

Ideas of Charan Singh

An Alternative Perspective of Development

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Charan Singh's intellectual practice has remained under-explored in the realm of the study of Indian intellectual traditions. At a time when development promises continue to elude agrarian and rural India, Singh's ideas are worthy of serious attention because he presented a comprehensive critique of the development discourse in India from the perspective of agriculturists and the countryside. By noting why Singh's written word should attract more attention, the paper goes on to mark the leitmotifs that may help one to navigate through Singh's oeuvre. Further, it attempts to present an outline of three important developmental issues delved upon in Singh's writings.

This paper seeks to explore Charan Singh's intellectual practice which hitherto remains largely an obscure page in the history of intellectual traditions in India. Singh's written work is worthy of serious attention for perhaps the only and an early comprehensive critique of the development discourse in India from the standpoint of agriculturists and rural India. "While Russia produced more than a dozen agrarian intellectuals, and China produced a few, Singh may have been independent India's one and only" (Khilnani 2016: 564). This intrinsic importance of being almost a lone voice in this realm of ideas places him as a central figure to academically engage with.¹ More importantly, he presented his ideas in print with academic rigour, still ripe with power to stimulate and provoke. By reflecting upon his corpus, namely his numerous books and personal files amounting to a composition of around more than 2,50,000 pages, this paper aims to interpret Singh's vision of alternative development. It also seeks to identify some leitmotifs which, otherwise unsaid, undergirds his arguments and may help one to make sense of the currents that run through his oeuvre.

There are at least three reasons why Singh's written word should attract more attention. First, along with offering a cogent critique of the mainstream high techno-industrial development discourse, his writings articulate an alternative conception of development bearing interesting theoretical and policy aspects. One of the central phenomenon of modern human history—the developmental transition, namely the transformation from agrarian to modern industrial political economies—is the main subject matter of his writings. Additionally, the transpositions of Singh's ideas in the contemporary context may potentially be a rewarding exercise. For instance, when a substantial part of our population is engaged in increasingly unviable agriculture, and the enigma of agrarian and rural crisis has become a perennial feature of Indian economy, his ideas appear germane. His writings also allow one to draw some profound insights about the development trajectory of many other agrarian societies.

Seen methodologically, Singh's writings are not casual reflections on issues but are fashioned in the idiom of social sciences. Following features are noteworthy about his style of writing. First, apart from a thorough grasp of the subject at hand, he almost always mustered a body of evidence—extensive, well-annotated statistical data—to corroborate his assertions. This analytical method of building an argument remains a consistent feature of most of his articulations even if he is engaging in an interpretive exercise. Second, almost as a methodological

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principle he adheres to a logical style of argumentation with an “if this, then that” mode of reasoning. Third, most of his analyses maintain a constant cross-national comparative framework to drive home his point. In short, Singh’s writings give a sense of cogently argued treatise; where, over and over again, in analytical fashion, a crisp argument is advanced or a position is combated. In this process, he also makes conceptual innovations or revises many a concept.² Further, there is an exceptional consistency and coherence in Singh’s writings spanning for almost five decades, containing a rhythmic mix of both analysis and prescription.

What distinguishes Singh from most political practitioners is that his politics was almost always informed by his intellectual understanding and unique policy proposals of which he never lost sight of. For instance, in 1977, when the opposition leadership, including him, was busy in the formation of a national alternative to Congress, Singh did not let slide his developmental vision. He was quick to compress his views, articulated in a range of writings since 1930s, and submitted a draft to the Janata Party on development policies.³ In short, Singh and his political programme, which contributed to some of the important tipping points of post-independence India, can be appreciated only against the backdrop of his written work. However, till now, many appraise Singh and all that he represented, without an acquaintance with his written work.⁴ Further, his writings are also important to understand various indictments on him.⁵ Also, some political parties and social movements in North India have attempted to posthumously appropriate Singh. An understanding of Singh’s perspective through his writings shall be of value in assessing such appropriations.

Here, one cannot engage in deep analytical exposition and scrutiny, given the sheer magnitude of all the themes that Singh invoked and engaged with.⁶ In the limited scope, this paper seeks to identify some of the underpinnings of his arguments that may help in putting Singh’s writings in perspective. Further, the paper seeks to pull three strands of Singh’s ideas and tease out indicative implications. These three issues address some of the important developmental issues.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Conventional ideological taxonomy may not be appropriate to capture Singh’s discourse. He approached conventional ideological frameworks by keeping an eye on the structural specificities prevailing in India. Owing to these, he was convinced that India needs to evolve its own development path. One of his key submissions in this context is that epistemic indebtedness pushes us to ask wrong questions to begin with. Consider, for instance, with regard to agriculture in India, how in the process of framing a question, he questions the frames:

Marxism, like capitalism, has every where asked: How could one obtain from the existing surface a maximum return with a minimum of labour? The question for us is different. It is: How could we on the existing surface secure a living to a maximum number of people through the use of their labour in the villages? Land being the limiting factor in our conditions, our aim must be, obviously, not the highest possible production per man or agricultural worker, but highest

possible production per acre. That is what will give us the largest total for India as a whole and thus eradicate poverty or want of wealth. (Singh 1959: 20)

In essence, his insistence is that the intellectual investments directed to advance an alternative conception of development cannot always be expected to answer the problems posed by the orthodox knowledge; rather an alternative approach should begin with our own questions. He was critical of borrowed knowledge frameworks and considered this epistemic bankruptcy of the Indian intelligentsia, along with urban bias, as one of the key reasons for the developmental nightmare of the country.

Singh almost always took sophisticated positions on some of the fundamental questions of development. Certain themes run through his discourse. He had serious problem with the dominant assumption in mainstream development theories that societies move unidimensionally from traditional to modern—from agricultural to industrial and from rural to urban—with a uniform universal aim of socio-economic transformation. This idea in his time, in particular, was subscribed by both, modernisation theories as well as orthodox Marxist perspective. He not only questioned such a notion but rather, by changing the vantage point, approached the conventional frameworks from the perspective of village and argued that “reconciling the development of countryside with the growth of industries” is, in fact, a “vital problem.” In this, both capitalist and communist paths, according to him, “have failed” and “there is no example which India can exactly follow in solving the problem” (Singh 1964: 212). Arguably, it can be put forward, at the risk of flattening Singh’s multifaceted argument, that two currents of concern—how to establish a harmonious union of industry and agriculture; between town and country, and how to resolve the predicament of overcrowded village—form a key plank of Singh’s thoughts on development.

Further, his writings can be read as a robust attempt to withstand, to borrow an expression from James Scott, the imperialism of high-modernism (Scott 1998).⁷ This imperialism of high modernism emanated from a muscle-bound hubris about scientific and technological progress associated with industrialisation in Western Europe and Northern America. It involves “gigantomania” (a superfluous irrational obsession for bigness), linear progress (genealogy of which again goes back to industrialisation in Western Europe) and sweeping rational engineering of aspects of social life, including nature. Faith in high modernism is shared by both left and right, albeit more by the former than the latter, and is thus independent of the orthodox ideological moorings. It necessarily involves exclusion, sometimes even contempt, of practical experience and local knowledge. However, high modernism is not only about some innocent faith, but also interests; interests of certain set of people over another. High modernism informed the subterranean logic of the mainstream development terrain throughout the last century and in many ways still ignites the imaginations of development scholars and planners. It manifests in an array of projects—large dams, large-scale industrialisation, large farms, etc. Much of Singh’s intellectual practice

can be read as a reasoned attempt to resist the imperialism of high modernism. In his writings he not only captured almost every above-described element of high modernism but also makes a critical assessment of these aspects.⁸

As a positive statement, specifically, Singh formulates four signposts or touchstones for his development vision

- (i) Increase in total wealth or production; (ii) Elimination of unemployment and underemployment; (iii) Equitable distribution of wealth; and (iv) Making democracy a success (Singh 1959: 20).

There is no lexical priority among the four touchstones. To him,

inasmuch as social, political and economic life is intertwined, India's preference should be for an economy which, even as it ensures bread, freedom and equality to the maximum extent possible, also releases trends and forces which promote and strengthen the democratic way of life. (Singh 1977: 2)

He argued that an economic system dominated by small independent peasant-farms and cottage and small-scale enterprises with subject to certain exceptions that answers the above objectives best. In fact, what undergirds Singh's range of arguments is the veracity, desirability and feasibility of small over the grandiose. His case for the small—small family farms, small-scale industry, small dams, and so on—is foregrounded in the issues of efficiency, fairness, equity, inclusiveness and sustainability. He pleads for a framework where “it is the human personality which has been assigned the first or central place—not money or machine” (Singh 1981: viii–ix). He contends that

in India, progress has to be measured ... [by] the quantity and quality of basic necessities of life like food, clothes, houses, health, education, etc, that become available to the last man (Singh 1981: 398).

In following section one attempts to present an outline of three central developmental issues delved upon in Singh's writings, namely his ideas on two key questions of agriculture, critique of urban bias and, a critique of high industrialism and linear structural transformation.

Envisioning Agriculture-led Development

Question of land and farm size: On the issue of land, Singh stood opposed—both politically and academically—to both landlordism and Soviet inspired joint farming and was for an agrarian order based on small family farms by independent peasantry predominantly run thorough family labour. From the beginning he took a strong position against landlordism and produced arguments to prove how it is “parasitic”⁹ (Singh 1939, 1947a, 1947b, 1949, 1957).

Singh's ideal of small family farms faced another threat in the form of joint farming, inspired by Soviet Union and China. The idea, widely endorsed by the then intelligentsia, also found resonance in the highest office of the land, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.¹⁰ Singh confronted this both politically and academically. In his book *Joint Farming x-Rayed*, he produced a multipronged defence of family farms against Soviet-inspired large scale joint farming (Singh 1959). His arguments are a defence against both Soviet style and large capitalist farming. Singh argued that small, though viable, farms are key to

increased production and hence bountiful, sustainable, have potential to increase employment and also helpful in nurturing democracy. His arguments assume significance even in the present context when, to borrow the words of Peter Rosset, “small farms have time and again been labelled as backward, unproductive and inefficient ... an obstacle to be overcome in the process of economic development” and when the “American model of large scale, mechanised, corporate agriculture is held out as the best, if not the only, way to feed the world's population” (2000: 77). While expounding his case Singh also states the limitation of the prevalent epistemic frameworks to appreciate this argument as they are “nursed in the field of capitalist agriculture with the background of “wage and labour” and the criterion of as much rent or profits as possible.” They are unable to “give a true insight into the socio-economic nature of wage-less family economy that the peasant agriculture symbolises” (Singh 1959: 73). Apart from Singh's gamut of arguments in favour of family farms, which cannot be pursued here in greater detail, Singh corroborated his case principally by deploying a range of statistical evidence of comparative data of yields from various countries to show that as the size of the farm increases, production decreases (Singh 1947a, 1947b: 95–96, 1959: 21–75, 1964: 35–105, 1978: 14–16, 1981: 115–19).

It might be interesting to state that this was the same famous inverse relationship argument which, when it became known in India, gave rise to a prolonged and extensive debate. In the academic circles in India, the debate ensued in 1962 when Amartya Sen (1962) published an elegant article that offered an explanation of the inverse relationship. Sen later on commented that he “had the unenviable role of doing the initial poking at what has turned out to be a beehive” for academics (Sen 1975: 148). But “Charan Singh,” notes Marxist political economist T J Byres, “had been poking around since at least 1947, although he disturbed no academic bees”¹¹ (1988: 176–77). Singh “in fact, drew attention to the likelihood of an inverse relationship before any evidence for India had become available, and was among the first to seize upon and consider the systematic data for India. He receives no credit for that in the Indian debate” (Byres 1988: 177). To revert to the main point, stating an array of data—from Switzerland to Meerut— in favour of smallholdings, and by maintaining a cross-national comparative framework, Singh mustered the argument for inverse relationship, in turn, building a robust efficiency argument in favour of family farms.¹² Further, Singh justified the pre-eminence of family farms on the ground of sustainability and ecology. His ideas in this regard are immensely valuable in the context of current agroecological crisis¹³ (see, in particular, Singh 1959: Chapter vi, xx, xxi).

In Singh's defence of family farms one comes across other interesting arguments of political economy like the relationship between economic origins of democracy and authoritarianism. To him, a land system based on family farms is superior to large-scale joint farming not only in terms of productivity, sustainability, employment opportunities and equity, but is also desirable in the Indian conditions because it fosters and

provides a secure base for democracy. Such a system ensures a wide diffusion of economic power, nurtures the spirit of free-thinking and promotes egalitarian ethos.¹⁴ Even a cursory study of the functioning of joint (or collective) farming—which once seduced an entire generation of Indian political and administrative leadership—shows that its performance, wherever in the world it was attempted, has played out exactly in the way Singh anticipated. Seen in the current milieu, in the wake of certain trends of globalisation leading to an onslaught on family farming—from land grab to corporate farming and the moves of global agribusiness around the Third World, to threats faced by such farms from the “free trade” and so on—Singh’s thesis for the viability and feasibility of family farming appears topical.

Primacy of agriculture: Singh remained, his entire career, a protagonist of the primacy of agriculture in India’s development. However, what is striking here is the structure of his arguments which debunks industrial determinism—the dominant idea of the time—by postulating that substantial agricultural production is an essential condition for industrialisation itself. According to him

inasmuch as industrialisation will progress to the extent men are released from agriculture, and men will be released to the extent agricultural production goes up, and agricultural production will go up to the extent agricultural practices improve and more capital invested, industrialisation or economic development of the country turns on improvement in agricultural practices we are able to effect and amount of capital we are able to invest in land. (Singh 1964: 408)

One of his key argument was that

a surplus food supply is the *sine qua non* to industrialisation ... *Industrialisation*, of course, to the extent it is possible in our circumstances, *cannot precede but will only follow*—at the most it can only accompany—*increased agricultural production* (Singh 1959: x).

Though there is a symbiotic relationship between agriculture and industry, he insists that at the early juncture agriculture plays the role of a precursor. Sure about his thesis, he notes categorically: “to think of or seek industrial development without prior or simultaneous agricultural development would amount to chasing a will-o’-the-wisp” (1964: 372). He gives a range of reasons to corroborate this assertion. It might be interesting to note that such an argument became the key plank of some of the prominent development thinkers like Michael Lipton almost two decades later.¹⁵ In retrospect, Singh’s case for primacy of agriculture was quite prudent when placed in the context of aid politics of PL-480 in the 1960s.

Further, the compelling logic of an agriculture-led approach in Singh’s discourse is that it sets in motion a triggering impetus in the entire economy, and thus is the best guarantee to reduce poverty. Agriculture-led development as a pro-poor, bottom-up viable approach has been increasingly stressed by both academics and international organisations (see, for instance, Mellor 1998; Lipton 1977; World Bank 2007). However, despite his insistence on agriculture-led development, Singh was not arguing that any move away from agriculture is inherently

degrading, and therefore India should stay agricultural. His chief concern was that agriculture in India is overburdened and this is one of the prime causes of poverty in India. However, to unburden it, to the extent it is possible in conditions of India, as a prerequisite, it should be developed first.

The relative neglect of agriculture to a large extent, Singh insists, can be explained by the urban bias on part of the ruling elite. In Singh’s discourse the critique of urban bias, however, is a wider perspective and remains the most important institutional impediment to poverty reduction in India.

Critique of Urban Bias

Constantly calling out the urban bias in development and mapping the asymmetric and hierarchical power relations between town and village, particularly in India and similarly placed societies is one of the leitmotifs of Singh’s thinking. In his classic account Lipton (1977), who also coined the term in one of his earlier articles, advanced his thesis on urban bias (Lipton 1968). Singh himself favoured and claimed kindred interest in Lipton’s work. Singh cites Lipton’s early article (1968) and his major work (1977) at length in support of his own position (Singh 1981: 164, 182, 186, 192, 224, 233, 512–13). Byres, who has written about both Lipton (Byres 1979) and Singh (Byres 1988), however, notes that “there is a certain irony in this, inasmuch as Charan Singh had been expounding” urban bias argument “in extenso, with skill and with passion, for some 40 years before this ... Lipton nowhere quotes Charan Singh. He might well have done so, in detail and with favour” (Byres 1988: 169). Nevertheless, the urban bias argument in Singh’s oeuvre extends way beyond the economy.

The first dimension of urban bias that can be identified in Singh’s writings is about allocation of resources. This encompasses three facets: allocation for agriculture vis-à-vis industry, allocation for rural vis-à-vis urban areas is general, and disparities between rural and urban in terms of wealth and other aspects. Singh delved on these issues in detail. He explored the themes like “capital starvation of agriculture,” “exploitation of the farmer” and the “deprivation of the village” (see, for instance, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 in Singh 1981). With this, Singh also points to the neglect of the countryside in the realm of various amenities like health, hygiene and sanitation, housing, drinking water, transport, power, and above all, education.

The second aspect of the bias against countryside is price twist which results in, to borrow a term from Schultz (1968: 5), indentured agriculture. Singh indicates various mechanisms through which terms of trade are tilted against agriculture and rural sector. He observed that the

money pumped into the rural sector for its development will not be of much avail if, at the same time, a large amount is pumped out through price manipulation—as has happened in our country all along. (1981: 194)

Further, unremunerative prices disincentivise the farmers and therefore can lead to low productivity. In an interesting formulation he asserts that three things—namely, small-scale farming (which in India is an inescapable condition), high productivity and low prices of agricultural produce—cannot

coexist. Hence the only way out, in given conditions of India, is “remunerative prices to farmers” (Singh 1981: 188). This assertion encapsulates an important insight in the current context.¹⁶

The third dimension of urban bias unravelled in Singh’s writings is related to a specific disposition. This is socio-psychological in nature and is embedded in a prejudiced and discriminatory social perspective and behaviour on part of the city dwellers. Singh argues that such a temper is not a result of some designed evilness or is not always consciously chosen on the part of city people, but a result of “natural” disposition.¹⁷ This disposition results, according to Singh, in a biased behaviour. He writes, “a town bred non-agriculturist calls his poor countryman from the village a *dehati*, *ganwar* or *dahqani* in the same contemptuous tone in which a heaven-born European flings, or used to fling, terms ‘native’ or ‘nigger’ at us all the Indians.”¹⁸ Such “prejudices prevail unabated” (Singh 1981: 519) and it is a distinction, Singh insists, between the ruler and the ruled. The “ruled” has also internalised such a perception about themselves and sees it as natural. He illustrates his assertions by resorting to close readings of texts where assumptions and value judgments that signify urban bias are submerged and considered natural. Urban bias performs various dysfunctions, the most important of which is that, in a primarily rural society, it leads to incompetence in performing public duties by those who are devoid of any touch with rural areas.

The fourth aspect of Urban Bias underlined by Singh is the issue of representation, that is, abysmally low presence of the countryside in the structures of power. He argues that “There is no direct rural presence in towns where political and economic decisions are made. Small farmers, in particular, have practically no direct impact” in power circles and “permanent migrants from villages to towns identify themselves with the urban elite they have joined” (Singh 1981: 512). Insisting on the importance of experiential reality, Singh asserts that the background of the educated matters as their sympathies are inextricably nested within the milieu of their origin. There are examples of “Ministers of Agriculture who did not know the difference between *rabi* and *kharif*, highly-placed officers serving in the department of agriculture who could not distinguish between a sugarcane and a plant of *jowa*” (Singh 1981: 515). The overly urban complexion of the administration and political structure, to him, is not only unjust but should also be a concern because this leads to inefficiency in governance. He elaborated a range of cases how in a country which is predominantly rural the representation of rural students in good educational institutions, in general, is abysmally low.

Vast majority of medical students come from elitist urban backgrounds; there training in the colleges is in western, curative medicine, rather than in community-oriented preventive medicine, with the result that the townsman has nine times as good a prospect of medical attention than a villager. (Singh 1981: 224)

In the Joint Entrance Exams of Indian Institute of Technology “the candidates from the cities were more than six times as successful as those from villages and secured 90% of the merit list positions”¹⁹ (Singh 1981: 231).

Another facet of the tilt towards the city is the issue of land grab. Here Singh anticipates a contestation that has become common in recent times.

the village lands on the periphery of the cities are acquired for a pittance for urban and industrial uses. The city authorities sell these lands to the urban rich, sometimes at a price more than hundred times what was paid to the villagers in compensations. Their lands are taken from them in the same way as a conquering army would take over the properties of the subjugated people. (1981: 228)

The method of the acquisition of agricultural land for industrial/urban usage is now increasingly questioned.

Owing to above-said aspects of urban bias Singh advances a cue about the nature of state in India. To him, “an urban class of businessmen and industrialists, workers, professional intelligentsia and bureaucracy controls the State” and “it is powerful; it dominates” (Singh 1981: 162). Stating a range of cases he submits that the ruling elite are unable to consider the agriculturists as “equal citizens of India” but treat them as “inferior” ones (Singh 1981: 204–05). The villager or the cultivator is “duly remembered at the time of election” but “his voice is rarely heard in the corridors of power” (Singh 1981: 514). “Once elections are over, liaison men and urban lobbies take control. The press, the bureaucrats, business and professional lobbies and commission agents control the levers of power. Whatever the complexion of the government—Congress, Communist, Janata or any other—it is this class which rules” (Singh 1981: 512).

For Singh, urban bias is quite rife in epistemic frameworks, pedagogy and cultural artefacts. In summary, written with buoyant empathy and argued on the basis of intimate knowledge, Singh’s approach to urban–rural contains much more than a mere debate about the biased allotment of resources—it rather opens up new vistas to rethink about the nature of the state and society in much of the developing world.

Along with agriculture and rural, Singh delved at great length on the issues associated with the nature of industrialisation in India and similar societies. Immediately after independence, amidst the zeal to turn India rapidly industrial, Singh evokes some conditions that curtailed such a desire. This can also be read as a check on an urban–industrial bias present in the very episteme of development discourse where urban and industrial is almost always equated with development in a linear progress.

On Late-industrialisation and Transition

Singh’s critique of “high” industrial aspirations of India’s elite challenges some of the axiomatic beliefs of mainstream development discourse. Amidst the eagerness of the postcolonial elite to willy-nilly transform India into a land of industrial affluence, Singh highlights conditions that intercept such a desire. Owing to these throttles of history and geography along with the democratic encumbrance, to put it diomatically, the reproduction of high industrial modernity seems unlikely in societies like India (see, Singh 1959: 165–88; 1964: 221–51; 1978: 55–59; 1981: 246–68).

To make his point Singh developed a whole typology, which is of great interest, wherein he classified the countries of

industrialised world and gave specific explanations of their industrialisation. He argued that the emergence of modern capitalistic industry in the first category of countries of the West, like Britain, was an outcome of a historically specific conjunction of events; *inter alia*, colonialism, *lebensraum*, slave trade and so on. He says that

The development of the age of inventions or success of the Industrial Revolution, in these countries which, barring Japan, are all situated in Western Europe, in the 18th and 19th century, depended not simply on some special and unaccountable burst of inventive genius in the European races, but on the accumulation of a sufficient fund of capital. The tools of their progress or industrialisation in the form of skills and machinery could be directly traced to the vast surplus produced by exploitation of the vast human and physical resources of the territories held in subjection. (Singh 1981: 257)

With this, the early industrialisation in Britain also owed a great deal to the slave trade. In addition, the prosperity in many of these countries—along with “the stimulation of sales of manufactured goods in new areas [and] the flow of cheap food and raw materials—also owed to *lebensraum* or draining off of excess people to the New World and other colonies” (Singh 1959: 172).

In the case of other advanced countries, like United States, Canada, etc, comparatively high physical resources relative to their population density, along with distinct work ethic, played a crucial role. Further,

their own resources not only produced raw materials that fed the factories, but also food in quantities that left a surplus over rural requirements, to feed industrial workers and those engaged in capital formation. This surplus served to increase the income of rural population which initially constituted a high percentage of the total—so that they could buy industrial goods. (Singh 1981: 259)

India being a densely populated country is not well-placed, Singh contends by marshalling available evidence, for such opportunities are not available to it. Here his arguments come close to the position articulated by contemporary environmental movements.

On top of it Singh also advanced, to borrow a term used by Sudipta Kaviraj, the “sequentiality” argument. In the West, the economic revolution preceded the acquisition of democratic political rights and the process of capitalist industrialisation was stabilised before the postures of democracy. However India is, so to say, encumbered with democratic constitution. Singh argues that the “framework of democratic freedoms,” “prevents the exploitation of peasant and labourer beyond a point” (1964: 244). And adds,

so far as Western countries are concerned, economic revolution in these countries had *preceded* the acquisition of political rights by the people. Long before the masses in these countries came into picture through adult franchise, right of association, right to strike, etc, they had been able to build up their industry and perfect their techniques, that had begun to produce enough resources to meet the demands made by democracy or the political revolution. Capital accumulation was facilitated by denying the worker his due share in the increased production that followed from the application of new and newer methods and techniques of production. The capitalist employer was thus enabled, out of his higher profits, to make larger investments till the economy was able to “take off.” On the other hand, in India and some other economically under-developed countries, while population density

and growth hamper economic improvement, people’s aspirations have been awakened by the political democracy which they have come to enjoy. (Singh 1981: 461–62 emphasis added)

India is thus, to put it dramatically, “burdened with a fully democratic constitution” (1959: 180).²⁰ Such an assertion—and making it central to the argumentation—is indeed telling. Kaviraj has pointed out that while in the West the process of capitalist industrialisation was stabilised *before* the pressures of democracy; in India such is not the case. “The rise of capitalism was decisive and transformative for the economy precisely because of the *absence* of democratic political life [and] in the absence of even rudimentary rights of resistance and legitimate protest” (Kaviraj 2010: 192). The capitalist industrialisation in the West therefore could afford to skip the computations of democracy in the process of enforcing capitalist transformations.

Infeasibility of High Industrialisation

Owing to these circumstances, Singh contended, high industrialisation, no matter how good it may be if it could be done, seems unlikely in India. The specificities of India, and the wider circumstances, warn us not to get swayed by the lure of high industrialism. The larger theoretical point which can be of interest is that the high capitalist industrialisation in the West and elsewhere could unfold in a historically specific milieu; and in the non-existence of such a context, the predicaments of development are deeper, particularly in the societies where democracy precedes capitalistic industrial development. Additionally the ceiling put by the carrying capacity of environment further corroborates this assertion. This also entails that any search for an alternative should commence by revising our ambition of a “fairy land”—to become one like “them,” that is, the West, in terms of industrialisation and urbanisation.²¹

Thus, Singh warns against the easy assumption of the possibility, in the given conditions, of structural transformation in India.²² An alternative perspective on industrialisation and transition, anchored in the specificities of India, and which produces less suffering for the masses, he contends, is the way forward according to Singh. Such a search leads him to advance a conception of industrialisation largely in conformity with Gandhian perspective, though he reinvented and updated Gandhi in his own style. He wrote extensively on the technology question in development. Singh’s conception of an alternative industrial structure laid stress upon decentralised, rural-based, labour intensive production through appropriate technology. He called for a healthy balance between labour-intensive small-scale production and the capital-intensive mass production and of course, between agriculture and industry as a whole. The order of importance and priority should be light to medium to heavy industry, and through this “a pyramid of industry broad based on progressive rural economy will be built up and ... the bigger ones ... would develop a genuinely supporting, instead of exploitational relationship towards the smaller towns and the countryside” (1964: 297). Visualising the final objective he reflects that “ultimately we should have urban villages which will take the place of rural hamlets and

overcrowded cities of today ... without any slums” (1964: 309). This will lead to

an economy where (private) capitalism is eliminated almost altogether and (state capitalism or) socialism is retained to the minimum—an economy which is based predominantly on self-employed persons, artisans and workers, with the owner and the worker, the employer and the employee, the entrepreneur and the financier all rolled into one. (1964: 265)

This is apparently an ideal to strive for, though in practice the necessary aberrations to this idea can be accepted.²³

Beyond the three ideas adumbrated above, Singh held a clear perspective on many other key issues of development, public policy and politics. He always insisted on “innovation” and nurturing robust work ethic. In this context a radical remolding of some of the central organising principles of Indian society in general, and Hindus in particular was also suggested. He explored the issue of caste in considerable detail and wanted this institution to go lock, stock, and barrel. He suggested radical solutions for this ill that are documented not only in his published works but also in his letter exchange with Jawaharlal Nehru.²⁴

All that said, in speaking of the village and agriculturists, which is the core subject matter of Singh’s writings, there are certain ambiguities and critical neglects.

Ambiguities and Limitations

First, naming of the problem as urban bias may appear inappropriate to many. To complicate, Singh himself sometimes clubbed the big landlords with the urban classes and slum dwellers with the rural. With this realignment, obviously, cracks start developing in the category of urban in the urban bias. For the want of a better term, this problem can be tackled by treating urban bias as a conceptual heuristic device, without connotation of any hard-wired rural–urban spatial or geographical dichotomy. Singh himself used the urban and rural many a time as notional entities and not as geographical sites per se. Moreover, there is enough in Singh to present a case that the rural–urban divide is one of the fault lines in a cross-cutting grid of inequality and discrimination in India and similarly placed societies and not an all explaining certitude.

Further, though Singh rightfully makes a critique of the hubris of high techno-industrialism, sometimes he appears falling in the opposite trap. Critics may call him an agricultural fundamentalist. Similarly, though he counts the slum-dwellers as the allies of the villagers in the “revolt” against domination of the urban elite (1981: 529–30), due to his focus

on the village and countryside Singh could not adequately air the concerns of the city poor.

Another aspect which deserves to be mentioned is that in his effort to articulate the interests of agricultural and rural, Singh did not pay sufficient attention to caste and gender relations that not only determine access to land but also shape almost all hierarchies in rural India. He does not deny that the village in the present form is internally “unequal, exploitative and far from idyllic” and his vision of countryside is where “privation, dirt, drudgery and dead habit will disappear and “women will emerge into their own” (1981: 529), but nowhere in his writings Singh delved upon this aspect. This critical neglect is important to mark for it is a fact that villages, particularly in North India where he came from and practised his politics, are gendered spaces.

Similarly, in his conception of an ideal countryside the concerns of the landless farmers are, at best, an afterthought. He dissolved the interests of the landless into the wider knot of rural and agrarian interests wherein the condition of the landless is supposed to improve either through the trickle-down with the prosperity of landowning farmers or through upcoming employment in the forthcoming labour-intensive industry.

If one sensitises his vision with these sensibilities and accordingly updates it, Singh’s writings not only are of historical value but also contain deep theoretical engagements and structured contributions about many developmental enigmas.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

In the preface of *India’s Poverty and Its Solution*, Singh states that the

arguments advanced in these pages may be derided and even attacked as unpatriotic in the present intellectual and political climate of India. But the logical validity of an argument, does not depend either on its popularity in intellectual circles, or on its political acceptability. (1964: xiii)

Even a cursory evaluation of his ideas, in retrospect, indicates that Singh was quite precise on this point. Though Singh produced a rich corpus comparable to the most erudite and rigorous set of writings by a political activist, presenting a coherent and sophisticated conception of an alternative development, offering fascinating vignettes and theoretical propositions on issues of development and comparative political economy, his intellectual work still remains under-explored. Nevertheless, several of the issues articulated and the problematics raised by Singh constantly echo in our times.

NOTES

- 1 Charan Singh played a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of the politics of Uttar Pradesh and of North India (see, Brass 2011, 2012, 2014; Varshney 1995; Jaffrelot 2002). His written word, nevertheless, merits attention independent of his political practice.
- 2 The concept, for instance, of private property is presented in an innovative manner (see, Singh 1947: Ch V).
- 3 See, Singh (1977).
- 4 Two important exceptions in this regard, and to which this article itself is in many ways indebted,

merit special mention. Brass’ magnificent “biography,” though carries debates on development, is principally focused on the life and times of Singh (Brass 2011, 2012, 2014). Similarly, Terence J Byres in his brilliant article has explored Singh’s life and intellectual practice from Marxist perspective (Byres 1988). Present article rather seeks to focus exclusively on Singh’s ideas predominantly by interpreting his written work.

- 5 There are two oft-repeated charges against Charan Singh. He is often projected as a representative of *kulaks* and big landlords and a leader of his own caste. Some journalistic

observations even portray him as an unsophisticated village bumpkin. An engagement with Singh’s intellectual practice is important to assess how much water do these indictments hold.

- 6 Singh’s writings on the subjects other than developmental issues are also outside the orbit of this paper.
- 7 The choice of the term imperialism is important as this is not “a blanket case against either bureaucratic planning or high-modernist ideology,” (Scott 1998: 6) and here this expression is used in this sense. Actually Singh’s engagement with modernity is rather a negotiatory one.

- 8 A critical assessment of Soviet collectivisation is common to both Scott (1998) and Singh (1947a, 1947b, 1959, 1964) and in this context many of the core arguments produced are also similar.
- 9 For Singh's struggles for framing and implementation of radical legislation in Uttar Pradesh (UP) on land reforms, see Singh (1986) and Brass (2011: Ch 5). Even before independence Singh took a leading part in the formulation and finalisation of various bills and laws like Agricultural Produce Markets Bill (1938), Debt Redemption Bill (1939), etc.
- 10 See, Charan Singh Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi (CS Papers), Extracts from the Prime Minister's fortnightly, DO No 411-PMO/56, dated 12 August 1956, Instalment I, A L and Reforms, Subject Files, S, No 17, for Nehru's views on this subject wherein he says, "the real alternative is collective farms owned by the state, which most Communist countries have."
- 11 A close scrutiny of Singh's personal papers reveals that Singh had been conscious of inverse relationship at least since 1939. In a hand written article, "Peasant Proprietorship or Land to the Worker," dated 13 June 1939, by quoting David Mitrani, on page 10, Singh clearly indicates inverse relationship. See, CS Papers, Instalment I, Section A Land Reforms.
- 12 Though Singh was also of the opinion that there should be a certain floor along with ceiling in case of farm size.
- 13 Singh was not supportive, in fact was critical, contrary to popular perception, of chemical fertilisers, pesticides and large-scale mechanisation in agriculture. He rather advocated organic farming techniques. Similarly, one finds an early voice against big irrigation and hydroelectric projects in Singh.
- 14 Capturing the real rationale behind collectivisation, Singh argues that the argument of productive superiority of big farms was just exculpatory. The deeper reason for the decision, besides the use of agriculture as a resource base for industrialisation. Singh argues, is surveillance and control, to flatten the heterogeneity (which small-scale agriculture maintains and promotes) and to mould the rural populace according to official ideology. These are essential for the authoritarian regimes and the collective farm comes as quite handy to fulfil these objectives (see, Singh 1959: 93-105).
- 15 Lipton argues, "The argument for rapid general industrialisation, prior to or alongside agricultural development, assume against most of the evidence that such a sequence is likely to succeed"; and hence, if you wish for industrialisation, prepare to develop agriculture" (Lipton 1977).
- 16 However, price twist was more common in *dirigiste* regimes and less pertinent in open economies.
- 17 To clarify, for instance, in a patriarchal social structure one need not always wilfully act in a patriarchal way; culture, norms, socialisation and social processes embedded in hierarchical binaries "unintentionally," enforce patriarchal behaviour.
- 18 See, Why 60% Services Should be Reserved for Sons of Cultivators, dated 21 March 1947, p 1, CS Papers, Instalment I, Section A: Land Reforms (1939-1975), Subject Files, S, No A 2.
- 19 Analysis of recent reports proves that the passage of time has not made a dent on the trend indicated by Singh (see, for instance, IITJEE 2012).
- 20 Under the conditions of democratic encumbrance there are numerous instances in India when people have claimed and extended the ambit of rights through struggles.
- 21 Here it also can be clarified that, while talking about the mode of industrialisation, Charan Singh has indicated his stand on foreign

- funds—both as private capital and government and other forms of aid (see, Singh 1959: 186-87; 1964: 246-49; 1981: 306-29).
- 22 When most of the development theorists were swayed by the easy assumption of "structural transformation," Singh problematised it again and again. This point is now indicated by many. See, for instance, Corbridge et al (2014: 80-99), Dorin (2017) and Chatterjee (2008).
- 23 This is not the space to consider the practicality of these ideas in context of the present structure of global economy.
- 24 See, for instance, CS Papers, "Letter to Jawaharlal Nehru," Instalment II, Subject Files, S, No 412, dated 22 May 1954.

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