Summary and Bibliography

Land Reforms in U.P. and the Kulaks

Charan Singh

1986

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

Summary

Land Reforms in U.P. & The Kulaks. 1986

Land Reforms in U.P. and the Kulaks[1]

BY CHARAN SINGH

Background

Singh provides his account of the Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition and Land Reform Act 1950, alongside a number of other measures taken in favour of the small peasantry's interests in the face of severe resistance from his own party members, and at great personal political cost. Charan Singh was a member of the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Committee headed by Chief Minister Govind Ballabh Pant (1945-47), and later the Revenue Minister of the state and the principal architect of the abolition of *Zamindari* (landlordism) in Uttar Pradesh. He argues against the charges being a *Kulak*, a pejorative term of Russian origin for large farmers and moneylenders.

Charan Singh's public life in the Indian National Congress began in the 1920s, when the entire nation was enthralled with Mohandas Gandhi. Singh himself was an unabashed worshipper of the great man's character, principles, morals and policies. The Congress was the single umbrella under which the struggle for Independence from colonial British power took shelter. Like millions like him, Singh gave his life and livelihood for the Congress and for the ideals of the *Swaraj* of Gandhi's dreams.

Singh separated from the Congress in 1967, some years after the party had split after vicious power struggles after the death of Nehru. The giants of the freedom struggle had left this earth, and politics writhed in the grasp of valueless leadership immersed in petty factionalism and personal gain. The Congress spawned political parties adhering to different ideologies ranging from the Swatantra Party on the right and the constantly fragmenting Socialist Parties on the left. There was the Hindu communal Jana Sangh and Communists of various shades on the extreme left beholden either to Russia or China and of course nursing hopes of a violent revolution.

Not many of these, other than some in the Swatantra and in the

[1] Published 1986 by Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi. 220 pages. Charan Singh suffered an incapacitating stroke in November 1985 and his health continued to deteriorate till his passing on 29 May 1987. He wrote *Land Reforms in U.P. and the Kulaks*, his last text, in response to accusations by political opponents of being a supporter of large farmers.

Socialists, had affinity with Singh's adherence to Gandhi's teachings. His position as the tallest agrarian leader in independent India pitted his perspective against that of his urban-oriented, high caste political rivals and formed an unbridgeable divide between him and most of the political class throughout his public life. He was separated from his supporters by his expansive world view that was above and beyond caste, and from his political opponents by his agrarian approach to politics. Singh was called a 'Kulak' by the Indian Left and is a marker of this ideological rift. Its origins lie in the October Revolution of 1918 in Russia. Paul Brass, Singh's renowned American biographer, describes it thus: "The label of Kulaks, for the Stalinist Communists, defines a category of persons including both the farmers and their supporters, who deserved to be killed, and were in fact exterminated in Russia under Stalin".[2] Although in Indian circles on the political left it did not carry precisely the same connotations, it still represented the Kulak as a sympathiser of rich peasants against the interests of the poor, and retained its pejorative connotations.

Further credence was lent to these allegations by Singh's origins in "the lower reaches of the rich peasant spectrum"[3], and his birth in a dominant middle-caste between the upper-castes (synonymous with the rich) and the lower-castes (populated with the large mass of the destitute). Furthermore, the beneficiaries of his policies predominantly hailed from middle and small landed peasant families belonging to the middle and what are now called the 'Other Backward Castes'. These were easily conflated by the uninitiated urban journalists and academics and of course the politically ideological with 'rich' farmers. The budget Singh presented as the Finance Minister under the Janata Party government in 1979 was called the 'Kulak budget', while the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD), the party he formed after his break from the Congress, was called 'a successful rich-farmer party'.[4] Book after book by academics from the 1970s discussed the rise of the peasant as a class and Charan Singh as their representative, and his political track

[2] Brass, Paul (2011), *An Indian Political Life: Charan Singh and Congress Politics, 1937 to 1961*, Sage Publishing House.
[3] Arnold, David & Robb, Peter (1995), *Institutions and Ideologies,* Routledge Publication, p. 267.
[4] Pai, Sudha (2011), The Chaudhary's theory of Land and Mobility, Outlook Magazine available *@https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/the-chaudharys-theory-of-land-and-mobility/278415*.

record in State elections in Uttar Pradesh in 1967 and 1971 indicated his growing clout across rural self-cultivating castes.[5]

Published in 1986, a year before Singh's death at 85, *Land Reforms in UP and the Kulaks* is the last of Singh's major works and was written in defense of his political legacy which had brought the uncomfortable rural question to the urban, high caste ruling elites. Over the course of the years, most of the benefits of the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act, 1950 in Uttar Pradesh (which Singh later in life defined as the most important achievement of his public career) had accrued to middle and small tenant farmers, leaving out the Scheduled Castes at the bottom of the social pyramid. Singh considered much of this to be due to tampering with the Act's provisions or their halfhearted implementation by those in the Congress who held the helm after his term as Revenue Minister in the mid-1950s. Therefore, the book seeks to present an account of those his reforms did help, including the Scheduled Castes, and to demonstrate that the reforms in U.P. were the most far-reaching of their kind to be implemented in India, without resort to violence or class warfare of the revolutionary kind.

The title of the work, and the succinct preface, sets up the thesis of the book. It formulates an account of land reforms in U.P. involved in the abolition of *Zamindari* in the state, so that "the bar of history and the judgment of such members of the present generation as may be interested in knowing the truth" could decide for themselves if "a person who was responsible for these reforms could be characterised as an accomplice of the enemy or a protagonist of large scale farming", which is to say, a "Kulak". Singh begins with a definition of the term Kulak, originally from Russian, where it meant "a dishonest rural trader who grew rich

[5] See for example Paul R. Brass *The Politicization of the Peasantry in a North Indian state: I*, The Journal of Peasant Studies, 7:4, 395-426. 1980. Paul R. Brass *The Politicization of the Peasantry in a North Indian state: II*, The Journal of Peasant Studies, 8:1, 3-36. 1980. Brass, P. 1984, *Division in the Congress and the Rise of Agrarian Interests and Issues in Uttar Pradesh Politics, 1952 to 1978*, in Wood, J.R. (ed.), State Politics in Contemporary India: Crisis or Continuity? Boulder CO: Westview Press. Brass, Paul *Congress, the Lok Dal, and the Middle-Peasant Castes An Analysis of the 1977 and 1980 Parliamentary Elections in Uttar Pradesh*. Pacific Affairs. 1981. Brass, Paul R., *'An Indian Political Life: Charan Singh and Congress Politics', Volume 1 (2011), 2 (2012) and Volume 3 (2014)*. Sage Publications, Delhi. Byres, T. J., *Charan Singh (1902–87): an Assessment*, Journal of Peasant Studies, 15/2, 139–89. Jan 1988. Varshney, Ashutosh *'Democracy, Development, and the Countryside: Urban-Rural Struggles in India,* 101-112. Cambridge University Press, 1998. Jaffrelot, Christophe., *India's Silent Revolution. The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2003.

not by his own labour but through someone else's—through usury, by operating as a middleman."[6] but by 1930 had come to mean a term of approbation used to describe rich farmers in general. In Alexander Solzhenitsyn's words "to smash the strength of the peasantry"[7] by branding them as an "accomplice of the enemy."[8] In India too the term had retained its derogatory connotations as a term of class abuse, and Singh was accused on this account to be a friend of the rich peasant in a struggle against small and landless peasants. Nothing, Singh says, could be farther from the truth.

He begins by pointing out his personal background and circumstances as the first argument against an allegation of coming from the class of rich peasants. He describes being born "in a peasant's home under a thatched roof supported by kachcha mud walls"[9] in 1902 as the eldest son of a tenant farmer under the large, feudatory landlord of Kuchesar in Western Uttar Pradesh. On joining public life, Singh recounts the legislations he presented in the United Provinces Assembly as evidence of his stance in favour of the disenfranchised, such as the Agricultural Produce Markets Bill, 1939, the Land Utilization Bill, 1939, and the Debt Redemption Bill, 1939 which brought relief to the peasantry, besides preparing a draft Congress manifesto on Land and Agriculture in 1945 that declared "the cultivators of the soil shall be given their due share in the administration of the country and their sons shall be recruited in ever-increasing number to the Public Services."[10] Measures were taken to stay the ejection of tenants and subtenants from lands in their possession going as far back as 1940 by modifying the U.P Tenancy Act, 1939, and declaring all the residents of the village, irrespective of their status, as owners of their houses empowered to turn their *kaccha* (temporary) dwellings into *pukka* (permanent) ones without fear of eviction. This proved to be a boon especially for the Scheduled Castes who often had no claims to land and was included in the Zamindari and Land Reforms (ZALR) Act of 1950. These events, Singh recounts, brought his ideas on *zamindari* abolition to

[6] Singh, Charan (1986), *Land Reforms in U.P. and the Kulaks*, Vikas Publishing House, preface p(v).
[7] Ibid, p(vi).
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid, p. 1.
[10] Ibid, p. 4.

the attention of the then Chief Minister Govind Ballabh Pant, who "reposed full confidence in him owing to his ability and capacity for hard work"[11] and appointed him in 1946 on the Zamindari Abolition Committee constituted to abolish intermediaries between the cultivator and the State (i.e. landlords) by providing equitable compensation to the former for their erstwhile earnings. When the committee submitted its report Singh dissented and wrote an impassioned letter to Pant outlining his opposition to some key provisions of the report.

ZALR Provisions

His foremost target was the compensation in the form of bonds guaranteed by the State to be given to the landlords in exchange of their confiscated land. Singh reasoned that if the State bought off the landlord, it would have to secure funds for the same, which in the form of taxation, would once again would be borne out by the peasantry, which made up most of the country's occupation and taxpayers. Therefore, he proposed the payment should be made directly by the impacted peasants, who could buy land from large landlords in exchange for the payment of a fixed sum decided by the government. Besides this, he suggested changes such as the removal of upper-bounds on the price of sale or leasing of land as the government circle rates were too low and buying off precious land on those prices would engender a class war, encourage evasion of the law and grant too much power to the village state apparatus in the distribution of land and fixation of prices. Ceiling on leasing or selling prices also handicapped widows and invalids whose earnings would take a hit if their power to rent at a suitable price was curtailed. Additionally, he called for breaking up of farms larger than fifty acres for land to be redistributed first towards augmenting uneconomic holdings, followed by distribution amongst landless peasants, and suggested fixing of the lower bound on economic holdings at 6.25 acres, defined as the area that can be tilled by one family with one pair of bullocks.

In its final form, the ZALR Act implemented from 1951 abolished the right of intermediaries, vested land rights in the government, and simplified a complex system containing 46 different types of tenure

[11] Ibid, p. 5.

into one containing just four classes: a) *Bhumidars* (holders of land), b) *Sirdar* (wielder of the plough), c) *Asami* (non-owner) and d) *Adhivasi* (occupant). The first of these, the Bhumidars, enjoyed full rights of user and transfer, while the Sirdars were granted full rights to use but none of transfer. The last 2 categories held no transferable rights, while the *Adhivasis* by 1954, were also granted the status of *Sirdars* through an amendment of the 1952 provisions. Singh defines the legal definitions of these categories to illustrate what manner of cultivators qualified for each, before he details the provisions for each's benefit in the bill.

Sirdars could graduate to *Bhumidars* on the lands they tilled upon payment of ten times their rent to the government towards the "Zamindari Abolition Fund", from which the government would compensate the landlord for his seized land -- a policy drafted by Singh as early as the Land Utilization Bill of 1939 and commended since by the Planning Commission. The Act also stayed ejection of anyone classified as "trespassers" (most of them *adhivasis*) and subtenants on Singh's word that most of them had been labelled trespassers as a result of collusion between the landlord and the *patwaris* (revenue record-keepers of the village), abolished subletting and ensured that rents for *Sirdars* and *Bhumidars* would remain unchanged for the coming forty years. Meanwhile, the *Zamindars* were also equitably compensated with compensation equivalent to eight times his net assets payable by the government in State-sanctioned bonds, while the smaller of them were safeguarded against moneylenders by effectively relieving them of 65-80% of their debts.

Singh details how the provisions of the Act worked to ensure the smooth functioning of each provision in different circumstances. He also shares the political backlash he faced by the large landed vested interests within the Congress, and in the supposedly 'Socialist' parties, whose grip on power the Act damaged. Singh moves on to answer criticism levelled against the Act from these very quarters.

Criticism Answered

He starts with the allegation that the draft had taken too long to formulate, and says that proponents of this view "have always had Russia in

mind"[12], where the existing system had indeed been dismantled in haste, but nothing coherent had been put together in its place over the next decade when the government flip-flopped and chopped and changed its policy on land use and distribution several times, often completely reversing previous formulations. The task of positive formulation being much harder than mere abolition, the committee had taken only three years to work out the bill.

Secondly, Singh objects to the landlord's accusation that by not nationalizing industries owned by capitalists and instead seizing the landlord's land the government was displaying an anti-landlord bias. The capitalist performs some function in the process of surplus production, Singh argues, while the landlord functions purely as a parasite. Besides, nationalization brings no change insofar the factory worker is concerned as he will go from one set of masters to another, whereas the psychological fillip the abolition of *Zamindari* would bring to the tiller's relation to his land would work wonders for land productivity in a sector employing by far the most people in U. P.

As for the method of abolition concerned, says Singh, there were only 3 models (i) that of Japan, where the feudatory chiefs had voluntarily surrendered their rights, administrative powers and hereditary distinctions, (ii) armed revolt by the tenants on the model of the Russian Revolution, resulting in violence, death and destruction of valuable property, or (iii) abolition by law, instead of sword, where landlords were compensated. Singh argues against the first two measures, since the time for Indian landlords to voluntarily surrender was past and the Russian revolution violated ideas of non-violence and statecraft, and which leaves the question of compensation still open. Proponents against genuine compensation to landlords often cited Gandhi's 1942 proclamation that compensating them would be economically infeasible, but Gandhi himself had modified his views on the topic by 1945, advocating "equitable compensation" instead.

Socialist critics harangued Singh about the actual amount of compensation, quibbling over percentages. Critics from the opposite end argued that the price of ten times the rent required for *Bhumidari* rights was too much for the poorer peasants to furnish, but Singh disagrees with

[12] Ibid, p. 25.

this assessment on account of his familiarity with the peasant's mindset. Further, these critics underestimated the value of land ownership for a tiller and underappreciated the lengths he would go for acquiring it. Finally, *Bhumidari* rights furnish former tenants with the rights to sell and raise loans, increasing the value of their land many folds, while reducing expenditure in land revenue, making a one-time investment economically beneficial for them.

Singh rubbishes criticism labelling new *Bhumidars* as capitalists simply for having ownership rights on land directly under their plough. Similarly, he makes light of criticism regarding no solution for uneconomic holdings or landless labour being provided by the Act. As there isn't enough land in India to go around even after abolishing the minority of large farms, the problem would always remain in some measure no matter what method of redistribution is followed. In fact, provisions for prevention of the formation of uneconomic holdings were made in the Act, while the benefits conferred on the landless who were given a stake in land by vesting the entire non-cultivated area of the village to the community as a whole, and permanent rights to their houses and trees, were also tangible.

Singh argues against collective farming as a measure against the problem of uneconomic holdings and low production, as it itself leads to lower production, disincentivizes the peasant and works against the grain of democracy by robbing him of his individuality. Furthermore, collective farms used machinery in a vastly labour surplus economy, leading to more unemployment and underemployment instead of ameliorating it. Instead, Singh proposes decentralized 'cottage' (home-based) and small industries run on electricity and small machinery, geared towards utilizing existing manpower and increasing their productivity specially for the landless peasants. Small and cottage industry is known to increase production and provide more employment, increasing agricultural surplus and therefore purchasing power in a primarily agricultural civilisation. This is vital for innovation and capital formation in the rural sector, which are pre-conditions for the inevitable move away from agricultural to industry and service sectors.

The ZALR Act had profound political, social and economic consequences. By providing benefits of property rights non-violently to millions at the bottom of the social pyramid, had reinforced their faith in

law and order. It abolished both the oppressive landlord and the oppressed tenant, replacing them with self-cultivating peasant proprietors as the bulwark of a "middle-of-the-road, stable rural society and barrier against political extremism"[13]. Further, by reducing 46 types of tenure to four, the reforms had eliminated many class differences, while economically private ownership of their lands was the magic that turned sand into gold in terms of productivity.

The Patwari Standoff

Having reasoned out the merits and consequences of the ZALR Act, Singh recounts the logistical challenges of its implementation. The lack of accurate land records was a huge roadblock regarding the same, as their upkeep had been grievously neglected since World War II, while "the various measures of land reform undertaken in quick succession demanded exclusive attention of the land records staff."[14] In the absence of the same, the *patwaris* – village level land-record keepers responsible for maintaining ownership and tenancy records – had acquired enormous powers which they often misused for personal benefit in collaboration with the landlords. One consequence of this was the aforementioned inflation in the number of *Adhivasis* classified as trespassers who were then liable to ejection from their lands, where the *patwaris* colluded with the landlords in deliberately fudging the record books.

Under the new policies published as an official manual for implementation, many of the *patwaris'* powers were revoked, as a result of which they tendered their resignations en-masse to the UP government in an effort to strongarm it by paralyzing recordkeeping works until their demands to retain their powers were met. This move was backed by the wealthy and political interests within the Congress and Socialist parties as well, whose interests often aligned with the landlord-and-*patwari* nexus on the backs of whom they were elected. Singh, the Revenue Minister, accepted the resignations of all the *patwaris* rather than be coerced as he believed it would set the incorrect precedent that government employees could paralyze the government until their demands were met.

[13] Ibid, p. 40.
[14] Ibid, p. 46.

Singh then presided over a massive hiring over 13,000 personnel under the new designation of *lekhpal* who performed the same function as the *patwari* but with curtailed powers. 18% of these posts were reserved for Scheduled Castes, as opposed to none before, while provisions were made for reserving 36% vacancies for SCs in the future. These new recruits carried out correction drives village by village and worked admirably despite their relative inexperience after a basic training, so that the massive task was completed between the months of August and November. So much so that an inspection of records in randomly selected villages carried out after allegations of corruption surfaced against the *lekhpals* as well found the governmental records incontrovertible, cementing the drive's success. Singh finishes this section with a quote from Wolf Ladejinsky, an agrarian expert of international repute[15], about the correction drive:

> "Without a written record any and all provisions relating to security of tenure cannot be enforced. In Uttar Pradesh, a few million records were corrected or newly inscribed in the course of a special drive organised by the State Government in connection with the implementation of the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reform Act. The same cannot be said of a sizable part of the country, particularly of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Kerala Madras, Mysore and Orissa. Evidently, *the Uttar Pradesh method, largely based on the determined leadership of Charan Singh, then Revenue Minister, was not to be duplicated in many other States."* (emphasis in original)[16]

Rights of Resumption

Singh discusses the natural antagonism between security of tenancy for tenants and the right of resumption of land, up to a reasonable amount, for personal cultivation by landlords which became a source of much wasted effort and legal complications in implementing land reforms throughout the country. While some states like Bombay and Hyderabad set limits as high as fifty and thirty acres respectively on lands resumable for personal cultivation even before the first Five-Year Plan, the Second plan declared that (i) a land-owner could resume land upto a ceiling

[15] Ladejinsky, Wolf (1899-1975) an American scholar of agrarian policy and land reform who studied the unfinished business of alleviating rural poverty and the development problems of rural societies. He worked for the USDA, Ford Foundation and the World Bank.
[16] Ibid, p. 50.

limit for personal cultivation provided his tenant was left with a family holding, or (ii) if the land-owner had less than a family holding, he could resume land from his tenants provided they were left with an economic holding as well.

Terms such as "personal cultivation" and "family holding" are hard to define precisely, leading to different laws in different states and mired the reforms in tedious legal hassles conjured by the landlords in cases that lasted years in litigation and rendered the law too complex for the poor and uneducated tenant to understand. As a result, the proportion of agricultural labourers increased instead of decreasing in many of the states following the Second Five-Year plan, leading to "an expropriation unheard of in the previous history of India"[17] as a result of "Congress policies or inefficiency of its government in this regard"[18]. Usurpation of their lands using these nefarious means sowed the seed of Communism in states such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Kerala and West Bengal where the right for personal cultivation was most abused by the landlords, and Singh remained perhaps the only Revenue Minister of a state within India to reject the Second Plan's recommendations in favour of permanent tenancy rights.

Singh demonstrates using official data that the percentage of agricultural labourers in UP declined through the implementation of the reform until Singh's resignation from government in 1959, the primary beneficiaries of which came from the lower rung of the societal pyramid. When the numbers started to rise again, for example in the 1971 agricultural census, it was because of walking back of provisions from the ZALR Act of UP in the "sacred name of personal cultivation"[19] made by subsequent Revenue Ministers none of whom "had any knowledge of economic conditions of the village or any sympathy with the underdog."[20]

Further, Singh's own sympathy with the underdog attracted the ire of the higher castes which had largely built up the Congress, while it was reasoned that the beneficiaries of the land reforms, being primarily from the backward classes, would vote for the Socialists or Communists in the

[17] Ibid, p. 54.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid, p. 58.

end. Therefore, the blame for a Congress loss in the 1953 by-elections fell on the alienation of their upper caste voter by the provisions of the reforms such as prevention of subletting and refusal or resumption of land for personal cultivation, and indirectly on Singh as the champion of these measures. By way of reconciliation with the Congress Party's traditional base, a demand emerged amongst party workers to grant rights of ejecting *Adhivasi* tenants of such landowners whose area for personal cultivation was less than eight acres to the extent that their total area completed eight acres, whereas Singh's idea was to give such *adhivasis* the opportunity to become *Bhumidars* following procedures outlined in the ZALR Act. Pant asked Singh to prepare a report regarding the intricacies of the same, which Singh discuss next.

Problem of the *Adhivasis*

Singh begins by pointing out the arguments made in favour of the proposal: that the landowner should have a right to resume land let out when letting was legal, while the sub-tenants were only agricultural labourers working the land for wages, and therefore held an inferior claim to the land. Singh points out that many, such as the landowner's *halwaha* (cook) and the like were declared as subtenants, meaning that most of the land was anyway under the landowner's possession; taking from those who held little in favour of those holding too much already would make no sense. For every landowner satisfied, there would be several who would have to be ejected.

Besides, the landowners had not tilled their own lands when they possessed all rights to do the same so their claim to do so now was weak compared to the traditional tillers who had been doing it all along. To live off mere rent for 8 acres or less not being possible, those who sought to resume land to maintain economic holdings already had another source of income, while those holdings large holdings would receive enough compensation. Giving land to them taken away from tillers who had no other occupational avenues would in no way be fair, especially since the primary benefits of the ZALR act had not reached the *adhivasi* community in the same measure as the *sirdars* and *bhumidars*, and whose only hope was the assurance that they would not be ejected from their lands given by the Congress party since 1938. Politically for every vote the Congress would lose from the landowners they would gain ten

from the *adhivasis*, whereas diluting the Act would be going contrary to the party's own professed ideals.

Singh goes on to accuse the party officials of betraying precisely these ideals in favour of class and caste interests favoring their narrow interests, forgetting that the government served all. They had been lazy and corrupt in the implementation of ZALR act's provisions, which was the root cause of the Congress' defeat in the elections as they lost the *adhivasi* votes to the Communist and Socialist parties. Further tinkering of the provisions in favour of the landowners would be a recipe for further political distress, as security of tenure was amongst the only demands of the subtenant community. Singh writes:

> "Not only the fate of the millions that will be directly affected, turns on the decision; it will affect the attitude and behaviour of millions of others who may be connected with these up-rooted families by ties of some kind or other. It will, to a great extent, decide the political pattern, at any rate, of the eastern districts."[21]

Based on Singh's note Pant ordered a survey of villages which bore out Singh's predictions regarding the state of affairs as he had represented, following which Pant came to side with him on the issue. Much resistance had to be faced from prominent Congressmen representing landowners' interests, as a result of which finalization was delayed, affecting the Consolidation of Holdings Act which was also tied to the clarification of this issue. After pointing out evidence from unimpeachable sources how the ZALR Act had increased the proportion of owner-cultivators to agricultural labourers in U.P., and how a better part of these benefits had gone to the lowest castes least likely to have held land before, Singh, before moving on to discussing Consolidation of Holdings, declares:

> "As a result of the land reforms carried out by the State Government the backward classes are no longer prepared to play a secondary role in the society. Nobody can any longer address them as "*Chhoti Zaat*" or "low caste" as members of the so-called high castes used to do, particularly in the eastern parts of Uttar Pradesh."[22]

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[21] Ibid, p. 77.

[22] Ibid, p100. Here, 'backward classes' means the lowest of the low, not to be equated with the contemporary use of 'backward castes' which are in between the 'backward classes' and the high castes.

Consolidation of Holdings[23]

Singh begins by explaining how, dating back to the times when irrigation and other agricultural facilities were not advanced, land belonging to one farmer was scattered into many plots in different places so that no farmer could claim a vast chunk of good quality land. With the advent of these facilities though, consolidation of holdings held by one owner became "the very first step towards improvement of agriculture"[24] which led to "increasing the productivity of all the three factors of production in agriculture – land, capital and labour."[25]

Consolidation of holdings led to better control of irrigation and drainage waters, encouraged digging up of more wells, setting up of proper fencing by farmers whose possession would all be in one place and reduce the wastage of water. Control of animals and rodents would be easier, whereas disputes over rights to land and irrigation which took years in litigation and cost a fortune would be eliminated. Time and effort would be saved with the bullocks not having to be taken from field to field, not to mention the same for the farmer, while provisions for storage and processing of produce near the consolidated holding would also reduce labour and time, while increasing yield. Therefore, Singh regarded all efforts of Zamindari abolition as requisites setting the stage for this step. Singh describes the resistance he had to face from highly placed Congress leaders biased to the cause of large landowners and ignorant of the full significance of such a measure. Furthermore, given variances in quality of land at different plots, there was much scope for corruption which Singh and his revenue staff had to fight tooth and nail.

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[23] For an independent account of the benefits of Land Consolidation in U.P., see Oldenburg, Philip. *Land Consolidation as Land Reform in India*. World Development, Vol 18, No 2, pp 183-195. 1990 "The benefits can be listed under five broad heads: getting one's land in one place; getting road and water channel rights of way; changing the location of one's farm; getting a farm with straight- line boundaries and a rectangular shape; and having a partition of joint holdings done. The farmer saves land through the elimination of unnecessary field boundaries and he saves time and trouble previously spent in traveling from one field to the other, but these benefits pale into insignificance compared with the potential gains from the newly-acquired opportunity to make important productive investments." Pp 187. " If it is indeed the case that what lies at the core of the justification of land reform in India is to increase the number of economically viable and hence liberated farmers, and to reduce the degree of exploitation of small and marginal farmers, then land consolidation in UP produces, at the very least, a result that parallels "real" land reform." p. 191.

[24] Singh, Charan (1986), *Land Reforms in U.P. and the Kulaks*, Vikas Publishing House, p. 101.

[25] Ibid.

Useful comparisons

Next he graduates his defense to comparisons with the state of Kerala where land reforms had been carried out by the Communists, and in the hills under the leadership of Singh's mentor G.B. Pant. He cites a comparative study of the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill versus the ZALR Act made by the Revenue Secretariat of U.P. which declared that the Kerala law had not led to the abolition of *Zamindari* as "the uncultivated land will still continue to be vested in *zamindars* and will not be handed over to the village community as it has been done in Uttar Pradesh."[26] Tenants of charitable and religious institutions had not been given rights to purchase lands they tilled, while the rates for purchase for those who could were far larger than that of U.P, and this price was to be paid even by the lowest rung of agricultural labourers. Rights of resumption were also maintained in Kerala, with the obvious consequence of insecurity of tenure for tenants and subletting too was not forbidden.

As for the hills, Singh takes issue with Pant's policies which "did not favour conferment of permanent (*sirdari*) rights on tenants-at-will of Kumaon known as *sirtans* who constituted about 11 per cent of the entire peasantry of the area." at least half of whom were Scheduled Castes. He cites disagreement over these policies as some part of the cause of a rift with his mentor Pant later in his career which, coupled with Nehru's displeasure with him over the issue of Cooperative Farming, affected him both personally (including his health) and of course politically.

Cooperative Farming

The ZALR act made provisions for land in uneconomic holdings held by *bhumidars*, *sirdars* or *asamis* to be transferred to cooperative farms, to be operated by ten or more adult members of a *gaon samaj*. Singh explains how this provision, in practice, was a "dead letter"[27], included only to appease "the whims of the Congress leadership at the national level"[28] headed by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru who had led the formalization of cooperative farming as India's agricultural policy at the Nagpur Resolution of the All India Congress Committee in January 1959.

[26] Ibid, p. 106.
[27] Ibid, pp. 114.
[28] Ibid.

The policy advocated pooling of land for joint cultivation, with individual workers being compensated for their labors with a share of the produce in proportion to their land. A period of three years was set for the implementation of this plan, starting with service cooperatives. Charan Singh, however, made a logical and impassioned objection to the policy at the Nagpur session itself based on his extensive study of collective farms set up in the USSR and other parts of the world. His research had shown that cooperative farms "instead of leading to an increase in agricultural production, would rather lead to a decrease and that the scheme was impracticable and militated against our democratic way of life"[29]

He wrote pamphlets and books – *Whither Cooperative Farming* and *Joint Farming X-rayed* – detailing his opposition, though his rebuttal in Nagpur had already earned him the approbation of Nehru. Singh recounts how many newspapers reported on several Congress leaders present at the conference, privately agreeing with Singh's arguments, chose not to voice their dissent for fear of displeasing Nehru then at the peak of personal and political power.[30] Singh documents how his stand on cooperative farming led to his resignation from the Congress ministry in Uttar Pradesh later in 1959. Singh responds to a statement from Gandhi supporting cooperative farming, cited as an argument in its favour, saying the rest of the country could not reach the moral heights that a Gandhian ideal demanded. Besides, Gandhi did not confess to know or pronounce on everything and advises the country to acknowledge where the facts went contrary to his ideas.

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[29] Ibid, p. 115.

[30] Giani Zail Singh (1916 –1994) was the seventh President of India from 1982 to 1987. A lifelong Congressman, he had held several ministerial posts in the Union Cabinet including that of Home Minister. He wrote in *Kitni Khoobiaan Thi Is Insaan Mein*, Asli Bharat. December 1990, p. 20. CS Papers NMML. "I got an opportunity to hear Chaudhary Saheb's inspiring speech at the Nagpur session. ... Chaudhary Saheb vigorously opposed the Collective Farming proposal brought by Panditji. I was spell bound by Chaudhary Saheb's hour-long fluent speech. Panditji listened carefully to Chaudhary Saheb's powerful speech, and even smiled. In the pandal, there was all round clapping when Panditji moved the resolution, but after Chaudhary Saheb's speech it seemed as if the tables had been turned. Panditji replied to Chaudhary Saheb, and though not agreeing with Panditji, we had to support him because such was the force of his personality then. I know for sure that had I been in Panditji's place I would not have been able to argue the case put forth by Chaudhary Saheb."

Land Redistribution and Ceilings[31]

Singh was often criticised for his opposition to land redistribution. He first explains his support of small farms his entire public life as they produce more per acre than larger ones and provides more employment. He also supported the imposition of ceilings and redistribution of surplus land thus obtained. What he opposed was treating this band-aid as a blanket solution to the land problem as there wasn't enough surplus land to be obtained from the large holdings that would be diluted without running the risk of either leaving a lot of needy landless people out or creating yet more uneconomic holdings.

Redistribution would require large landowners to be compensated from the Government's pocket and posed the question of prioritizing who gets the surplus land. Besides, the ultimate aim being weaning the population from agriculture to other sectors which provide more earning per capita, Singh considers it counterproductive to "tie to land all those who do not possess land today and, thereafter, try to divert them to other occupations."[32] Lastly, he points out that the policies of resumption of land for personal cultivation and imposition of ceilings pulled in different directions, betraying a confusion on the part of the government.

Singh addresses criticisms of his views on land redistribution by Communists who, either willfully or otherwise, distorted data from the reports on land reforms or misunderstood them. He cites several examples of such errors, which led to incorrect conclusions like land falling into ever fewer hands as a result of land reforms in U.P., or that people were being reduced to "wage-slaves" of the Marxist doctrine. Singh suggests that such criticism was made in service of an ideological agenda, in favour of collectivisation by followers of Marx whose theory on agriculture he felt had been debunked in theory and practice globally. These theories all consider the peasant a capitalist, member of the enemy class, and therefore have never been able to win their support for the cause of collectivisation.

Singh cites progressively higher taxation on large landholdings

[31] See Ladejinsky, Wolf (1899-1975). Land Ceilings and Land Reform, Economic & Political Weekly, Annual Number. February 1972. pp. 401-408. *The Selected papers of Wolf Ladejinsky, Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Oxford University Press, 1977.

[32] Singh, Charan (1986), *Land Reforms in U.P. and the Kulaks*, Vikas Publishing House, p. 129.

which would save the State the administrative hassle of identifying and breaking down large holdings as well as the financial burden of compensation. Increasing taxation would lead large farmers to sell some of their land as to make the rest more profitable, while the smaller farmers and agricultural labourers would necessarily be out of large taxation and find no reason to complain, thus eliminating "unleashing a class conflict" like the Communist party deemed the Nagpur Resolution had done. In fact, Singh had crafted the Large Land-Holdings Tax catering to these principles, but it had been struck down by the Allahabad High Court, while the eventual ceilings legislation passed after his resignation as Revenue Minister had built in loopholes in it favoring the rich and powerful, so that the first serious attempt at land redistribution came as late as 1970, when over 90% of the beneficiaries, at least on paper, were Harijans.

Punching down

Singh moves details his opposition to an increase in land taxation by 50% for *sirdars* and *bhumidars* sought by the Chief Minister C. B. Gupta in 1962 in violation of a provision of ZALR Act that no increase in land revenue would be made for 40 years from the enactment of legislation. Besides this obvious backtracking, Singh outlines his letter to the CM opposing the proposal on account that (i) the economic condition of the peasantry did not warrant such an increase, (ii) the villager was not lagging on his taxes, which were substantial, (iii) the funds could be obtained by other means, and (iv) the bill would prove to be politically disastrous. He moves on tackle each point.

There was a common misconception amongst leaders, Singh argues, that farmers "never had it better" as every farmer had a surplus to sell, and that the prices of agricultural produce were increasing. However, in reality, half of them consumed almost everything they produced, and the per capita income of the rural sector had remained stagnant since Independence, if not reduced in real terms, while urban per capita income grew substantially. The overall effect was an overwhelming disparity in urban and rural incomes, not to mention a disparity in the prices of urban, industrial goods when compared to the rise in prices of agricultural produce. Consequently, "while the non-agriculturist today has to pay 5.3 per cent less for the same goods than in 1948-49

the agriculturist has to pay 26.4 percent more." [33] The villagers spent almost all his resources on food, leaving, therefore, very little for all other expenses such as housing, education, health, marriage etc. The poor conditions of the cultivating family reflected in the deteriorating conditions of the agricultural labourers as well, whose wages dropped as the earnings of the tilling families reduced.

Another misconception was to confuse a change in the consumption pattern of the farmers with a rise in the standard of living. For example, a substitution of milk by tea could not be counted as a rise in these standards, nor could a shift to bicycles from horses or ponies even though they formed an increase in expenditure. Thus the rosy picture painted as the foreground of increased taxation did not represent the truth, which was reflected in the governmental policy since Independence of granting subsidies to the agriculturalists for construction of wells, irrigation facilities, fertilizers etc., premised on the assumption that they could not finance it themselves. An increased tax, in such a situation, was simply beyond their means to pay. In defense of this second point, Singh contends that the rate of land revenue was already the highest in the country. Further, the sum provided by *sirdars* and *bhumidars* towards the Zamindari Abolition Fund to acquire rights to their property, which had been deposited in the state coffers, was effectively a payment in advance by the peasantry. Any further tax burden on the small farmer would decrease his efficiency by cutting into his farm expenditure.

Singh also rubbishes comparisons of land revenue with income tax. While both were direct taxes, income tax started after a fair income while land revenue applied to the smallest owners of land with no possibility of escape even if the land were uncultivated unlike income taxes for closed businesses, and no possibility of evading it through legal loopholes. Against the argument that agriculture could not transfer its burden of taxation on the urban clerk or factory worker, Singh points out that the agriculturist already contributed over 75% of the state taxes, while earning incomes of less than one-third that of a town dweller, and receiving disproportionately little of the state expenditure's benefits such as those on electricity, roads, schools, hospitals and the like when compared to his urban counterpart.

[33] Ibid, p.155.

In any case, Singh contends, the requisite funds could be arranged without increasing taxation but by ensuring better utilization of existing budget funds. He identifies overblown state bureaucracies as the major culprits of funds wastage both on account of inefficiency and personal corruption. No scheme could succeed with such a machinery behind it, while with the right intent and dedication vast reforms such as the ZALR or Land Utilization Act could be implemented without much added expenditure. He also chastises the attitudes of the people themselves at the beneficiary end. Without an improvement in their health, education and fatalistic attitudes, they could utilize no scheme, however rich, to its fullest. Furthermore, efficient taxation of the existing rich taxpayers would ensure an increase sought in the increase of revenue without putting undue burden on the peasantry, while better planning would at least ensure proper implementation of existing funds which remained unused in many sectors.

Finally, Singh argues, burdening the pockets of cultivators who formed over 75% of the rural electorate and over two-thirds of the total, would politically backfire "beyond repair"[34], as it would represent a "breach of faith with the masses"[35] who were promised no increase in revenue for 40 years from the implementation of the ZALR Act. Small farmers to big ex-Zamindars alike, many had welcomed the reform given that this clause would remain. Walking it back, especially by the same government that promised it, would erode the faith of the governed in the government.

Singh details the tenure of Sucheta Kripalani as Chief Minister of U.P. as an example of the kind of leadership he criticises throughout. He accuses her of having no idea of the issues pertaining to Uttar Pradesh's conditions, much less that of agriculturists dwelling in villages, and of making "serious attempts to water down the land reforms legislation that had already been enacted and implemented in Uttar Pradesh several years before she arrived on the stage"[36]. Specifically, he cites permission of letting for all *sirdars* and *bhumidars* and lifting on restrictions on acquiring land above 12.5 acres, which was hitherto the maximum limit. Singh recounts Kripalani seeking his opinion on the matter and his

[34] Ibid, p. 178.
[35] Ibid, p. 179.
[36] Ibid, p. 189.

response that such measures "will be detrimental to public interest and will undo the effects of *zamindari* abolition, to a very, very large degree.[37] falling on deaf ears. He then goes on to make concluding remarks on his account of land reforms in UP, and his role in piloting the same from its conceptual stage all the way down to its implementation for which he "had to wage a relentless struggle for over two decades 1946-67 against the Kulaks who were going by the appellation of Congress and even, Socialist leadership." [38]

Singh adds a proposal in the Appendix of his favoring reservation of half the posts in the state government jobs for sons of agriculturists, as they constituted over 75% of the earning population when agricultural labourers were included. However, he cites the cleft between the rural and urban mindset, the latter of which was not only massively overrepresented in government jobs but whose interests directly conflicted with the countryside, as the governing factor for such a move. A man's opinion is largely shaped by the surroundings in which he grows up, Singh says, and the urban middle class which formed a vast majority of public administrators had neither understanding nor sympathy for the countryside. In fact, it harbored contempt for the values of the countryside and agriculture as a profession. Therefore, there was a need for public servants from agriculturist backgrounds who had an understanding to the pace, psychology, and experiences of a farmer's life, without which officers even with the best interests at heart ended up working for the detriment of the agriculturist class as they lacked the understanding to intervene constructively and provide solutions. The same went for judicial and non-judicial officeholders, especially in the department of agriculture.

Singh recommends a change in the hiring pattern of cooperative staff, so that people lagging in agricultural experiences, regardless of their qualifications otherwise, should not be chosen over those who understand the countryside lifestyle and its intricacies. Public servants are required to exercise discretion during the course of their duties, and only when their psychology and interests are correctly aligned with those they serve can this discretion be correctly channeled. Singh goes on to say that a peasant's upbringing, by virtue of its circumstances, gives him

[37] Ibid, p. 194.
[38] Ibid, p. 201.

robustness of spirit, toughness, and virtue of patience and perseverance, besides making him less skilled at deceit and corruption. Whether the reader agrees with Singh's statement, one comes to fully recognise Singh's views and prejudices.

Arguments for reservation accrue from the vast disparity in urban and rural education standards and powers of patronage, and the fact that the agriculturists bore the brunt of taxation which led to the creation of these services, not to mention the salaries for the government jobs the cities appropriated. Therefore, after refuting certain arguments that could be raised against the plea, Singh writes in conclusion:

> "Only those can appeal to the cultivator's or villager's heart or touch his imagination whose reaction to things is similar to that of his, none else. We have, therefore, to go a step further, and not stop at exhortations; the source of recruitment has to be changed."[39]

Conclusion

To someone familiar with Charan Singh's actions on land reforms and his vision of development, it is difficult to defend the allegation that he was a "Kulak". Paul Brass, a respected and keen scholar of Indian politics and society, after a thorough examination of Singh's career while he was in the Congress, said "most such depictions of Charan Singh were a form of political slander rather than a serious analysis of his ideas."[40]

In the case of the ceilings on landholdings, a study of the evolution of his thinking reveals that Singh himself wrestled with the question his entire intellectual life, citing different ideas in books in 1959 (*Joint Farming X-rayed*) all the way through to 1981 (*Economic Nightmare of India*), though each centered around the ideal of an *efficient* farmer, rather than any considerations regarding one's own class or caste. On this matter too, Brass agrees, writing that to reduce his logic on the issue to his 'class interests' would be to diminish "Singh's own vision of the conversion of the downtrodden Indian peasantry into a class of self-respecting and prosperous farmers into an apologia for the 'rich' as well as middle peasantry."[41]

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[39] Ibid, p. 216.

[40] Brass, Paul (2011), *An Indian Political Life: Charan Singh and Congress Politics*, 1937 to 1961, Sage Publishing House.

[41] Ibid.

Critics from the Left, such as Terence Byres[42], agree that Singh was not a Kulak of the Russian variety insofar as he abhorred moneylenders and did not indulge in trading. Many of the arguments cited in this book bring out little-known facts about the positive impact of the reforms he initiated in Uttar Pradesh on the middle and small peasantry. These landed groups, however small, indeed held more resources than the landless, but they too were destitute in a state where agriculture was the primary occupation and the overwhelming majority lived at subsistence levels. Singh's reforms broke the hegemony of the upper castes in favour of the backward castes, who emerged subsequently as a political force thanks to their acquisition of land. This is not to say that the poorest of the poor, such as the Scheduled Caste, did not benefit from the program, as the book amply demonstrates. The historiography of the Congress leadership during the land reforms bear out the truth of the charges Singh levels against them, as well as the conclusion that he is to be given the credit for *Zamindari* abolition in U.P. and which became a blueprint for other states to follow.

This book is a defense of his intent and proof of his consistent batting for the rural underdog in the face of stiff political opposition from the high castes and urban interests. At the same time, it lays bare Singh's disregard for most of his colleagues in the Uttar Pradesh Congress and political rivals on the grounds of incompetence, intellectual ability, corruption or sheer disinterest. Singh considers the gap between urban and rural India as the critical issue than the upward mobility of the middle and small farmer.

[42] See Byres, T. J., *Charan Singh (1902–87): an Assessment*, Journal of Peasant Studies, 15/2, 139–89. Jan 1988. Terence J. Byres is a peasant studies scholar and a professor emeritus of Political Economy at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

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