

Summary and Bibliography

Abolition of Zamindari

Charan Singh



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Mir Singh and Netar Kaur, parents of Charan Singh.
Village Bhadaula, District Meerut. Uttar Pradesh. 1950.

Charan Singh: An Introduction

Charan Singh was moulded by three key influences: his early life in a self-cultivating peasant family and the realities of the village, the teachings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati and those of Mohandas Gandhi. His thoughts, ideals and friendships took shape during the mass movement for *Swaraj* and freedom from colonial British rule led by Gandhi. His private and public life was one, his incorruptibility and high character recognised by all who encountered him. Singh believed deeply in a democratic society of small producers and small consumers brought together in a system not capitalist or communist instead one that addressed as a whole the uniquely Indian problems of poverty, unemployment, inequality, caste and corruption. Each of these issues remains intractable today, and his solutions as fresh and relevant to their amelioration and ultimate eradication.

Charan Singh was born on 23 December 1902 in Meerut District of the United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh) in an illiterate tenant farmer's village hut. His mental fortitude and capability were recognised early in life and he went on to acquire a B.Sc., M.A. in History and LL. B from Agra College. He joined the Indian National Congress, at 27, in the struggle to free India from British rule and was imprisoned in 1930, 1940, and 1942 for his participation in the national movement. He remained a member of the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh from 1936 to 1974 and was a minister in all Congress governments from 1946 to 1967, which provided him a reputation as an efficient, incorruptible and clear-headed administrator. Singh was the state's first non-Congress Chief Minister in 1967 and again in 1970, before his tenure in 1977-78 as the Union Minister for Home and, later, Finance. This journey culminated in 1979 when he became Prime Minister of India. Over much of the 70s and early 80s he remained a figure of major political significance in Indian politics till he passed away on 29 May 1987.

Charan Singh wrote scores of books, political pamphlets, manifestoes and hundreds articles on the centrality of the village and agriculture in India's political economy. Many of these thoughts are relevant to India today as we struggle with an agrarian crisis with 67% of our impoverished population living in the villages and 47% engaged in

unremunerative agricultural livelihoods. He helped write the 611-page report of the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Committee in Uttar Pradesh in 1948 and also wrote the books *Abolition of Zamindari* (1947), *Joint Farming X-Rayed* (1959), *India's Poverty and Its Solution* (1964), *India's Economic Policy* (1978) *Economic Nightmare of India* (1981) and *Land Reforms in U.P. and the Kulaks* (1986).

“Charan Singh’s political life and economic ideas provide an entry-point into a much broader set of issues both for India and for the political and economic development of the remaining agrarian societies of the world. His political career raises the issue of whether or not a genuine agrarian movement can be built into a viable and persistent political force in the 20th century in a developing country. His economic ideas and his political programme raise the question of whether or not it is conceivable that a viable alternative strategy for the economic development of contemporary agrarian societies can be pursued in the face of the enormous pressures for industrialisation. Finally, his specific proposals for the preservation and stabilisation of a system of peasant proprietorship raise once again one of the major social issues of modern times, namely, whether an agrarian economic order based upon small farms can be sustained against the competing pressures either for large-scale commercialisation of agriculture or for some form of collectivisation.”

Brass, Paul. *Chaudhuri Charan Singh: An Indian Political Life*.
Economic & Political Weekly, Mumbai. 25 Sept 1993.

Summary

Abolition of Zamindari. 1947

Abolition of Zamindari

Two Alternatives¹

BY CHARAN SINGH

Background

No question has been more central to the development of post-colonial economies than the question of redistribution of land, and none with its promise unrequited for the most part. The monopoly of land, held between the government and landlords, had perpetuated the colonial exploitation of the many in the interest of the few. The *zamindar* (landlord) was granted ownership of land by the government in exchange for being an intermediary to collect rent from these lands, and for his services he reserved the right to extract from tenants tilling his land virtually as much rent as he could. Thus the British government squeezed the *Zamindar* for revenues, the *Zamindar* the tenant who had no recourse against the powerful machinery of oppression of the government and its law. The collaboration for mutual benefit between the colonist and the *Zamindar* resulted in an extreme concentration of power and wealth in the hands of this nexus.

Indian agriculture under colonialism was deeply exploitative of the peasantry, the bulk of the state revenue generated from it appropriated largely by the *Zamindar* intermediaries. Until the turn of the twentieth century, land revenue accounted for half of the colonial state revenue, making it dependent on these intermediaries. Thus landlordism flourished, and upon Independence in 1947 more than 60% of total cultivable land was owned by a small number of landlords.

By comparison, over 60% of the rural households either did not own

¹ Published 1947 by Kitabistan, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. 263 pages. Charan Singh was 45 when he wrote *Abolition of Zamindari*, his first substantive book. Parliamentary Secretary in Uttar Pradesh from 1946 to 1951, Chief Minister Govind Ballabh Pant appointed him Chairman of the committee to formulate the U.P. Zamindari and Land Reforms bill ('Every single para, section, term was made according to my thinking' as Singh recounted in an interview to Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in February 1972. <https://charansingh.org/archives/interview-nehru-memorial-museum-and-library>) that Singh piloted into law in 1951. Singh considered this – the empowerment of tens of millions of peasant farmers and landless on 67 million acres of land in Uttar Pradesh, along with the peaceful destruction of the exploitative class of landlords – the primary achievement of his political life.

any land or were in possession of uneconomic holdings of a hectare (2.5 acres) or less, the total area under their collective possession being a mere 8% of the total area of the country.² These conditions, accentuated by the ever increasing pressure on agriculture to provide employment on account of the colonial destruction of Indian handicrafts and industry, created the ideal conditions for rack renting and tenancy. Absentee *zamindars* and subinfeudation³ ran rampant, while rents levied on the tenants ran routinely in excess of 50% of the crop, going as high as 85% in some areas. In addition, the landlord resorted to numerous exactions in cash, kind or labour (*begar*) which put a severe burden on the peasant. A particularly vile form of this exploitation developed in the form of a class of moneylenders who lent capital on exorbitant rates to the peasant so he could meet the demands of the landlord, perpetuating the cycle of indebtedness.

Lastly, under these conditions the *zamindar* made far more profits by extraction of rents and other illegal exactions to have any incentive to develop agricultural production. For example, 97% of the ploughs used in India as late as 1951 were wooden, the other 3% being iron, whereas the use of improved seeds and irrigation was virtually non-existent. As a result, agricultural output by the decades of the 30s and 40s was in decline, following long-term stagnation, leaving India at Independence with an acute food shortages and famine-like conditions in large parts of the country. Import of these grains formed about half of the government's capital expenditure in the first Five Year Plan (1951-1956).

Wherever *zamindari* was patronised by colonial governments, the results had been debilitating for the colonies' economies, especially their agriculture. Public sentiment had been building against it in the colonies much before the Second World War which led to the independence of many of these countries. In India, for example, the Indian National Congress⁴ had adopted the abolition of *zamindari* as a resolution as early

² Bipin Chandra et al, *India Since Independence*, Penguin Ibid, p. 510.

³ In English law, subinfeudation is the practice by which tenants, holding land under the king or other superior lord, carved out new and distinct tenures in their turn by sub-letting or 'alienating' a part of their lands.

⁴ The Indian National Congress, formed in 1885, was the broad-based umbrella political party that dominated the popular Indian struggle for independence from colonial Great Britain. The Congress was a widespread political organisation, with deep roots in all communities in Indian

as 1935⁵ on the back of mass peasant agitations under the leadership of the Congress and Mohandas Gandhi.

The Congress' election manifesto in the 1937 provincial elections cited "the appalling poverty, unemployment and indebtedness of the peasantry" as the most important and urgent problem of the country, which it argued was "due to antiquated and repressive land tenure and revenue systems."⁶ Gandhi's dictum that "land and all property is his who will work it", given in 1937, embodied the direction a solution was to take. Gandhi went so far as to predict that the landlord's property would be seized by his tenants sooner or later, with the prospect of compensating the landlord being economically infeasible.

By 1945, after the end of World War II, peasant movements emerged with new vigour and the demand of Zamindari abolition was made with greater urgency. The Congress election manifesto issued by the Congress Working Committee called for "an urgent reform of the land system to be undertaken which involved the abolition of intermediaries between the peasants and the state i.e. the *Zamindars* and *Talukdars*."⁷ The reformed policy, the Congress government of 1947 envisioned, would meet "the great challenge of building real democracy in the country... based on equality and social justice"⁸, and the task of formulating such a policy without any prior model was the colossal task facing India.

As a member of the Congress' Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Committee (ZALRC)⁹ tasked to abolish landlordism in

rural and urban society and formed all of India's governments at the Center and the score plus States for decades post-Independence.

⁵ A Kisan Conference held at Allahabad in April 1935, under the Presidentship of Sardar Patel, passed a resolution which among other things recommended "the introduction of a system of peasant proprietorship under which the tiller of the soil is himself the owner of it and pays revenues to the Government without the intervention of any *zamindar* or *talukdar*. At its 50th Session, held at Faizpur in 1935, the Indian National Congress adopted a resolution on the agrarian programme which inter alia recommended that "fixity of tenure, with heritable rights, along with the right to build houses and plant trees should be provided for all tenants."

⁶ Ibid, p. 516.

⁷ Ibid, p. 519.

⁸ Ibid, p. 520.

⁹ The ZALRC comprised Chief Minister Govind B Pant, key cabinet and junior ministers. Charan Singh, the most active member and a favourite of Pant, wrote the report in the face of stiff opposition of powerful supporters of *zamindari* in the UP Congress legislature party, and was forced to compromise on the recommendations. He subsequently wrote a dissenting note to the CM which, to Pant's credit, formed the basis of Charan Singh being given the herculean task of preparing a law in Uttar Pradesh to abolish *zamindari*. Singh considered this law, as well as his subsequent work as Revenue and Agriculture minister, the defining work of his entire career. He

Uttar Pradesh, Charan Singh inherited the task of formulating an alternative to *Zamindari* at the age of 44. He had been first elected to the U.P legislative assembly precisely a decade before, at 34, winning 78% of the vote against the candidate of the National Agriculturalist Party of *Zamindars*. He had, since then, distinguished himself by formulating “multiple rural and peasant supportive legislation in the Assembly”¹⁰ such as the Agricultural Produce Market Bill, 1939 and Land Utilization Bill, 1939¹¹ which called “for the transfer of land ownership to all tenants or actual tillers of the soil who chose to pay an amount equivalent to 10 times the annual rental on the land they cultivated”¹².

Charan Singh’s background as the son of an impoverished tenanted peasant provided him a unique insight to the realities of the exploitation of the peasantry and the myriad forms of their oppression. This defining experience, coupled with Singh’s later education in History and Law and his penchant for wide-ranging reading and research in an age where education was the prerogative of a microscopic urban and high-caste elite, made Singh a unique intellect of value to the phlegmatic Govind Ballabh Pant¹³, the first (and yet the longest serving) Chief Minister of U.P. as well as Singh’s mentor. Singh’s passion and intellect was ably directed by Pant, a calm and equanimous leader of people.

Singh’s intimate knowledge of the psychology of the peasantry and of the ground realities of the village enabled him formulate policies to replace the *zamindari* system. Following the success of the October Revolution¹⁴ many countries had adopted the Marxist doctrine of development after the model of the U.S.S.R., whose aid they relied on heavily in the fragile years of their infancy as nation-states. Marxism had

worked closely with Pant from 1945 to 1955-6 when the latter left for Delhi as Home Minister after the death of Vallabhbhai Patel.

¹⁰ Lohit, Harsh S. (2018), *Charan Singh: A Brief Life History*, Charan Singh Archives, p. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 5.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 5.

¹³ Govind Ballabh Pant (1887 – 1961) was a key figure, alongside Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, in the movement for India’s independence from the British colonial state. He was pivotal in governments in the critical state of Uttar Pradesh where he was Chief Minister (1946-1954) and later in Delhi where he was Home Minister (1955-1961) ranked next only to Nehru.

¹⁴ The October Revolution, officially known in Soviet historiography as the Great October Socialist Revolution, was a revolution in Russia led by the Bolshevik Party of Vladimir Lenin that was instrumental in the larger Russian Revolution of 1917.

been critical in dealing landlordism a fatal political and philosophical blow across the world, and its influence on the freedom struggles of most post-colonial economies had been immense.

By 1947, when Charan Singh wrote this book, the Marxist view was by far the common wisdom in postcolonial economies, and India was poised to follow in these footsteps. Singh disagreed with Marxist principles when applied to agriculture, especially in Indian conditions. In the preface he describes this as an attempt to “swim against the tide”¹⁵, and goes on to explicitly mention his views are not concurrent with the U.P. state government of which he was a part. He goes on to outline in the book’s first half reasons necessitating the abolition of *zamindari* and his case against the adoption of the alien Russian methods in the Indian milieu.

Typical to Singh’s analytical and argumentative style, the book doesn’t limit itself to a critique (which is long and thorough) and the second half lays out the alternate route to be taken. His model, based on peasant proprietorship and the marrying of land ownership with cultivation, would become the backbone of the Abolition of Zamindari and Land Reforms Act, 1950, whose passing Singh later in life described as the greatest achievement of his political career¹⁶. He acknowledged Chief Minister Pant’s active support, without which the powerful landed interests in the Congress would have had their way. This sustained and intense engagement with land reforms from the mid-1930s and the conversion of his ideas into a Law in the 1950s reflect the principles that would guide all future writings by Singh. These were – his faith in the independent small peasant as the bulwark of a democratic society and the antithesis of concentration of wealth in society, his opposition to authoritarian State Marxism and his deep commitment towards the democratic project that independent India had chosen for herself at a time where the vast majority of its inhabitants were illiterate and lived in its villages.

Summary

As the title of the book, *Abolition of Zamindari: Two Alternatives* indicates, Charan Singh predicated his work on the atmosphere against *Zamindari*

¹⁵ Singh, Charan (1947), *Abolition of Zamindari*, Kitabistan, p. vii.

¹⁶ Lohit, Harsh S. (2018), *Charan Singh: A Brief Life History*, Charan Singh Archives, p. 8.

prevalent at the time of the Independence of India from the British. Two enormous questions concerned her immediate future: industrialization of the country and re-organisation of its agriculture, the latter of which Singh held to be the precursor of the former. The Preface, which states these principles as a primer to the work to follow, wastes no time in declaring the dire necessity of the abolition of *Zamindari*. Singh points out the purpose of his work is an analysis of the two possible alternatives that would replace *Zamindari*, along with the provision of a blueprint for the shape that the new machinery would take given the uniquely Indian conditions of economy, population, psychology and political ambitions.

Singh lists the two possible options to be (i) the nationalization of land and collectivization of agriculture, or (ii) a decentralised model with the tenant proprietor which would “make the worker the owner of his tools and the means of production with or upon which he works”¹⁷. In the first half, Singh details the history and importance of the question of distribution of land and the arguments put forward in favour of collectivization. The second half of the book is dedicated to Singh’s argument for the latter option.

Land: An Intellectual History

Land, Singh argues, has occupied a pivotal place in agricultural India as “the private ownership of land confers upon its owner a power over his fellow citizens which, when exercised, is greater than the power possessed by the owner of any other form of private property”¹⁸. Land is non-alienable to settled living, and unlike the other resources of capital and labour, its quantity is limited. This makes land ownership a zero-sum game, as land acquired by one is necessarily taken from another. He goes on to say, unlike any other resource, land’s abundance is inexhaustible (it certainly must have seemed so in 1947) if cared for with the principles of natural farming. Land is largely immune to the vagaries of chance or security concerns, and therefore ownership of land provides a sense of security Singh summarizes in a telling comment told to him by a farmer: ‘The best thing to give one’s son is land. It is living property. Money will be used up but land never’.¹⁹

¹⁷ Singh, Charan (1947), *Abolition of Zamindari*, Kitabistan, p. iv.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 3.

Any further production of industry or commerce presupposes the utilization of land for fulfilling the basic food needs of the population, as well as the production of surpluses which can be gainfully employed by other industries. Thus the optimal utilization of land towards meeting these needs becomes the single most important question for the development of a country, and puts the tiller of the soil for these ends in the position of the principal architects of this future. Singh writes of farming as a moral endeavour and social service, in a language strange to our nature-alienated ears:

“Agriculture is not merely a way of making money by raising crops; it is not merely an industry or a business; it is essentially a public function or service performed by private individuals for the care and use of the land in the national interest and farmers in the course of their pursuit of a living and a private profit are the custodians of the basis of the national life. Agriculture is, therefore, affected with a clear and unquestionable public interest, and its status is a matter of national concern calling for deliberate and far-sighted national policies, not only to conserve the natural and human resources involved in it, but to provide for national security, promote a well-rounded prosperity and secure social and political stability.”²⁰

Ancient Indian scriptures were sensitive to these principles, and Singh cites the *Purva Mimamsa*’s²¹ conception of land as belonging equally to all enjoying the fruits of their labour on it. The king, therefore, was not owner but custodian of the land in the interest of its utilization for the benefit of the whole kingdom. For this labour the king extracted of the peasants a land revenue which he collected directly from the village panchayat as a unit of peasant organisation. In addition, Singh goes on to say, the king reserved the right to punish those who failed to till their land towards the benefit of the whole, and this right was advocated by Kautilya and Manu in their codified laws.

By the medieval period, a class of intermediaries had cropped up who were employed by the *Badshah* to collect revenue on his behalf in exchange for a commission extracted in proportion to the land granted to them. These *Ijaredars* or *Talukdars*, as they were called, were hereditary

²⁰ Ibid, p. 4-5.

²¹ The *Purva Mimamsa* Sutras (ca. 300–200 BCE), written by Rishi Jaimini is one of the most important ancient Hindu philosophical texts. It forms the basis of *Mimamsa*, the earliest of the six orthodox schools (*darshanas*) of Indian philosophy.

rent-collectors for the state, and it was this class that crystallised into the *zamindars* familiar to us from the colonial period. The colonial British government, however, went many steps further and granted these intermediaries permanent and hereditary rights to ownership of land upon which they collected rent on behalf of the government. The peasant was left at the mercy of these intermediaries, who performed no function on the land they owned but appropriated larger and larger portions of the wealth generated from it. Singh compares *zamindars* to “parasites”, and “drones doing no good in the public hive” a summation he would repeat in several of his works.

The *zamindars* had no concern for his land beyond the commercial returns and the insecurity of tenantry meant that the tiller didn’t really care for the land either. His exploitation made the tiller’s condition “gloomy, discontented, coarse, slavish – a hapless missing link between a beast of burden and a man”²². Thus, the *Zamindari* system had failed the collective responsibility it had towards the benefit of the country, and Singh pronounces the necessity of its departure.

The Russian Alternative

Moving from qualifying the problem, Singh proceeds on an analysis of the option of collectivization of agriculture on the model of the U.S.S.R based on “total abolition of private ownership of land and national acquisition thereof”²³. This option may sound strange to our ears in 2020CE when communism in all its forms has been buried since 1990, but collectivisation was an accepted dogma with many ideological intellectuals in the 1940s. Singh starts with the conditions prevailing in Russia the time of India’s Independence and the evolution of the collectivist farms.

Peasants in Russia had been under serfdom, with conditions bordered on slavery, until the eighteenth century of the common era. Legally bound to their landlords by royal decree, they could be bought, sold, in families or singly, and were viewed as a source of property apart from land. For taxation purposes they were formed into “Communes”, collectively responsible for revenue from their land as a whole, with individuals responsible for their share within it.

²² Ibid, p. 18.

²³ Ibid, p. 22.

“The communal system necessarily involved a good deal of communal control of the community’s farming activities, so that not only were the times of sowing and harvesting, hay-making and the like very dependent on the decision of the commune as a whole, but the crops to be sown, what area to be left fallow, etc. were similarly dictated.”²⁴

Reforms of this system occurred partly in The Act of Emancipation of 1861 which released peasants from bonded status and provided them an alternative of owning their respective lands in exchange for some liabilities towards the state. Decisive reforms came in 1906 under Stolypin²⁵, which gave the peasant the right to separate from the commune, upon which they were given a consolidated piece of land they could till or sell at will. By 1917 these reforms created, for the first time in Russia, a class of prosperous rural peasants called the *Kulaks* who were producing a saleable surplus.

The Revolution of 1917 abolished all private ownership of land including that of peasant proprietors. The Stolypin reforms were regarded as an antisocial measure designed to strengthen capitalism, and all land was forcibly reintegrated into the commune. The revolutionaries tried to win over the vast hordes of peasants by encouraging violent and often irresponsible seizing of land, and as the populism expanded the targets of these redistributions expanded from landlords and the gentry, to the rich peasants and *kulaks* as well by 1918.

These policies were largely populist, designed to win over the peasantry’s support. The real agenda of the Bolsheviks, Singh argues, was the creation of nationalized state farms, operated by large machinery which Marxist principles declared were the inevitable means of progress in agriculture much like industry. Singh writes:

“It was proclaimed that all ownership in land was abolished and that the land was transferred to all the working people for their use; that all land was to be distributed on the principle of equalized land possession, according to the consumptive needs of the people who work it, or according to the labour resources of families working on land. Every citizen in principle acquired the right to use the land and all dealings in land were forbidden.”²⁶

²⁴ Ibid, p. 25.

²⁵ Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin, (1862-1911), was a conservative statesman who, after the Russian Revolution of 1905, initiated far-reaching agrarian reforms to improve the legal and economic status of the peasantry as well as the general economy and political stability of imperial Russia.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 31.

Many new peasants got possession of land as a result of these reforms, but they hardly made productive use of it. Without the incentive of personal gain associated with a marketable surplus in the absence of markets, efficiency of the peasants dwindled and they stopped producing more than required for personal consumption. The state had envisioned exchanging the proletariat's industrial products in exchange for surplus grain, but as it happened there wasn't much by the way of these products for the state to share.

Nonetheless, the peasants had to keep parting with their produce in the interests of Marxism's treasured industrialist, urban proletariat, seen as the key of progress on the historical materialist model of progress. Under Lenin, and then Stalin, the peasantry had to be coerced into working against its own benefit and even that did not deliver the desired results. By the latter half of the 1920s the government had conceded its abstract ideals had not changed the peasant's psychology and that later programs would take this into account. The independent peasant's 'capitalist' tendencies were said to be the reason for this, and the state used this excuse in favour of further collectivization and the application of heavy farm machinery.

The truth was that the collective or state farm was the only way for the government to sustain its industrial project whilst keeping with communist principles. Under these state farms the rewards and punishments could be arbitrarily set by the government, so that the expanding industrial proletariat could be sustained even if the grain output was not enough for both peasants and the urban workers. Thus, despite overt and covert measures by the state to coerce more peasants into collectivization, the peasants lapsed into proprietorship whenever they got the chance. Singh summarises:

"The Revolution was frankly a proletarian movement led by a small body of men belonging to the intelligentsia who were wanting in appreciation of peasant needs and sympathy for irrepressible peasant longings. The Bolsheviks stood for an alliance with the middle peasants...,but only such an alliance as 'guaranteed the leadership of the working class, consolidated the dictatorship of the proletariat and facilitated the abolition of classes'. Few, if any, of the competent Bolshevik leaders were of genuine peasant origin and they seem to have thought the peasants ought to reach to the new order in much the same way as the industrial proletariat."²⁷

²⁷ Ibid, p. 49.

Soviet Russia

Singh undertakes a comprehensive survey of the existing model of the Russian *Kolhoz* (collective farm) and *Sovhoz* (state-farm) in the 1930s. He outlines the constitution of an ideal '*Artel*'²⁸ or *Kolhoz* adopted by the government in 1935, following revisions in policy which allowed the peasants to deal with the surplus beyond the state mandate whichever way they liked, including selling it at uncontrolled market prices.

Singh summarises in some detail the aims and objectives, means of production, land, operations & administration, membership conditions and the organisation, payment and discipline of labour in the *Artels*. Their objectives include "extermination of the *kulaks*" and acknowledge collectivization as the "only true path for peasants to follow". All boundaries of individual land were to be abolished in favour of an amalgamation held by the State but transferred permanently to the *Artel* for its use. Land could not be bought, sold or leased. Moreover, if someone wished to leave, no land was to be given to them as land could only be given by the State.

"All working cattle, agricultural implements (ploughs, drills, harrows, etc.), seed stocks, fodder in quantities sufficient to supply the needs of the collective livestock, farm buildings necessary for carrying on the work of the *artel*, and all enterprises for working up the products of the farm"²⁹ were held in common, whereas individual households, private livestock and its housing and basic farming equipment etc. were retained by individuals. Workers of both sexes above the age of 18 were eligible for membership, except the *kulaks* and "all persons deprived of civil rights"³⁰ with minor exceptions.

The *Artel* was to follow a plan in concert with the government's plan for agricultural production, involving crop farming and caretaking of livestock. Its first priority was to handover to the state its mandated share

²⁸ *Artels* were united not merely the labour force, but also the ownership of the capital employed. The members retained their own houses, small garden plots and some livestock and lived separately, but pooled the land and working stock and shared in the proceeds of joint farming. Its members worked under the direction of an elected management and its methods of production were very similar to those of the agricultural commune, while in the methods it employed for the distribution of produce it closely resembled the *toz*, the co-operative for the farming of land in common.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 54.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 57.

at a price fixed by the State (usually a tenth of market value), following which the wages of each of the members was calculated according to rules agreed to in the General Assembly. Wages varied according to labour share and specialization of labour, and the general assembly reserved the right to punish or expel members who failed to observe the rules, which was tantamount to “treason towards the community and as support of the enemies of the people”.³¹ Offenders could be handed to the authorities, to be tried in accordance with state mandated rules.

These consolidations were all aimed towards the deployment of large machinery such as tractors, whose machine-tractor stations which lay at the heart of the *Kolhoz's* organisation. The state supplied the communes with heavy machinery and scientific expertise from these centres, as well as served as the point of contact for engineers, planners, agricultural experts and so on. Moreover, the state exercised its control and propaganda through these stations where it could count on mass outreach into the peasants. Access to tractors and better seeds & equipment were also used as methods of explicit and implicit coercion by the state to incentivize yet more peasants into collectivization.

The Machine-Tractor stations formed the basis of the state-farms or *Sovhozs* as well, where, Singh writes, “the socialist principles find their complete expression.”³² The peasant of a *Sovhoz* was a wage-earner tilling the state land on state’s plan, with no say in the matters of agricultural production. These farms were created mostly on reclaimed land, and comprised of thousands of peasants forming farms as big as townships, with their own schools, hospitals, nurseries, recreation grounds etc. Here education was also carried out for all members, as well as those of the *Kolhozs*, and the amenities available on paper matched the lifestyle of cities.

However, the farms failed at their economic objective of increasing grain production on account of being too big to be managed effectively. Collectivised peasantry lacked the incentive required for careful use of the lands, livestock and tools provided on the farms. Without state intervention, many state farms lapsed into individual patterns of landholding.

³¹ Ibid, p. 63.

³² Ibid, p. 76.

Collectivization Rejected

In the final section of Singh's analysis of the collectivist option, he emphatically rejects it as a model for Indian agriculture. His argument is multi-pronged, and employs criticisms of the Marxist doctrine on ideological, psychological, economic, social and political planes. These aspects of Singh's criticism recur across his writings throughout his life virtually unchanged, and offer an overwhelming argument against the suitability of collectivization of agriculture in Indian conditions. A deep-seated distrust of Communism and Communists remained a recurring theme in his intellectual framework decades after collectivisation was dead and buried.

Singh points out, to begin with, that the task of an agricultural policy is to merge economic interests with a way of living, not just chase after material profits. The overhaul that a collectivist model would cause to the existing peasantry's way of life would take away from the peasant the land and independence he seeks most and seek to replace it with a purely material pursuit. Psychologically it would be devastating for the peasant, and socially it would be inimical to familial and interpersonal relations. The Bolshevik model deprived the peasant of a sense of individuality and ownership, which are necessarily for a rigorous tilling of land and animal husbandry. His life became subservient first to the dictates of other members of his commune, but even more so of the machines that the farm enjoys. The farms themselves were run largely on state guidelines and prepared the ground for totalitarianism inimical to the democratic project India had chosen for herself.

Even if all of this be done, Singh argues that the principle of "economies of scale" which Marxism imports from industry in favour of large farms and machinery does not work in agriculture. Farming is an organic process and the employment of machinery does not increase output indefinitely as in the case of industry. The crop cycles of agriculture cannot be altered mechanically, nor can the variable factors associated with it be regulated as strictly as in industry. On the other hand, machines such as tractors deplete the soil in the long run, and their employment replace labourers from work in a country with unemployment and endemic under-employment.

Most importantly, the Marxist model maximises yield with machines whereas Indian conditions of geography and population dictate that land

utilization be maximised with the application of labour. Thus, even in principle, the Marxist model cannot be adopted for Indian conditions. Even if all of these adjustments were done, the collective farm fails to deliver increased productivity which is the basis of its existence. Singh demonstrates how productivity of farms does not increase with size like the Marxist doctrine predicts and debunks the popular perception of its proponents that better machinery meant necessarily larger machines. He argues based on the success of the Japanese model that technology can be made suitable for small-scale intensive farming as well, whereas the advances in seeds and soil fertilizers do not vary by size of land.

Singh corroborates his claims with data available at the time (1947) from the U.S.S.R., as well as from various other sources spanning many disciplines. He lists the benefits from collectivization, especially in the health, education and rise in standard of living for the peasants, but pronounces that the ills of the policy far outweigh the benefits.

The Remedy

Having criticised both *Zamindari* and nationalization of land on collectivist principles, Singh declares that “peasant proprietorship is the only system which can provide a workable solution to the land problem of this country”³³. He advocates a model based on limited ownership, or permanent State tenancy based on two cardinal principles: (i) that land should not be seen as a source of rent, but for employing labour whose occupation is its tilling, and (ii) owning of land should “necessarily attach the obligation to use it in the national interest”³⁴. Singh here is influenced by Gandhi and his philosophy of Stewardship, where owning land or capital or indeed wealth of any kind is subservient to the needs of society.

In Singh’s model, the tenant is given limited ownership of the land he tills, such that he is able to alienate it if he wishes, but he occupies the land as a trustee of the government, tilling it in the national interest. Should he fail to deliver on his duties, the State would reserve the right to seize his lands, whereas if they deliver over a considerable period of time, they gain the right to ownership. Singh goes on to identify the middle

³³ Ibid, p. 127.

³⁴ Ibid.

path between two extremes, one ideally suited to Indian conditions and one that became his ‘uniquely Indian’ solution:

“In this scheme there is scope both for private effort and also for fulfilment of the social objectives. It eschews dogma – the two extremes of laissez-faire and totalitarian control. The struggle between the forces of an outworn, undiluted individualism and the new collective order has been overwhelming. We have to strike a balance.”³⁵

Singh argues his model would be psychologically as good for the peasant as collectivization would be bad. It would give the peasantry a boost of ownership and individuality which characterise the peasant’s historic attachment to his land and animals. He would be able to employ his family as free extra hands on the soil, employ animals reared and cared for better than any collectivist project can hope, and take better care of the soil using traditional machinery along with innovations suited to the small farmer. Not only would this engender democratic instincts in the country, more than three-fourths of whom lived in villages in 1947 and over 85% in his home state of Uttar Pradesh, it would also increase production per acre which was of critical importance for the material progress India had in mind. Moreover, it would do so while utilising labour more than capital, thus employing India’s millions and saving on capital which was scarcely available at the time. Singh argues against the Marxist ideological conception of the peasant as a ‘capitalist’, and his small farm as a mere stage in pre-capitalist production soon to be overwhelmed by the large farms and their technology.

He moves on to categorise peasant proprietorship’s superiority over landlordism. Abolition of Zamindari would release the difference in revenue lost between the tillers and the State due to the landlord’s appropriation. Linking the tiller directly to the State would ease the peasant’s burden and this increase in capital and mobility would generate demands for entrepreneurship and education alike among them. A peasant freed from the landlord would be a democratising project in rural India, and its effects on the produce, Singh points by example to various European countries, are visible to see wherever in India and elsewhere the independent peasant tills the soil. In conclusion, he writes:

³⁵ Ibid, p. 129.

“So we have to keep to the small family farm as the basis of our land system, with this improvement that all tenants have to be raised to proprietorship and steps have to be devised to ensure that no middleman interposes himself again between the State and the tiller. Large farms, if any, have certainly to go.”³⁶

A New Agricultural Model

The rest of the book is dedicated to steps needed to establish peasant proprietorship on this model and see to it that the model is maintained over time. From the first cardinal principles listed above flow the raising of existing tenants to ownership and prevention of it passing into hands of non-agriculturists in the future, while the second principle dictates reclamation of land, its distribution amongst holders of uneconomic farms, and regulation of the size of holdings. Singh discusses these one at a time.

He lists the idea that the landlord's land be appropriated without compensation but rejects it as it would inevitably lead to problems of execution and legality, tying the measures to courts of law moved by the landlords and running the risk of violent class warfare. Furthermore, it did not sit easy with the principles adopted by the Congress. Therefore, Singh proposes fixing “some rough and ready method which would obviate litigation, delay and unnecessary expense.”³⁷ as fixing prices of land is a business complicated by “speculative, social, sentimental or ethical value.”³⁸

Singh advocates rent paid by the erstwhile tenants as an adequate measure, and suggests land bonds guaranteed by the Government as compensation to the landowner.

“In view of so many arguments for downright confiscation and in view of the fact that the zamindar's right is in the ultimate analysis a right of collection only and that price has to be so fixed that its payment would fall lightly on the shoulders of the new peasant proprietors, we consider that a sum which is the equal of rent multiplied by three, i.e., net profit multiplied by ten, would meet the justice of the case.”³⁹

³⁶ Ibid, p. 140.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 167.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 169.

Upon payment of this sum, the peasant was to acquire ownership of the plot on which he was a tenant. Singh estimates that most peasants would be able to provide for this sum somehow; for those who could not Singh proposes instalment payments and simple loans. As to the objections of expropriation made by the landlord, he points to above-mentioned peculiarities of land ownership which preclude their ownership of their lands. In a rare moment of agreement he quotes from Marx about the landlord's useless position, and reminds them of their class' genesis as mere rent-collectors, not owners. He writes with a tone of finality that the landlord's time was up, cautions them of the march of history against their cause and advises them to "voluntary liquidate their order"⁴⁰ like the Japanese *Samurai*.

He then moves on to the problem of reclamation of land and its improvements for agricultural purposes noting that the land of India, in its present state, was sick. Furthermore, of the 214 million acres available for cultivation at the time, only 170 million acres were under the plough. Reasons for this were lack of water and drainage, poor soil fertility, alkalinity of soil and poor health conditions of cultivators. The average Indian was severely undernourished, and unable to work at the efficiency required of him to work the soil best to alleviate his suffering. This formed a cycle which kept India perpetually in food scarcity, and Singh urges remedies to end the situation as quickly as possible through bringing more area under the plough. This would create employment, improve conditions of soil and health, and provide much needed food security, besides encouraging industry and commerce by and by.

Singh suggests one-time, limited use of tractors to bring more area into cultivation, and taking steps to check diseases such as malaria which discouraged workers from other lands. He notes that "conversion of marshes, swamp and heaths into cultivable areas has provided means of living to thousands of families in Europe"⁴¹ and suggests that the State intervene in bringing more area under cultivation or assist the peasants themselves in doing so. Irrigation, soil erosion and alignment of state machinery such as roads and railways in accordance with the cultivable land surrounding it.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 176.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 186.

Peasant proprietorship

In order to perpetuate his model, Singh notes that land be prevented from going back to non-cultivators, easily the biggest of whom would be the moneylenders engendered by the *Zamindari* system. These lenders mortgaged the peasant's land against exorbitant rates, and when the peasant's loan lapsed, seized the land. Steps against this eventuality must be taken, and Singh lists measures taken by countries in the past.

These include forbidding of alienation for debt of a peasant's land up to a certain minimum, the state reserving to itself the right to pre-emption of holdings, transferring of lands only to *bona fide* cultivators, and forbidding of letting. Of this Singh endorses only the last, as the other measures, while tying the State in legislation and other hassles, would not prevent letting and sub-letting which he felt was at the heart of the problem.

He proposes, instead, that the State take over holdings at a fair price from those who do not wish to cultivate it and leases on land be annulled with exceptions for minors, widows, etc. Furthermore, land should be allowed to be mortgaged or surrendered only on loans advanced by the state or state-recognised institutions, and no ex-proprietary rights of occupancy to be granted to those whose lands have been surrendered to or confiscated by the court. He concludes:

“A supreme merit of these proposals lies in the fact that the most vital possession of the nation becomes secure against the secret and sinister operations of the private usurer, for, in view of the provision requiring a person holding the land to till it himself, land will cease to be an object of speculation and an attractive field of financial investment. The possibility of middlemen exploiting the labour of the peasantry is thus eliminated, and ‘an iron pen dipped in the blood of the *mahajan*’⁴² need not be used.⁴³

Size of land holdings

Singh now turns his attention to the regulation of existing holdings.

⁴² Sir Daniel Hamilton, a Scottish businessman who made Bengal his second home, wrote “What India requires is an Act written not with a goose quill dipped in milk and water, but with an iron pen dipped in the blood of the Mahajan”.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 202.

Measures like these had proven notoriously arduous and expensive to the State due to myriad complications, and Singh directs his attention towards simplifying the same.

He proposes consolidating scattered plots of land owned by the same person (*chakbandi*), prevention of holdings too big and abolition of holdings too small and uneconomic beyond a minimum. As a result of subdivisions due to inheritance laws, and the lack of opportunities other than in agriculture for sustenance, land holdings had fallen to a point where cultivating them had become uneconomical for those holding it. If unchecked, further subdivisions were likely to occur destroying further the potential for productivity. In order to remedy the situation, Singh argues for moving villagers to manufacturing and modifying land inheritance laws to prevent their indefinite subdivision.

He warns of the decades long trend in India of income derived from the manufacturing and services sector declining. Only an advance in these opportunities as a result of industrialisation would wean people away from agriculture and land towards more economically viable options, decreasing land holdings per capita in the process. Moreover, migration from villages to cities would effect a change in lifestyle, which was bound to show in population patterns of the country, for the urban masses have fewer children.

To manage uneconomic holdings which would remain even after industrialisation, Singh suggests changing the laws of inheritance such that (i) no holding after partitioning or gift should be allowed such that the total land held by anyone become below 6.25 acres, (ii) if co-heirs can't each get 6.25 acres then all the land be inherited by the eldest male, subject to the caretaking of the minor heirs so excluded and (iii) no land below 6.25 acres in size be partitionable and be held by the same person. As to the fact that such a proposal is manifestly unjust to those excluded, Singh pleads in the national interest that the individual good be sacrificed and that one, instead of two, should suffer from holdings which would be uneconomical in any case. However, he concedes that a final solution is difficult.

Landless labourers were to be utilized on co-operative farms built on reclaimed land by the State. Singh suggests a model of independent peasant proprietors who voluntary form co-operative societies pooling their resources of advertising, pricing and distribution etc where

cooperation had proven itself effective. However, he steers clear of collectivization, and points out that the Russian or Chinese model of cooperative farms was a misnomer to be avoided.

Having stated these principles and elaborated upon them, Singh ends the book with an appendix giving an outline of a bill based on these principles where critical words of law such as “owner”, “tenant”, “sale” etc are provided. This outline forms a large part of what was later to become the Uttar Pradesh Abolition of Zamindari and Land Reforms Act, 1950 that he himself was to write, pilot through the state legislature and subsequently implement as the Cabinet Minister in charge.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The principles laid down by Singh went on to form not only the model for abolition of *zamindari* in U.P, it was largely adopted by many other states such as Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Madras, Assam and Bombay. Singh’s work in Uttar Pradesh led to the abolition of *zamindari* in Uttar Pradesh in a democratic and peaceful manner.

Furthermore, assuaging the fears of leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, G.B. Pant and Sardar Patel who worried that the *zamindars* would engage in years of litigation fighting the reforms, Singh’s blueprint saw to it that virtually no part of its content, when implemented as law, was ever successfully challenged in court in Uttar Pradesh. This is indeed praiseworthy, and demonstrates the labour and meticulous planning invested later in Singh’s legal design of the Law in 1951, and displays the vast research and analysis (historical, economic, psychological, social and ethical) that Singh brought to bear on the subject.

Singh admits to the intractable problem of fixing ceilings on landholdings, which was to prove the biggest thorn in the State administration’s side for years. Some weaknesses of the Bill emerged in implementation and frustrated its cause, such as the loose definition of “personal cultivation” exploited by the land-owning classes in plenty in the following years and its evolution in strengthening the “superior cultivators” or rich peasants. Corruption of state revenue officials and resistance from the tenants shepherded into ownership towards the fixing of ceilings further stymied Singh’s plans.

⁴⁴ Lohit, Harsh S. (2018), *Charan Singh: A Brief Life History*, Charan Singh Archives, p. 23.

Where Singh is undoubtedly prescient is in his case against Marxism when applied to agriculture, and his opposition to collectivization as India's agricultural policy. Virtually all of his analysis has been borne out by history⁴⁵, and given Singh's arguments based on data available from countries where collectivization was implemented, it seems surprising that he would need to repeat them in his future works as well, decades later. Singh cited urban men planning rural policy as one of the primary reasons for the mismatch between policy and ground realities of rural India throughout his public life. Some part of this thesis is proven by the oversight of his prescriptions regarding joint farming by the country's overwhelmingly urban-elite leadership.

Most importantly, it is the uniqueness of Charan Singh's perspective of the self-cultivating peasant family, on behalf of whom he always argues, which moulds his text and analysis into a unity. He himself belonged to a self-cultivating family that had been tenants. Combined with the erudition few from his background acquired in an age where urban, high-caste men had a monopoly on school and college education, Singh built convictions which enabled him take issue with Marx and his supporters in India, and of course the tenderness he always held for the interests of the tiller of the soil.

⁴⁵ In 2020 CE.

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