ever be successful in India. Two, pooling of land holdings deprives peasant the freedom and dissuades him for any kind of individual initiative to increase production. Three, its success demanded mechanization of agriculture, for which capital was not then present in India. Four, it would invite authoritarian control of bureaucrats and few middle man over simple and innocent villagers, and would lead to the concentration of power in the hands of few.

Opposing Nehru's proposal, he argued for peasant proprietorship, that is, ownership of the land by the man who actually tills it. Peasant proprietorship for him was in tune with the idea of rural democracy and decentralization of economic resources. Ownership of land would also increase production as it gives a peasant incentive to work hard and produce more for their own benefits. Outlining psychological effects of peasant proprietorship, he wrote, "The Reason is that it generates forces which stimulate the free development of the peasant's personality. The thought that land has become his and his children's in perpetuity, lightens and cheers his labor and expands his horizon. The feeling that he is his own master, subject to no outside control, and has free exclusive and untrammelled use of his land drives him to greater and greater effort" (Singh 1959: v).

Gandhian Economic Philosophy

Third, inspired by Gandhi's economic philosophy, Charan Singh opposed Nehru's model of development with the emphasis on capital intensive industrialization. As an alternative, he argued for prioritizing agriculture and small-scale and cottage industries, in a primarily agrarian underdeveloped and poverty stricken country, like India. He explained that to ensure food security agricultural production should be prioritized through efficient utilization of available agricultural land. Moreover, purchasing power of the people could only be increased with development of agricultural sector and its cascading demand effect on the rest of the economy. It was only with increased purchasing power of rural demand for industrial goods and services could ever be maintained. Primacy to agriculture was also essential for the growth of industrial sector as it was the agriculture sector which supplies raw material to industry and for the manufacture of consumer goods.

Along with agriculture, Charan Singh underlined the necessity of small scale-labor intensive industries in villages to generate employment and to absorb surplus labor. However, Charan Singh did not deny big industries per se but believed that it could come in the course of time after sufficient growth in rural- agricultural sector or at most can only accompany increased agricultural production.

Critique against Caste System

Fourth, Charan Singh in his writings advanced an acerbic critique of the caste system (Singh 1981:535-548). He considered caste to be biggest enemy of Indian society. He argued that caste system was hierarchical in nature, based on the principle of purity and pollution, and prescribed to the principle of birth over the worth. For him such a system led to fragmentation of Indian society, dividing population in number of castes and sub-castes, preventing fellow feeling beyond the members of their own caste. People remain loyal and concerned to their caste groups than to larger society. Occupation decided by birth, according to him was inimical to free opportunity, open competition and individual mobility associated with dynamic economy. It violated the dignity of labor by labeling manual labor to be inferior. It was also responsible for political slavery and for India repeatedly falling prey in the hands of foreign invaders as it prevented political unity and united resistance at the time of foreign invasions.

To get rid of the evil of caste system, Charan Singh emphasized most on inter-caste marriages. He argued that in modern time the caste is perpetuated and sustained most through practice of endogamy. It becomes most important in the life of an individual at the time of marriage. Thus inter-caste marriage was the most effective solution. Such was his hatred towards caste system that he even did not hesitate to propose inter-caste marriages through constitutional provisions and rules. He wrote a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru on 26th May 1954 proposing inter-caste marriages mandatory for candidates seeking government jobs as gazetted officers. Inspired by Dayananda Saraswati, he also rejected ritualistic practices, religious superstition, idol worship, idea of purity and pollution which he considered to be associated with caste system.

Opposition to the then dominant party

Last but not the least, Charan Singh played significant role in opposing the then dominant party- Congress. He played crucial role in the formation of first non-Congress government first in Uttar Pradesh and then at the Centre. After holding several important ministries in Congress government since independence, Charan Singh parted away from the Congress party in 1967. In the same year, he formed first non-Congress government of Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (SVD) in U.P. SVD was a joint organization of all opposition parties in U.P. which unanimously elected Charan Singh as their leader.

After leaving Congress, Charan Singh formed new agrarian party, the Bhartiya Kisan Dal (BKD) in the year 1968. Formation of BKD marked the beginning of organized peasant politics in post-independent India and assertion of distinctive peasant interest in electoral politics in India. The core base of BKD was consisted of the middle status caste and middle size peasantry in north India (Brass 2011: 5-6). The political and economic aim of the new party was to secure the interest of the peasantry in India by drawing more investment from the state in the agriculture sector and by encouraging small scale industries in rural India for the purpose of providing employment to those without land. BKD in electoral politics opposed the then Congress' model of development with the focus on large scale and heavy industry and urban base India which neglected the rural and agricultural sector. In its first ever election in 1969, newly formed BKD was successful in marking its imprint on north Indian politics. It secured 98 seats and 21.22% of popular votes in U.P. assembly elections and emerged as the second largest party in the state after the Congress.

From the mid-1970's, Charan Singh shifted his focus from the state to the national politics at the Centre. In national politics, he made sustained efforts to unite the opposition party against the then dominant Congress party and to carve out a distinctive agenda which gave priority to the agrarian interest. For the same, he formed Bhartiya Lok Dal (BLD) in 1974. It was formed with the merger of BKD, factions of Swatantra Party, Samyukta Socialist Party, Uttkal Congress, Rashtriya Loktantrik Dal, Kisan Mazdoor Party and Punjab Khetibari Zamindari Union.

In 1975, when authoritarian 'emergency' regime was imposed, Charan Singh along with other opposition leaders was put behind jail by Indira Gandhi regime for the purpose of crushing all opposition to her government. During and after emergency, Charan Singh played instrumental role in bring the opposition leaders together and putting a united front against the Congress. Along with other opposition leaders, he relentlessly worked for the formation and success of Janata Party. He provided massive political base of his party among the peasantry of northern India to newly formed Janata Party, which defeated the Congress in the general elections of 1977. Importantly, it was under the symbol of his erstwhile party BKD, the historic 1977 general Lok Sabha election was fought and won by the Janata Party. As one of the chief architects of the Janata Party experiment, he elaborated alternative economic philosophy of the new party and of the government on Gandhian lines, underlining agrarian issues, small scale and cottage industries.

He became Prime Minister in 1979 for the brief period. After the disintegration of Janata Party, he revived his old party, with the name Lok Dal. In the succeeding general elections, though Charan Singh was elected to parliament, he never held government office again. However, he left a permanent imprint on Indian politics as many of leaders (Mulayam singh Yadav, Sharad Yadav, Nitish Kumar, Ram Vilas Paswan and other) from Lok Dal became significant leaders of north Indian politics. Charan Singh led a simple life and wrote several books, including *Abolition of Zamindari*, *Joint Farming X-rayed*, *India's Economic Policy: The Gandhian Blueprint*, *Economic Nightmare of India: Its Causes and Cure and others*.

At present when agricultural sector and farmers politics in the country is in crisis, the need to revisit the intellectual and political legacy of Charan Singh becomes all too important. In last two

decades, all the governments at the Centre are responsible for favoring the multinational corporations and for neglecting the agriculture sector in a way or other. Subsidy to agriculture sector has been substantially reduced, underdeveloped agriculture sector is linked to the uncertainties of the world market, minimum support price for crops is not sufficiently and regularly revised, farm land is acquired for setting up multinational companies and small scale industries in rural sector is repeatedly neglected.

These policies together in last two decades had detrimental impact on rural-agrarian sector, leading to deep crisis. The agriculture in India is increasingly becoming unprofitable and farmers are migrating from rural to urban areas. The widespread crisis in the agriculture sector can be comprehended by just looking at increasing farmers' suicide in the country. Since 1990's, farmers suicide has emerged as a widespread phenomenon and 2,56,916 farmers have committed suicide between 1995 and 2010 (Sainath 2011). Moreover, period between from 1997 to 2003 is being acknowledged as the worst for agriculture since the green revolution (Himanshu 2017)

Importantly, pervasive crisis in agriculture sector is integrally linked to the crisis in peasant politics in last two decades. Despite crisis in rural-agrarian sector, there is lack of sustained widespread peasant movement and assertion of peasantry in and outside electoral politics. As a result political class across political parties is increasingly becoming indifferent and insensitive towards issues of rural-agrarian sector. This is not to say that in the last two decades India did not witness any kind of peasant politics but there is huge difference between the way peasant politics and issues was central to national politics, particularly during 1960's, 1970's and 1980's and the way peasant politics has failed to make any significant impact in last two decades. Though in the last two decades India has witnessed several agitations by farmers, like protest in Greater Noida in 2011 on the issue of increased compensation to acquire agricultural land, movement in Maharashtra in 2017, movement in Madhya Pradesh for increased minimum support price on crops in 2017 and others but by and large these movements either remained confined to specific region or were too short lived. Moreover, though every major political party has a farmers' wing but the issue of agriculture and peasant is rarely addressed by these wings independent of their overall commitment towards their own party.

One of the reasons for the increased marginalization of peasant politics is the absence of peasant leadership and eclipse of peasant movement in the country. Since last two decades India did not produce any significant peasant leader who championed the cause of peasantry and agriculture, persistently engaged with the issues of agriculture, mobilized the peasantry across region and distinctly engaged with peasant issues. Moreover, peasants have repeatedly failed to pressurize the successive governments at the state and national level in last two decades to address their issues and to draw required financial support. In such scenario four lessons can be learnt by revisiting the intellectual and political legacy of Charan Singh.

First, the need is to articulate afresh an alternative model of development by keeping in mind the changed context of post-reform era, as Charan Singh articulated a model by keeping in mind the realities of Indian society of 1950's, 1960's and 1970's. Since 1960's and 70's many things have changed. Traditional landlords have disappeared, agriculture land is getting fragmented, there is no shortage of production and after the implementation of economic reform it is the corporate which is taking away the lands of farmers. In such a changed scenario, the necessity is to advance a new model of development in accordance to changed realities; the plan which remains committed to the interest of rural-agrarian sector.

Second, the need is to address the issues of rural-agrarian sector distinctly and independently of broader ideology and agenda of existing political parties. For that peasantry need to be mobilized y outside the fold of kind of political parties present in India. The necessity is to

form new political party committed to the cause of peasantry. Charan Singh in 1960's and 1970's did that by forming political parties, like BKD and BLD primarily dedicated to issues of peasantry.

Third, the need is to mobilize the peasantry in the electoral politics for the purpose of pressurizing the successive governments at the Centre. Charan Singh as the peasant icon was successful in mobilizing the peasantry in the electoral politics and in pressurizing the governments to address the issues of agricultural class. He was able to assert the cause of agricultural class in post independent Indian politics because he was successful in electoral politics. Last but not the least as Charan Singh throughout his life fought against the then dominant party (Congress party), the need of the hour is to fight against the present dominant party –Bhartiya Janata Party (Palshikar 2017) which not only dominate the Centre but also the majority of the states in the country. As Congress, the present dominant party is also indifferent to the cause of peasantry and is implementing the corporate agenda at the expense of interest of rural-agrarian sector.

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