Charan Singh (1902-87): An Assessment

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Charan Singh (1902-87) is frequently identified as 'champion of India's peasants'. That description refers to his long career as an active politician. Less well known is his written work. That is rarely mentioned, and when it is, the tone (especially that of urban intellectuals) is dismissive. It is argued here, firstly, that Charan Singh was, indeed, an accomplished politician, but one who successfully represented the interests not of the whole peasantry, but of its rich and middle strata. It is suggested, secondly, that his published work is of grater significance than is generally acknowledged; that it falls squarely into the broad tradition of neo-populism; and that he was, unusually, a true 'organic' intellectual of the rich and middle peasantry. Both his political career and his ideas merit more serious attention than they have attracted hitherto; and such attention needs and adequate class perspective.

I. CHARAN SINGH: THE NEED FOR ADEQUATE APPRAISAL

Charan Singh died in the early hours of 29 May 1987, in his eighty-fifth year. One of the obituary notices described him as 'champion of India's 650 million peasants' and as a 'peasant patriarch' [Bose, 1987]. That, indeed, was an image that Charan Singh himself sought to project. It is also his popular image in India. Such a description identifies him as of great potential interest to readers of this journal. How often does one contemplate the champion of 650 million peasants?

The image is a false one. 'Peasant patriarch', in a sense, he was. But the first part of the description misrepresents Charan Singh's role and significance. Certainly, interest in Charan Singh is amply justified. The reasons for that, however, are different from those suggested in the obituary.

His was an eventful, colourful and controversial life. It was a life which started among the peasantry of north-west India, and, as our obituarist tells us, Charan Singh was 'fiercely proud of his peasant origins' (loc. cit.). That pride was genuine, although Charan Singh was himself no working peasant. He became first a lawyer and then a politician. His life, nevertheless, was intrinsically and inextricably bound up with the peasantry of northern India; or, at least, in tis essential orientation, with important sections of that peasantry. He became their political representative, their spokesman and their ideologist.

So to identify him regionally is important. He did ultimately have considerable resonance for peasants throughout India, and his brief period as Prime Minister of India was not without

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significance. Moreover, his life was of some consequence in the political economy of post- 1947 India. That consequence was regional in origin, although national in its ramifications. The strength of his local roots and the power of his regional base remained primary, while his major achievements as a politician were all regional. His ideological appeal transcended regional boundaries, and, indeed, the broad nature of his ideology bears strong parallels with ideas generated outside of India. But the specific manner of construction of his ideology, and its recurring illustrations, are rooted in the concrete circumstances of north-west India. That is part of its strength.

So to insist upon his location within the peasantry is crucial. He had significance for the whole peasantry- the whole peasantry of both north-west India and of India at large- but in a less obvious way than implied by the obituarist. That significance derived from his championing not of all peasantry, particular sections of the peasantry. His political practice, inevitably, influenced all sections of the peasantry, and all rural classes, but in different ways. Not all rural classes were beneficiaries of such championing. The obituary reports Rajiv Gandhi, the present Prime Minister of India, as saying that Charan Singh will 'be remembered for his .... single-minded devotion to the rural poor [Bose, 1987]. The rural poor, however, were hardly the objects of his political interventions. On the contrary, for vast sections of the rural poor he had nothing positive to offer.

This essay is a biographical assessment of Charan Singh, from the political economy viewpoint. Elsewhere, Charan Singh will be written about and judged in other ways. Here he is viewed in terms of political economy: in that most crucial of contexts, the agrarian question. That requires an adequate class perspective. The key to unraveling the essential significance of Charan Singh lies in such a treatment. Such an assessment, at the time of his death, must, by its very nature, be preliminary and partial. Detailed and careful work is called for, to allow a full and balanced treatment. His importance, and the unusual nature of what he embodied, are, however, such as to prompt a serious, if premature, appraisal.

Charan Singh was unusual in several respects. Some of these will be identified in detail in the course of this essay. At the outset, however, one notes those of his distinctive features around which the essay is structured. These will be given detailed treatment in the course of the essay.

Firstly, he was an unusually successful politician, Pre-eminently on the agrarian front in his native Uttar Pradesh; and the nature of that success is in itself sufficient to justify serious political economy treatment. He was exceptio9nal, secondly, in producing a substantial corpus of written work, between 1947 and 1986 (for a full list see the References at the end of the article): which contained a coherent and elaborate set of ideas, encompassing a vision of the nature of rural India and of the road that rural India might best take. He was a genuinely productive intellectual, who distilled in his writing a potent mixture of analysis and prescription. That, too, would merit close attention from the political economist interested in the agrarian question, even in the absence of an active political career. But, thirdly, he possessed a special distinctiveness, in combining a capacity for political action with intellectual activity and facility in conveying ideas.

The two levels, political practice and ideology, are likely to overlap in any unfolding historical situation. The latter may be used to legitimise the former and any changes which it might produce; to conceal the full implications of such changes; to suggest future political action. Its 'decoding' calls for

a class analysis, since it is precisely the class implications of the existing order/agrarian structure, and any changes in agrarian structure and productive forces, that may be concealed or distorted. The former, in conjunction with other interventions and other influences, may lead to changes in the latter, although not necessarily in any straight forward way. The interaction between the two is likely to be complex, the subject of diverse mediations, and of contradictory and unpredictable outcome. Part of the fascination of Charan Singh is that he affords insight into that interaction, as it unfolds within a single agency.

II. ORIGINS, SOCIAL BACKGROUND AND EARLY INFLUENCES

Charan Singh was born on 23 December 1902, in the village of Noorpur, in Meerut district of western UP (then the United Provinces of British India) [Singh, 1986: 1]. He tells us, through an anonymous interlocutor [loc. cit.], that 'a man's ways, views and attitudes owe their origins, to a large extent, to his social background. So do those of Charan Singh'. One can accept both the general proposition and the particular application in Charan Sing's case. There may, however, be dispute over the relevant, determining constituents of social background.

Charan Singh chose to emphasis that he was born: 'in a peasant's home under a thatched roof supported by kachcha mud walls, with a kachcha well in front of the residential compound of the family, used for drinking water as well as for irrigation' [loc. cit.]. That, no doubt, is so. Other aspects of his 'social background' may, however, have had equal, or greater, significance in moulding his 'ways, views, and attitudes'. In this respect, one may consider both certain generic characteristics of the community into which he was born and the particular circumstances of Charan Singh's family. The reality of Charan Singh was altogether more complex than that rendered by the image of son of a simple peasant family, reared in humble surroundings.

Certainly, his peasant origins are impeccable. He was born into a family of Hindu Jats. The Jats are a cultivating, of peasant, caste. In northern India they are either Sikhs of Hindus, with Sikh Jats concentrated in the Punjab and Hindu Jats numerous in West UP and Haryana. Such 'cultivating communities' in India vary in their approach to physical labour. All, in principle, are willing to work the soil themselves. Among some, however, that willingness diminishes among those of their number whose material circumstances improve. Thus, for example, 'the Sagdope cultivator in West Bengal or the Vellala in Tamil Nadu rarely does all or even most of the work himself once he comes to own more than three or four acres of land' [*Beteille,* 1974a: 191]. Not so the Jat. The Jats are the archetypal working peasantry of northern India. Thus, 'the Jat cultivator in Western Uttar Pradesh or Haryana himself performs most of the operations of his farm even when he is moderately well-to-do' [loc. cit.]. Moreover, unlike other so-called peasant castes, the tradition is for his women to work with him in the fields [*Beteille,* 1974b: 53]. Charan Singh drew upon a genuine peasant tradition.

One notes, indeed, the variety of material circumstances among Jats, as among other peasant castes. Clearly, the Jat community - the Jat peasantry - is not, and was not at the beginning of the twentieth century, homogeneous. The Jat peasantry of that time was a distinctly differentiated one. That does not preclude their being joined by 'primordial ties', such as those of kinship and cast (cf. Alavi [1973] for a general treatment, not related to Jats), and ideologically. But it does suggest the

need to be alert to class relationships, processes of class formation and class action, all of which may be mystified or concealed by particular ideological formulations and constant ideological appeals. Charan Singh was to become a master of such formulations and appeals.

The Jat *kisan* tends to be a peasant proprietor. Not all Jats are, or were, in the early twentieth century, proprietors. Indeed, at the time of Charan Singh's birth 'his father was the youngest of the five brothers who held the land under their plough as tenants of the big zamindar or landlord of a nearby village Kuchesar' [*Singh,* 1986: 1]. Certainly, however, there is, among Jats, a fierce commitment to the ideal of proprietorship. That is important. It may yield a deep antagonism towards the landlord class: and especially the class of large landlords, of the kind which rented out land to Charan Singh's family at the time of his birth. Such an antagonism may be as bitter among rich and middle peasants - whether or not they are tenants - as among poor.[1] Certainly, Charan Singh possessed it.

In fact, within six months of his birth Charan Singh's family had become proprietors, in the village of Jani Khurd, 25 miles from his birthplace, and also in Meerut district [*Singh*, 1986: 1]. The family bought ten acres of land, perhaps using money earned by two of his uncles who served as soldiers in the British Indian Army [loc. cit.] Those ten acres seem, later, to have grown to around 15 acres (six hectares) [*Naik,* 1979: 31], and that would have placed Charan Singh's family in the lower reaches of the rich peasant stratum. He disliked intensely the description *kulak*, which was frequently attached to him, and lost no 'opportunity to reject it vehemently. But those origins among an industrious and well-to-do appeal to the rich and middle peasantry of northern India were of great significance. His sympathy for and appeal to the rich and middle peasantry of northern India were deep and powerful.

If, for Jats, peasant proprietorship is the ideal condition, while participation in physical labour is commonplace, the agricultural labourer's lot is anathema. As has been observed: 'the Jats of Northern India... would accept the role of sharecroppers but not that of agricultural labourers, however destitute their condition' [*Beteille*, 1974a: 84]. To be a landless labourer and to labour directly for others as a means of survival is to be demeaned. Here is another important constituent of Charan Singh's 'social background', which was deeply entrenched in his 'ways, views and attitudes.

Charan Singh would have grown up, too, with a hostility towards moneylender, especially when they were large landlords (cf. Whitcombe [1972: Ch.4, particularly 163-4 and 167-8] on this for the United Provinces up to the time of Charan Singh's birth); and for traders (cf. Whitcombe [1972: 180-91, 195-6)]. Whitcombe, indeed, draws one's attention to 'the common phenomenon of the combination, in one person, of moneylender and grain dealer ... [which] prevented the borrowing ryot, a similarly common phenomenon, from getting a fair price for his produce' [*Whitcombe*, 1972: 188]. Rich peasant would experience this far less than other strata of the peasantry. Charan Singh, however, came from a rich peasantry which was not of the Russian *kulak* variety, inasmuch as it did not indulge significantly in moneylending or in trading. It was a rich peasantry, moreover, likely to be in conflict with usurer's and merchant's capital. These dislikes would ultimately yield attempted political action from Charan Singh.

In the Indian context, class antagonisms and class attitudes of the kind identified may be compounded and deepened by considerations of caste. The result may be a particularly potent mixture.

Here we have a contentious issue, on which disagreement is considerable both generally and with respect to Charan Sigh and those he represented. We note the following.

If, as was common in UP, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *zamindar* was also a Brahmin, antagonism was given an extra edge. Whitcombe draws one's attention to the existence, a few years before Charan Singh's birth, in Aligarh, a district in UP not far from Meerut district, of Brahmin *zamindar* 'whose holdings were commonly found in amongst collections of Jat villages ... [and who] ... exploited the moneylending trade' [Whitcombe, 1972: 276]. It is not clear whether the *zamindar* in Kuchesar village was a Brahmin. Certainly, however, it could be said of Charan Singh that he 'does hate the Brahmins and our Brahminic social order' [*Naik,* 1979: 31]. Charan Singh did not conceal his hatred of Brahmins. Whatever its precise origins, he never lost that hatred.

Considerations of class and caste interpenetrate and commingle at the other end of the class spectrum. The vats bulk of landless labourers in northern India - and in other parts of India - at the turn of the century, as now, were untouchables (cf. Beteille [1972: 414-16]; Mahar [1972: 18-19, 30]; Brahmins, they bear no less deep a contempt for untouchables.

Such are some of the influences which contributed to the cultural, emotional, intellectual and political formation of Charan Singh. Before considering first his political practice and then his intellectual ideological formulations, it is useful to provide a brief sketch of his political career.

III. A BRIEF SKETCH OF CHARAN SINGH'S POLITICAL CAREER

Charan Singh passed his Matriculation Examination from the Government High School. Meerut. He graduated as a Bachelor of Science in 1923, and as a master of art (in History) in 1925, from Agra College, Agra. His marriage to Smt. Gayatri Devi took place on 5 June 1925, and he obtained his degree in Law, an LL.B, in 1926. He started practicing as a lawyer in Ghaziabad, one of Meerut district's two major towns, in 1928, and continued there until 1939, when he moved to Meerut, the district's other major town.[2]

He joined the Indian National Congress in 1929, and remained a member of the Congress Party until 1967. He was active in the freedom struggle. In 1930 he was sentenced to six months in prison for contravening the Salt Laws. He was prosecuted in August 1940, but was acquitted; and was sentenced to one year in prison in 1940, in the individual Satyagraha Movement. Once more, in August 1942, he was arrested under the defence of India Rules, and was in prison until November 1943. 1947 brought this phase of his life to an end, although he would be arrested and imprisoned again, in the 1970s, during the Emergency, along with other opposition leaders.[3]

In February 1937, he had been elected to the Legislative Assembly of the United Provinces, for the constituency of Chhaprauli, in Meerut district. It was now that his career as active representative of agrarian interests began. He was a member of the UP Legislative Assembly between 1937 and 1977.[4]

Charan Singh dominated politics in Meerut district from the early 1940s onwards. He had helped establish the Town Congress Committee of Ghaziabad in 1929 and held various positions in it until 1939, when he moved to the town of Meerut. He was vice-Chairman of the District Board Meerut, between 1932 and 1936. He was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the UP Congress State

Government (the government of Pandit Pant) in 1946 and held that post until 1951: attached first to the Minister of Revenue, then to the Minister of Health, subsequently to the Minister of Local Self-Government, and finally to the Chief Minister. He was acquiring formidable knowledge of how to get things done, on a major scale, politically, for his constituents.[5]

Between 1951 and 1967, with a short break, in 1959-60, he was an important member of the State Cabinet. His political achievements, on the agrarian front, were, over this period, remarkable. His posts were as Congress Minister for Justice and Information (June-September 1951); Minister for Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Information (from September, 1951); Minister for Revenue and Agriculture (1952-54); Minister for Revenue and Transport (1955-57); Minister for Revenue (April 1959); Minister for Home and Agriculture (1960-62); Minister for Agriculture (March 1962-August 1963); Minister for Forest and Agriculture, (1963-65); Minister for Forest and Local Self Government (1966-67). These achievements I identify in the next section.[6]

He remained in Congress until 1967, when he left, on 1 April, with 17 followers. His dissatisfaction with Congress had been brewing for several years, and he had been in conflict with the Congress leader in UP, C.B. Gupta, for more than a decade. According to one commentator, Charan Singh :

> was ... known to have been politically and intellectually dissatisfied with his colleagues in the Congress for many years, especially with the leader, C.B. Gupta, for whom he had no respect .....The justification for the defection was the alleged corruption and administrative incompetence of the previous Congress regime and some of its members *[Brass,* 1984: 120*]*.

Congress had previously failed to secure a majority of seats in the legislative assembly for the first time since, 1947. It had managed to form a government, with the support of defectors from opposition parties and some independents. With Charan Singh's defection from its ranks, it fell after 17 days. Charan Singh was unanimously elected leader of the SVD (the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal), a joint organisation of all opposition parties. He was sworn in as Chief Minister on 3 April, and retained that position in 1967-68. He immediately came into conflict with the Congress central government, over the need to introduce a policy of foodgrain procurement.[7]

He had struck out in order to 'pursue an independent political path' [Duncan, 1979: 2). Free from the constraints inherent in being a member of the Congress Party, which represented a diversity of class interests, he could now focus openly and uncompromisingly upon specific class representation. That he projected in terms of the 'peasantry'. I have already suggested the actual content of his political activity.

He founded a new party, the BKD (the Bhartiya Kranti Dal), in 1967. In the mid-term general election of 1969, the BKD, which had existed for less than two years, became the main opposition party to Congress in the state legislature. He was Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh in a second non-Congress coalition government, in 1970. After than and until 1977 he was leader of the Opposition in the UP State Legislative Assembly.[8]

In 1974, he attempted to unite, nationally, all opposition parties, and from this emerged, on 29 August of that year, the Bhartiya Lok Dal (the BLD): a merger of the BKD, factions of the Swatantra

party and the Samyukta Socialist party, the Uttkal Congress, the Rashtriya Loktantrik Dal, the Kisan Mazdoor Party, and the Punjabi Khetibari Zamindari Union. On 26 June 1975, Mrs. Gandhi declared her state of Emergency. It lasted until January 1977, and during that period Charan Singh was prisoned. He was in 1977, one of the main architects of the Janata Party, into which the Bhartiya Lok Dal was merged. When, in March of that year, India went to the polls, the Janata Party swept to victory. He was elected to the Sixth Lok Sabha in 1977. He had now progressed to the highest political offices in the land. He was in succession, Minister for Home affairs (from March 1977 to June 1978) and Minister of Finance (from January 1979 to July 1979), in the Janata Government.[9]

It was during this period - on 23 December 1978 - that Charan Singh presided over a peasant rally in Delhi, called to celebrate his 76th birthday. An estimated one million *Kisans* attended. It was a significant event, politically: marking a demonstration of rich and middle peasant assertiveness on a large scale, and providing an opportunity for a national projection of Charan Singh's ideology. It also brought to the surface some of those realities of Charan Singh's politics which were never articulated in his writing or in his policy pronouncements. This I discuss below.[10]

Charan Singh split the Janata Party in 1979, and in July of that year, with the help of Congress, became a caretaker Prime Minister. In September 1979, he revived his old party, with the name Lok Dal. He was Prime Minister of India for six months from July 1979 to January 1980.[11]

He was defeated by Mrs. Gandhi and Congress in a mid-term election in January 1980. Thereafter, his political career declined, and in the 1984 general election the Lok Dal suffered heavy losses. He was now an old man suffering from heart disease. He attempted to secure the succession of his son. Ajit Singh, an engineer trained in the United States, and in 1987 the Lok Dal virtually split over that issue.[12]

His death on 29 May 1987 marked the end of a life which spanned the passage, in north-west India, from a semi-feudal countryside, dominated by landlords, to one in which a vigorous capitalism was stirring and developing. It is a capitalism which, in its essential respects, is a 'capitalism from below': a capitalism whose roots lie in the peasantry. Such a capitalism requires a successful struggle against the dominant landlord class. Charan Singh led such a struggle. It involves the powerful emergence and consolidation of the rich peasantry, and its ultimate transition to a class of capitalist farmers. That process is not yet complete. It is, moreover, a process marked by contradiction and unevenness. Charan Singh represented those social forces which are the vanguard of a capitalism from below. He also embodied, in his political practice and in his ideology, the central contradictions of such a process.

IV. CHARAN SINGH'S POLITICAL PRACTICE

(a) Representative of the rich and Middle Peasantry: Before and after 1947

Charan Singh awaits the serious scholarly treatment which is his due. Among those few scholars who have given him attention, these does, at least, seem to be a consensus that he represented not all peasants but a section, or sections, of the peasantry. But which section or sections? That is not always sufficiently clear.

Baxter tells us that he was a 'spokesman for the middle farmer and individual ownership' [Baxter, 1975: 118]. As we shall see, he was certainly a powerful advocate of peasant proprietorship. Quite what to make of the notion of 'Middle farmer' is not, however, very clear. It does not capture the nature of those class interests represented by Charan Singh. Duncan, who has given him close attention, describes him as 'the most prominent spokesmen and champion [in UP].... of the more prosperous sections of the peasantry' [*Duncan,* 1979:2]. That takes one nearer to an accurate identification, but lacks precision. Brass, a knowledgeable and sympathetic observer, is somewhat more precise in identifying him as the 'leading spokesman for the interests of the middle-level and rich peasant proprietors' [*Brass,* 1980b: 4]. Brass's identification seems to me to be accurate in relation to the results of Charan Singh's political action. Both rich and middle peasants have been the beneficiaries, and Charan Singh received support from both strata. Of these, however, the rich peasantry have been the major gainers.

Charan Singh's significance, moreover, lies in the contribution he made to the emergence and consolidation of rich peasants as a class in north-west India. In so doing, he cleared some of the way for an agrarian capitalism from below in western UP. We shall see that Charan Singh argues a neo-populist case against capitalism. That is not inconsistent with his reducing some of the barriers to agrarian capitalism: with his helping to unleash forces whose full power he underestimated and whose ultimate implications he disliked.

Charan Sing's major achievements, on behalf of rich and middle peasants, were secured after 1947. Already, however, before Independence, he was finding his way, encountering the powerful obstacles constituted by the organised class power of existing dominant classes, and learning the necessary political skills.

(b) An Early Target, 1938: 'The Rapacity of the Trader'

If one were to identify obstacles to the development of capitalism from below, among them would be the entrenched power of merchant's capital of traders. In the UP in which Charan Singh grew up, and in which he was politically active in the 1930s, all strata of the peasantry confronted traders as a class hostile to their interests. Poor peasants, perhaps under powerful compulsions to market a 'distress surplus', were especially vulnerable (see Narain [1961 : 36-8] and Byers [1974 : 237-40] on the notion of a 'distress surplus'). But middle and rich peasants were by no means exempt from the power of traders. That power acted to constrain the capacity of rich peasants to accumulate.

Charan Singh's first attempted legislative act on behalf of his agrarian constituents had as its target traders. This was in 1938.

He had published, in the *Hindustan Times,* in March and April of 1938, an article on 'Agricultural Marketing' [*Singh,* 1938]. Later in that year he introduced into the UP Legislative Assembly, as a private member, an Agricultural Produce Markets Bill which sought 'to safeguard the interests of the producer against the rapacity of the trader' [Singh, 1986:2]. He later recalled that his legislation 'did not envisage any control on price or quantity of the commodity sold or purchased, but only on malpractices indulged in by the cleverer of the two parties [that is, the trader in relation to the producer]' (loc. cit.).

He made no mention of obstacles to capitalism, of course. That was not part of his agenda. But his description of the aims of his legislation could have been inspired by Adam Smith.

Nor did he single out particular strata of the peasantry. All agricultural producers, he implied, suffered, and all would benefit from action to curb the power of traders. In fact, those most likely to be able to take advantage of such action would undoubtedly have been rich peasants, with their greater holding power, and to a lesser degree, middle peasants. Poor peasants, caught in a powerful web of exploitation, would have needed action on a far wider front, if they were to derive benefit.

In this, his initial legislative effort on behalf of 'peasants', he was not successful. But he was serving his political apprenticeship and acquiring rare expertise. He tells us that it was not until 1964 that such a bill was passed in UP *[Singh,* 1986:2].

There is some significance in Charan Singh's later memory of his unsuccessful bill and in his account of subsequent attempts to act on this front. He states that between 1938 and 1964, 'he was foiled ... by representatives of vested interests who were entrenched in high places both in the Congress and its Government' [*Singh*, 1986:2]. That, surely, cannot be in dispute. Traders to this day are powerfully organised and effectively represented. In 1938, and it the quarter century which followed, they were a *fortiori* so. He describes the response to his efforts on this front of his old adversary in Congress, C.B. Gupta: who 'argued... that as the farmers had become rich and educated and could, therefore, hold their own against the traders... the Agricultural Produce Markets Bill was... unnecessary' (loc. cit.). Charan Singh, perfectly accurately, saw the fallacy in this. It might be true of some large 'farmers'. It was not, however, true of the mass of the peasantry. Nor could the power of traders be so lightly dismissed *vis-a-vis* even rich peasants, at that juncture.

(c) A Second Target, 1939: Moneylenders

Like merchant's capital, but to an even greater degree, usurer's capital enters the pores of a pre-capitalist agriculture. Like merchant's capital it bears more heavily on the poor peasantry than on middle or rich peasants, but is significant, nevertheless, for rich peasants, where they are in its thrall, in placing a curb upon their ability to accumulate.

Charan Singh was prominent in 1939, in formulating and introducing the Debt Redemption Bill. Again, he tells us of opposition from the 'moneylenders' lobby', and of his 'great disillusionment that some leading lights of the Congress Socialist Party, including, for example, Acharya Narendra Dev, who professed such great solicitude for peasants and workers from the public platform, took up a strong creditor attitude' (loc. cit.).

This time he was successful, and he tells us that the bill 'brought great relief to the peasantry' [*Singh*, 1986:3]. In practice, it must have been of particular advantage to rich and middle peasants. Poor peasants were too weak and too vulnerable to take advantage of its provisions.

(d) Further Action Before 1947: Focus Upon Landlordism

Other of his actions before 1947, which he draws to our attention, are worthy of note. They are none of them spectacular, or particularly successful. But they carry the seeds of future political action of considerable significance.

On 5 April 1939, he brought before the executive Committee of the Congress Legislature Party a resolution calling for the reservation of a minimum of 50 per cent of public employment 'for the sons and dependents of the cultivators or agriculturists who formed the mass of our people' [Singh, 1986:2]. That was not considered, since the party resigned from the legislature in October 1939. His persistence on behalf of agrarian interests was becoming obvious, however.

In April 1939, he drafted a Land Utilization Bill, whose aim was to 'transfer ... the proprietary interest in agricultural holdings of UP to such of the tenants or actual tillers of the soil who chose to deposit an amount equivalent to ten times the annual tent in the Government treasury to the account of the landlord' [*Singh*, 1986:3]. His war against the hated landlord class had begun. In June, he published a newspaper article [*Singh*, 1939], which contained the embryo of the land reform he would pursue relentlessly after Independence. That land reform had at its core the abolition of landlordism in UP. By 1945, he had prepared a draft Congress Manifesto on Land and Agriculture, which provided for that abolition, and it was approved by the All-India Congress Working Committee at its meeting in Calcutta in December 1945 [*Singh*, 1986:3-4].

Charan Singh was preparing himself politically and ideologically as the *kisan* champion. It was after 1947, however, that the fruits of that preparation ripened, and the middle and rich peasantry found in him a representative of power, political skill and effectiveness. It was the landlord class that would first feel the full impact.

(e) The Assault Upon Landlordism: (1) Enactment and provisions of the Zamindari Abolition Act

In UP, as in other parts of India, the *kisans*, and most notably the rich peasantry, on their own behalf, had for long waged a war against the landlord class. That war had started in the nineteenth century. The peasantry had made some gains, and the rich peasantry was emerging or clearly as a distinct class. Still, in 1947, landlords remained masters of the Indian countryside, in UP as elsewhere.

The most important battle in that war was about to be fought. The preliminary skirmishing had, in fact, started before 1947. Now the fighting began in deadly earnest. It was a long, drawn-out affair, brilliantly managed by Charan Singh. It was also decisive, at least on Charan Singh's home ground, western UP. Charan Singh's role was crucial.

Charan Singh, a long-time opponent of landlordism, designed the UP land reform legislation, whose aim was to strike a moral below at the landlord class: the Zamindari Abolition Act [*Brass,* 1980b: 4; *Duncan,* 1979: 2]. That, in itself, was an achievement.

The Zamindari Abolition ACT's gestation as legislation, quite apart from its implementation, was prolonged. The entrenched power of landlords ensured that. Daniel Thorner refers to 'the preliminaries to, and the stately legislative progress of, zamindari abolition' [Thorner, 1956: 48]. That, surely, is an accurate description. The legislative process - its preparation, which reached back to the late 1930s, and its successful conclusion - spread over more than a decade. Charan Singh, successful lawyer and practiced politician, bided his time and saw the legislation through to a successful conclusion in terms of enactment. As parliamentary Secretary of the UP Congress Government from 1946 to 1951, and as a powerful member of the State cabinet from 1951 to 1967, holding posts crucial in the sphere of agrarian relations, he masterminded the Act and took it to its final enacted form.

In a nutshell, the Act's progress and major provisions were as follows:
The Zamindari Abolition Committee in Uttar Pradesh appointed in 1946 presented its report in 1948. The Bill based on that report was referred to a Select Committee and was pased by the State Legislature in 1950 and signed by the President in 1951. It became effective only from 1 July 1952.... The Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition and Land Reform ACt,as enacted in 1950, and modified subsequently by amending acts in 1952, 1954, 1956 and 1958 lays down the following main provisions:

i) All zamindari estates situated in Uttar Pradesh were transferred to and vested in the State free from all encumbrances. All rights, titles and interests of the intermediaries (all proprietors between the State and the tenant) passed to the State.
ii) Holdings of zamindars classified as *sir* and *khudkasht* land, not leased out to any occupancy tenant, were recognised as their personal property and did not vest in the State.... All zamindars were vested with *Bhumidari* right in respect of their *sir* and *khudkasht* lands without any payment to the State. *Bhumidari* right meant the right to full proprietorship with the right to inherit, transfer, mortgage etc. [*Government of India,* 1976: 92]

It now had to be implemented, in the teeth of fierce opposition.

(f) The Assault Upon Landlordism: (2) Re-Organisation of the Patwari System

The *Enactment* of agrarian legislation, in the face of the determined and organised opposition of powerful dominant classes, is, in all conscience, difficult enough. Its *implementation*, however, faces yet more demanding obstacles.

In this instance, a key figure was the village *patwari*: the keeper of the village records or, to describe him somewhat anachronistically, the village accountant [*Thorner,* 1956: 47; *Neale,* 1962: 201,315; *Whitcombe,* 1972; 20, 42-3, 236, 246-7; *Duncan*, 1979;2]. There was, in UP, a veritable army of *patwaris* - some 27,000 of them [*Singh,* 1986: 42, 44, 47]. The *Patwari* had existed since long before the arrival of the British; he normally had three to four villages in his charge; and his function in keeping village maps, and records of boundary changes, of tenancies, of levels of rent and changes therein, and of who was in possession of what land, was critical (Neale [1962: 201-2], citing Walsh [1929: 149-51]).

The *patwari* had for long had an apparently dual position. On the one hand, he was the servant of the landlord, who kept 'records of transactions between his master, the zamindar, and the cultivators under his master's aegis - records, that is, of all claims, arrears, advances and debts in which the zamindar's interests were involved' [Whitcombe, 1972: 42-3]. On the other, he had an allegiance to the state. We are told that 'precedent from time immemorial bequeathed him to Government as the keeper of the records, meaning those records which were in fact kept, being mostly zamindars' tax record' [*Whitcombe*, 1972: 20]. The British, as their power was consolidated, sought to establish his independence. They did not wish, however, to disturb the *patwari's* position in the 'village community'

[*Whitcombe,* 1972: 247]. The *patwari's* low official salary and dependence upon the zamindar for payment [Whitcombe, 1972: 20, 250-51] constituted powerful reasons for his true allegiance never being in doubt. That was so in the late nineteenth century. It was still so in 1947.

The *patwari* was enmeshed in the local network of power, and subject to the overwhelming authority of the local dominant class. According to one writer, the patwari occupied what was 'usually [an] hereditary post' [Neale, 1962: 315]. That is no doubt so. Thorner, however, qualifies that description appropriately: to the effect that when the post fell vacant the landlords had the 'powers of nomination' of the successor (Thorner, [1956 : 47], citing the *Report of the U.P. Zamindari Abolition Committee [Government of United Provinces, 1948 : 176-7]* ; the same point is made by Whitcombe [Whitcombe, 1972 : 43]). That of course, is not inconsistent with the post being, in fact, hereditary. But it serves to underline the landlord's long-standing coercive hold over the *patwari*. The *patwari* was the landlord's nominee and representative in the village. He would not lightly oppose him or undermine his position.

It was upon the *patwari's* records that the enforcement of land law depended [*Neal*e, 1962: 201]. The *patwari* system was an established source of considerable discontent for the UP peasantry [*Duncan*, 1979: 2], and not least for Charan Singh's essential constituents, the rich and middle peasants. It was the rising class, rich peasants, and, to a lesser extent, middle peasants, who found the activities of the *patwari* most irksome as they struggled to assert their rights, newly enshrined in legislation, and to secure dominance. Poor peasants and landless labourers were too weak to be capable of deriving substantial benefit from the Act. At this critical juncture, however, the Zamindari Abolition Act was threatening to founder on the rock of the *patwari* system.

The central issue was 'precisely which portions of a zamindar's holdings were to be classified as *sir* and *khudkasht*' [*Thorner,* 1956: 47]. Various criteria were advanced by which one might judge whether of not land fell into this crucial category, but it was in this respect 'that the *patwari* could work the greatest mischief' [Thorner, 1956: 48]. Upon his entries in the village records hinged the determination, in this regard, of the respective rights of cultivators and landlords; while the slow progress of the legislation 'gave to the patwaris of the U.P. an opportunity such as had never before occurred to them, even in their fondest dreams' (loc. cit.). As Thorner drily observes: 'They did not fail to avail themselves of it' (loc.cit.). Their behaviour, in this respect, was open and 'notorious' (loc.cit.).

At this point, Charan Singh stepped in decisively. He had become Congress Minister for Revenue and Agriculture in 1952, and was acutely aware of the activities of *patwaris* in falsifying village records. In 1953, they went too far 'when they struck for higher wages' [*Thorner*, 1956: 48]. Charan Singh acted. It was at his prompting that 'the U.P. Government incurred no popular displeasure by dismissing thousands of them at one stroke' (loc. cit.); and it was he who, at this juncture, 'was responsible for the reorganization of the *patwari* ... system' [*Duncan*, 1979 : 2]. That was a significant achievement.

Certainly, 'the mischief which was *patwaris* perpetrated was not only great, it was also irreparable' [*Thorner*, 1956: 48], inasmuch as they were responsible, through their falsification, for much land to which tenants should have acquired permanent rights remaining 'in the hands of the

Zamindari-turned-bhumidar' (loc.cit.). But, we note, it was *poor* peasants who were the major losers in this respect.

Moreover, it is true that those who succeeded the *patwaris,* the so-called *lekhpals,* 'the new title for village record-keepers and panchayat secretaries', were 'as venal as their predecessors ... [and] as disliked and mistrusted as the old patwaris [*Neale,* 1962: 245]. In that sense, 'the effort to "clean up" the servants of the local governments failed' (loc. cit.). That, however, is to judge the outcome by an impossibly demanding criterion. Charan Singh's intervention served to push the implementation of the Act substantially the way of a sizeable number of rich and middle peasants, who were the undoubted beneficiaries of the UP land reform. If the *lekhpals* (or the *patwaris,* as they were still called [*Neale*, 1962: 245]) continued the venal way of their predecessors, it was increasingly at the behest of rich peasants, who had previously found their activities irksome and constraining. Rich and middle peasants themselves would now use the *patwari* in their own interests.

The legislation, once it had been enacted and implemented, to the extent that it was implemented, did not abolish landlordism in UP [Brass, 1980a: 396-7], and especially not in its stronghold in eastern UP. Nor did it bestow advantage upon landless labourers or poor peasants. It did, however, benefit considerably rich and middle peasants, particularly in western UP: Charan Singh's home territory, where they existed as a more powerful force than in the eastern part of the state (on the greater significance of rich and middle peasants in western UP see Clift [1982]). This was a notable accomplishment. It could not have taken place, of course, had there not been a long prior struggle against landlords, and had not the large landlords been, at least, in post-1947 India, a weakened class and one on the defensive. Nevertheless, Charan Singh had proved himself to be a formidable adversary, on behalf of those he represented, in circumstances that were far from easy (for his own account see Singh [1986: 41-50]).

(g) *Land Consolidation and the Rich and Middle Peasantry: The Consolidation of Holdings of 1953*

At this period, too, Charan Singh was largely responsible for another important piece of legislation [Duncan, 1979:2], which smoothed the way for rich and middle peasants in particular, and especially the former [Brass, 1980a: 398]. This was the Uttar Pradesh Consolidation of Holdings Act of 1953, which represented 'a programme of land consolidation for individual peasant holdings' [Duncan, 1979: loc. cit].

Fragmentation of holdings, or the existence of operational holdings in more than one plot - often significantly more than one plot - was rife in UP, as in other parts of India. It is still pervasive in most of India. Fragmented holdings existed for rich and middle peasants as for poor peasants. That is clearly shown for UP in Table 1, where figures for western UP (the two districts of Meerut and Muzaffarnagar) are given for 1954-57: operational holdings of up to five acres had between three and six fragments per holdings; those from five to 15 acres, between nine and 15; and those with 15 acres and above, between 16 and 24. We lake this to have been the situation, very crudely, for poor, middle and rich peasants, respectively.

TABLE 1

FRAGMENTATION OF HOLDINGS IN UTTAR PRADESH[1], 1954-57[2]

Size group (acres)	**Cost Accounting sample [3]**			**Survey Sample [3]**		
	Number of Fragments		Average Size	Number of Fragments		Average Size
	Per Acre	Per Acre	of Fragments	Per Acre	Per Acre	of Fragments
Below 2.5	2.79	1.62	0.62	3.41	2.20	0.45
2.5 - 5.0	5.98	1.55	0.65	6.46	1.70	0.59
5.0 - 7.5	9.04	1.70	0.70	9.26	1.51	0.66
7.5 - 10.0	10.56	1.21	0.83	11.91	1.39	0.72
10.0 - 15.0	12.28	1.02	0.98	14.57	1.22	0.82
15.0 - 20	16.66	0.99	1.01	18.39	1.21	0.83
20.0 - 25	15.52	0.70	1.43	21.67	1.10	0.91
25 and above	19.59	0.61	1.65	26.96	0.70	1.43

Notes : 1. The region represented lies in western Uttar Pradesh: that is, the two districts of Meerut and Muzaffarnagar,
2. The Study was conducted for the three agricultural years from June 1954 to May 1957.
3. The cost accounting and survey methods were being tested, to see if the latter could yield as satisfactory results as the former. The cost accounting method involved a prolonged stay by the fieldworker in the selected village and the intensive study of a small number of cultivators; while the survey method consisted of periodic visits by the investigator to gather data from a larger number of respondents. The cost accounting method was more expensive, but more reliable.

Source: [Government of India, 1963: 26]

Whatever the origin of fragmentation (and these remain to be examined properly),[13] and whatever the attempts (not infrequent) to rationalise of justify its existence,[14] there can be little doubt that fragmentation represented a significant barrier to the efficient working of the land: a barrier felt most keenly by rich peasants, especially those who were proto-capitalists, and who perfectly accurately, saw consolidation as a necessary prerequisite for the most effective use of their land. Extensive fragmentation, on the scale indicated, represents a most powerful obstacle to accumulation in agriculture.[15] Charan Singh himself observed of the situation in the early 1950s that: 'consolidation of land-holdings is a condition precedent total and any development in the countryside' [*Singh,* 1986: 102].[16] He was hardly exaggerating. Later, from the mid-1960s, when the 'new technology' became available, the case for consolidation took on added force for the rich peasantry, and this was especially so in relation to mechanisation [Brass, 1980a: 398], which was more or less non-existent in UP

agriculture in the early 1950s. For the moment, the consolidation made possible by the act of 1953 represented a significant step forward, and for that Charan Singh must take much of the credit.

It was a step that was taken far more confidently and more pervasively in western UP - where the rich and middle peasantry were an important force - and which had particular 'significance for the middle and larger landholders' [*Brass*, 1980s: loc. cit.]. That it should have started a process which, by the end of the Fourth Plan (that is, by 1971), 'had encompassed more than half the cultivated area of the state' (loc. cit.) was no mean achievement.

It was an achievement secured elsewhere in India only in the Punjab and Haryana [*Government of India,* 1976: 184, 188, 233-4] (on the Punjab see, for example, Chadha [1986: 66-8]; Randhawa [1974: 38-44]). The Punjab, Haryana and western UP are the heartland of agrarian capitalism ('capitalism from below') in India - the regions of most rapid agricultural growth. It is no accident that they are also the areas where consolidation has progressed furthest.

Such changes do not do not take place without organised class action, and intervention by the state on behalf of emerging classes struggling for dominance. Opposition is likely to be deeply rooted and considerable. Thus, as one authority points out:

> Persons with vested interests like having possession in joint holdings or on common land of the village in excess of their share and enjoying adverse possession of land of others would resist the voluntary introduction of the consolidation scheme 'and, if introduced, they would retard its progress by opposing it at every stage. The experience has shown that differences do arise when land is actually parcelled out and men with conflicting interests from opposition groups and the dominating ones tend to harm the interests of the weaker groups and would attempt at making the scheme fail *[Government of India, 1976: 197]*.

Even among possible beneficiaries, there is natural reluctance to part with land seen as 'one's own'. There is, moreover, considerable suspicion that, where exchange of fragments is to take place, good land may be exchanged for bad.

Charan Singh directed the intervention that took place in UP, and which overcame much of the existing opposition, reluctance and suspicion.17 He fought off a variety of opposition to the Act to 1953, both within Congress and outside [Singh, 1986: 103] He tells us, further;

> of the various schemes and measures which [he]... hade to handle in performance of his public duties, consolidation of holdings was the one most susceptible to corruption. The varying quality of land held by the various owners and the attachment to their plots that farmers develop everywhere, were the two main causes of corruption. These two factors gave ample opportunity to the consolidation staff to make illegal gains. But... Charan Singh kept a strict vigil on this aspect of the scheme. This fact was acknowledged by the Opposition on the floor of the Legislative Assembly in the year. 1958 *[Singh,* 1986: 104*]*.

There is not reason to doubt this account, at one level. His vigilance in seeing through consolidation is beyond dispute. Whether it can be seen as an example of his 'understanding of ... [the] problems of the

masses' [Singh, 1986: 103] is another matter. That is in the nature of populist rhetoric. The beneficiaries were the rich and middle peasantry of western UP.

(h) Resistance to Land Taxation

In the 1960s, the rich peasantry emerged ever more strongly as a force to be reckoned with in north-west India. Charan Singh continued to represent their interests, along with those of middle peasants, forcefully, cleverly, and successfully. So far, our account has centred on struggle within the countryside. Now that struggle extended to a confrontation with urban interests and the central state. This was clearly so on two important fronts: taxation and food procurement.

A critical issue in the political economy of post-1947 India has been the inability of the Indian state to tax agriculture adequately, and, in particular, within agriculture, rich peasants, along with the other dominant landed classes, most notably, landlords. It is an issue which has attracted considerable attention (for a brief account of the evidence up to the mid-1970s see *Byres* [1979: 224-7]). It is one which remains unresolved. As a recent authoritative commentator observes:

> the chronic resource difficulty of the states has a major source in their unwillingness to *tap the agricultural sector* to raise resources ... Distributionally, benefits tend to accrue largely to the richer farmers [*Chakravarty*, 1987: 49, emphasis in original].

The 'unwillingness' of the Indian states so to proceed might better be described as 'inability'; and that present inability derives from the able resistance led in the past by such as Charan Singh.

It has been pointed out that in 1962, when Congress Minister for Agriculture, 'he played an important part in the opposition to the increase in land taxation which Congress had attempted to introduce' [*Duncan*, 1979: 2] (on the attempted land taxation see also Brass [1980a: 398 and 422]; Brass [1968 : 112]; Brass [1984 : 309-21]). More accurately, his part may be described as having been crucial.In that year, Charan Singh tells us, retrospectively: 'the then [Congress] Chief Minister [of UP], Shri C.B. Gupta sought to increase ... [land taxation] by 50%' [Singh, 1986: 15]. Charan Singh moved quickly and decisively. He recalls the episode briefly, but pointedly, thus:

> Charan Singh opposed the move vehemently and provided the intellectual opposition to it in a long confidential note or memorandum submitted to the Chief Minister, dated 29 September, 1962 …. The matter went up to the Planning Commission and Congress Leadership in New Delhi, ultimately the proposal was dropped (loc. cit.).

Charan Singh had won a signal victory, on behalf, especially, of the rich and middle peasantry.

The opposition to increased land taxation was successful both because of Charan Singh's skillful advocacy and because of adroit political maneuvering. The case which he argued in a lengthy memorandum to C.B. Gupta (reproduced in detail in Singh [1986: 151-94]) is a clever mustering of evidence, a deployment of special pleading and, not least, an open political warning.

It includes a treatment of taxation figures and data relating to the inter-sectoral terms of trade, interpreted to show 'agriculture's' inherited and continuing disadvantage. The peasantry, it is held, is already taxed sufficiently, and could not bear a heavy burden of taxation. Moreover, it is argued, the

land tax is a regressive tax, which bears hard upon the less well-off; an agricultural income tax would be preferable. It suggests possibilities for raising extra revenue, other than increased taxation: for example, the abolition of prohibition of alcohol, which deprived the state of valuable revenue. It points to the special problems of agriculture, brought by it's being subject to recurring natural disaster, and not least the indebtedness that this inevitably brings. It stresses the pervasiveness of rural poverty. It makes comparisons with other Indian states, in particular the Punjab, showing a more advantageous position for the peasantry than in UP.

Charan Singh ignores the differentiation which existed in the UP countryside and the advantages accruing to rich and middle peasants; concentrating, instead, on the difficulties being experienced by poor peasants and landless labourers. His supposed favouring of an agricultural income tax fails to mention that if that had been a real possibility his opposition would have been no less vehement. He raises the spectre of what would later be termed 'urban bias' (see Lipton [1977] and for a critique [*Byres,* 1979]). It is an impressive piece of special pleading. These were ploys at which he was adept.

All of the forgoing is persuasively argued. But it must have been the political reasoning, bluntly stated by Charan Singh in his memorandum, that was most convincing to Congress politicians. He pointed out:

> The cultivators in Uttar Pradesh from the largest percentage of any state in India, viz. 67.45 and constitute 77 per cent of the rural electorate, and not only 50 per cent as the sponsors of the Bill imagine [*Singh,* 1986: 179].

Nothing could be clearer than that. He continued:

> The proposed increase in the land taxation will affect the mind of the peasantry unfavourably towards the Congress organization in as large a degree as the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act had affected it favourably. Arguments here may not appear convincing to friends who hold the opposite view, but it cannot be disputed that the measure will affect the political fortunes of the Congress beyond repair .... The enactment of this measure amounts to committing ... political *hara-kiri [Singh,* 1986: 178-9*]*.

He said menacingly, for the first time focusing upon his natural constituents: 'It is holders of more than 12.5 acres or so that enjoy political influence in the countryside. This influence, in future, will be exercised to our disadvantage' [Singh] 1986: 188]. No more telling argument could have been made. The rest his fellow Congress politicians might ignore. This must have concentrated their minds wonderfully.

The increase was not introduced. A careful study published in 1973, which examined agricultural taxation in Uttar Pradesh up to 1966, concluded:

> there is ... vast scope for additional taxation of the agricultural sector in this state. To this may be added that more than 50 per cent of the total taxable capacity lies with farmers having holdings above 20 acres [*Dwivedi*, 1973: 148].

Charan Singh had been instrumental in fighting off an attempt to tap some of that taxable capacity and reach the better off farmers. To this day, the rich peasantry of UP, and the prosperous capitalist farmers who have emerged from their ranks, escape effective direct taxation.

(i) Food Procurement

When, in 1967, Charan Singh took over as Chief Minister in the non-Congress coalition government, he faced the determination of the central government to impose a food procurement scheme upon him; and not only that, but one of a kind which was especially unwelcome. In the event, he did initiate such a scheme. He did so with his customary skill.

Again, the interests of rich peasants, and to a lesser degree middle peasants, were at state. Now, however, it was more difficult to conceal representation of these under the cloak of action on behalf of the whole 'peasantry'. The rapidly proceeding process of social differentiation was yielding widening fissures within the UP peasantry, and especially in western UP. Differential class interests appeared more nakedly than previously.

From the early 1950s India had relied increasingly on imports of food and on US foreign aid to supply urban demand. Net imports as a percentage of net production in 1964-65, the monsoons failed in 1965-66 and 1966-67. Output fell drastically, with devastating results. India became heavily dependent on the United States for food aid. The Indian state was determined both to raise dramatically the rate as which agricultural output was growing and to increase the quantum of domestic food surplus under its control. Both required immediate action. The former, which gave rise to the so-called 'green revolution strategy', would take some time to bear fruit. The latter, our concern here, called for results at once. The central government was adamant.

The marketed surplus of Indian agriculture was in overwhelmingly private hands. Private traders purchased that surplus directly from producers and, through the wholesale trade, distributed it to urban and rural consumers. They attracted widespread opprobrium: as 'exploiters' of both the direct producer and of urban and rural consumers; as creators of artificial shortages and exacerbators of natural shortages; as the source of a powerful upward bias to agricultural prices. Such traders constituted, throughout India, a powerful class.

Acquisition of a food surplus, under the control of the central state, via action in the individual states, had for long been the subject of discussion. A variety of piecemeal action had been generated. A number of possibilities existed.

One solution was the nationalisation of the grain trade. The major recommendation of the Foodgrains Enquiry Committee of 1957 (the Mehta Committee) [*Government of India,* 1957] had been that the trade in foodgrains be progressively 'socialised', that is, taken out of the hands of private traders. The Indian state appeared to have embraced that goal. It faced the organised power of the All India Foodgrain Dealers' Association, but it seemed to be attempting to move in that direction. A long

prior history of efforts at procurement existed. Then, in January 1965, the Food Corporation of India had been established, to undertake the purchase, sale and distribution of foodgrains in India. At the same time, the Agricultural Prices Commission was founded, to advise on appropriate pricing policy.

If the state were, through the Corporation, to procure food, it could do so through compulsory levies or through competing directly with traders. if the former, it could, in principle, acquire a grain surplus either from the wholesale trade or directly from the producer. The latter had been attempted in the past, but the predominant emphasis was on striking at the wholesale trade and the generally detested speculative and 'hoarding' trader. By the mid-1960s, however, there had been a shift of view. Traders, and the wholesale trade, were not exempted from culpability. But attention now shifted from the trader as the only culprit. The previous policy, indeed, had yielded limited success: as was observed at the time, the available figures 'hardly indicate progress towards socialisation of the grain surplus' [Krishna, 1967: 1697].[19] It was decided that procurement at the wholesale market level could ot now be effective, and that it was those producers with a large marketable surplus and holding capacity who had to be the direct target of procurement. It was against this background, in a situation of national crisis, that Charan Singh acted.[20]

There had, in fact, been pressure on the UP government to improve procurement operations since 1964. UP's dependence on central supplies of imported wheat meant that her government was susceptible to insistence that the state's procurement performance be improved. In March 1966, the Congress UP Food Minister gave notice of a procurement scheme involving a direct levy from wholesalers. The central government, intent on procurement directly from the producer, ensured that the scheme was abandoned. In the early months of 1967 a serious shortage of foodgrains had emerged. No scheme for procurement directly from the producer had been introduced in UP in 1966. Now, in March 1967, a newly-elected Congress state government announced that a levy on producers would be imitated.[22]

The Congress government fell on 1 April, and Charan Singh took over as Chief Minister. His concern of the 1930s with the exploitative activities of traders had long since gone. This was a reflection, no doubt, of the radically altered circumstances, in which rich peasants could now look after their own interests. Poor peasants, heavily indebted and without storage capacity, remained desperately weak and subject to what Charan Singh had earlier called 'the rapacity of the trader' (cf. Duncan [1979: 4]). Middle peasants, too, were vulnerable. But not so rich peasants. With access to cheap government credit, and supplied with subsidised inputs, many of them 'had developed a storage capacity and an experience of the market which enabled them to engage in speculative practices' [*Duncan*, 1979: 5].

Charan Singh faced a dilemma. He would have preferred no policy of procurement. He had, in recent years, stated his opposition to government interference. But the pressures upon him to adopt such a policy could not be resisted. He had no obvious concern to defend the interests of traders. If a procurement scheme were to be forced upon him he would have preferred one that looked to the wholesale trade. He had given voice to a 'preference for the free market and for freedom of the peasant to exploit market conditions to the best of his ability' [*Duncan,* 1979: 7]. But the central government was determined to see compulsory procurement directly from producers. He effected a compromise.

He modified the scheme which had been introduced by the previous Congress administration, and was careful to stress that he was mounting 'a limited operation dictated by extraordinary conditions' [*Duncan*, 1979: 7]. That operation involved a levy on holdings of eight acres and above, progressively graded up to 25 acres, and the setting up of government purchasing centres throughout UP (loc. cit.). Great play was made of the fact that only holdings of more than eight acres were subject to procurement: that is, 'a minority of "well-to-do" *kisans'* [*Duncan*, 1979: 8]. That, on the face of it, was hardly calculated to please the rich peasantry. Other aspects of the scheme meant that it was a compromise which, in practice, was not disadvantageous to rich peasants.

From the very beginning, the scheme's operation was hedged round with a variety of concession: for example, areas hit by drought were to be exempt; a reduction was allowed for those cultivators who had sown less than their full acreage; and there was a generous time limit for registering objections to the amount levied. In addition, 'the government ... issued supplies of cement, sugar and galvanised iron sheets to be made available to peasants coming forward with their produce' [*Duncan*, 1979: 8].

Charan Singh further emphasised two aspects of the scheme: first, that only a small fraction of any holding's marketable surplus was being procured compulsorily; and, second, that the price paid of between Rs. 80 and 85 per quintal was a high one [*Duncan*, 1979: 7-8]. That is so, and, indeed, 'for many peasants, with a modest surplus to sell, the government purchasing centres provided far better terms of sale than those normally offered by traders in the foodgrains market' [*Duncan,* 1979: 8].

In the short run, Charan Singh, 'by controlling the terms of the implementation of the policy' [*Duncan*, 1979: 8] was able both to argue that he was looking after the interests of 'the vast majority of the peasants in the stat' (loc. cit.) and to placate rich peasants. More than that, the scheme actually steered resources the way of rich peasants.

In fact, he was initiating a scheme which, in the longer run, would be of great advantage to rich peasants. Over the next decade, the operation of a system of administered prices for agriculture, especially in areas like western UP, through the medium of both minimum support price and procurement prices, gave a significant upward bias to agricultural prices [*Mitra,* 1977: 110-11]. The procurement scheme introduced by Charan Singh, under pressure from the central government, created machinery and procedures which would be used to secure an outcome quite the opposite of that originally intended: a strengthened capacity to hold surpluses and an upward bias to prices.[22] It is doubtful if Charan Singh intended such an outcome. On the contrary, he was using his political skills to defuse a potentially dangerous situation. He did that successfully. He also contributed to an outcome that would be of great, ultimate benefit to rich peasants.

(j) *The National Stage: The Kisan Rally and the Kulak Budget*

The 1970s found Charan Singh on the national stage. He had been Minister of Home Affairs in the Janata government, in 1977-78, and been forced to resign. After his 'expulsion from the cabinet' [*Ping,* 1979a : 53] he used his large peasant support - overwhelmingly from northern India, but with the strong possibility of its spreading to other parts of the country - as a sword of Damocles in the political struggle then being waged. In the seven months after his enforced resignation, in his national political

manoeuvrings, he used the intimidating prospect of considerable peasant mobilisation, via a mass peasant rally, in his dealings with Morarji Desai and other of the Janata leaders from whom he was estranged.

In the 'carefully orchestrated' campaign leading up to the rally, Charan Singh's lieutenants suggested that as many as a crore (ten million) of *kisans* would participate in it [*The Hindu,* 17 October 1978]. Charan Singh himself, in a speech on 7 July 1978, 'told the audience - many among it were sturdy peasants from areas adjoining Delhi- that the proposed rally had evoked great enthusiasm among people in all parts of the country, from Tamil Nadu in the south, to Bengal and Orissa in the east' [*The Hindu*, 8 July 1978]. It is unlikely that anyone could have taken seriously the possibility of ten million peasants descending on Delhi. Equally, widespread national support for Charan Singh had obviously not materialised. Yet, there was an undeniable frisson of apprehension around at that time: a feeling of what might yet come to pass.

In the event, the *Kisan* rally did take place, in Delhi, on 23 December 1978, Charan Singh's 76th Birthday. The threatened *crore* of kisan did not foregather. But, according to one estimate, one million did, in 'the largest rally in the history of the capital' [*Ping*, 1979a: 53]. There were, it seems, no particularly large contingents from outside northern India. But addressing the rally, along with Charan Singh, as well as the Chief Ministers of the Punjab (P.S. Badal), UP (Ram Naresh Yadav) and Haryana (Devi Lal), was the Chief Minister of Bihar (Karpoori Thakur); while a message of support arrived from the Chief Minister of Karnataka (Devaraj Urs) [*The Hindu*, 24 December 1978].

The numbers were sufficiently large and the regional spread sufficiently wide to make a considerable impact. Charan Singh, and what he represented, had to be taken seriously. That this was so in the Janata Party was shown when, Very quickly after the *kisan* rally, on 24 January 1979, Charan Singh became Minister of Finance and Senior Deputy Prime Minister [*The Hindu*, 25 January 1979].

The *kisan* rally's slogan drew upon populist imagery, invoking the 'urban bias' notion, of which Charan Singh had been a powerful exponent for many years (although he did not use that expression): 'Today, India's villages are the colony of the city' [1979a: 53]. It was observed by one commentator, with some accuracy, that the rally 'symbolised the coming of age of the *kulak* class as a formidable political force' [*Ping*, 1979a: 53]. In that coming of age, Charan Singh had played an influential part. He was now the rich peasantry's leading political representative and major ideologue: a formidable adversary and skilled politician.

Urban intellectuals were puzzled as to what quite was to be made of him. There he was, posturing on the national stage, and threatening urban India with an army of peasants. Romesh Thapar, for example, observed that: 'Charan Singh is not a very reliable factor in any national assessment. He is too mercurial and given to unbalanced generalisation on economic and political theory' [*Thapar*, 1979: 175]. Thapar was inclined to take the then Minister for Industry, George Fernandes, more seriously. Charan Singh may, indeed, have struck those who were unfamiliar with his writing as 'mercurial' and 'unbalanced'. In fact, as we shall see in the next section, it is the consistency and the coherence of his arguments, stated over 40 years, that are remarkable. Charan Singh was no unstable rural buffoon.

About one thing Romesh Thapar was absolutely correct, however, and that was that 'Charan Singh [would] settle down to budget for his kisans' [*Thapar,* 1979: 175]. Perhaps that was not too difficult a prediction to get right.

Charan Singh buckled to the task and produced his budget in March 1979. One of his associates described that budget as having about it 'the breath of the people and the smell of the soil' [*Ping*, 1979c: 76]. Again, the populist imagery is significant. More realistically, the budget was reported in some parts of the Indian press as a 'kulak budget'. It merits that description. The duty on chemical fertilisers was cut by half; taxes on mechanical tillers, light diesel oil (for electric water pumps), plastic PVC pipes (for irrigation) were either reduced or abolished; the Agricultural Refinance and Development Corporation was exempted from income tax, with the intention that the saving would be passed on to borrowers in the shape of lower interest rates; commercial banks were given concession with respect to rural lending; the subsidy on minor irrigation to larger farms was extended; outlays for dairy farms, rural electrification and grain storage facilities were raised [ping, 1979c : 76]. These were all benefits which would accrue very substantially to the rich peasantry and the emerging capitalist farmers. It might be dressed up in populist garb. Its reality, however, was clear enough.

(k) Charan Singh and the Extremes of the Class and Caste Spectrum

Before turning to a consideration of Charan Singh's intellectual practice, it is worth noting certain features of his politics which surfaced at the time of the *kisan* rally and thereafter. These relate to the manner in which class and caste interpenetrate.

I have noted above his hatred of 'Brahmins and the Brahminic social order'. At the time he was prominent on the national political stage, a former colleague suggested that; 'His dislike of the leftists, I suspected, was partly due to the fact that a vast majority of them were Brahmins' [loc. cit.], while 'his hatred of Nehru and Indira Gandhi was partly due to the fact that they came from an aristocratic, Brahmin, background' [*Naik,* 1979: 32]. Charan Singh did not conceal his hatred of Brahmins. Whatever its precise origins, he never lost that hatred.

Considerations of class and caste interpenetrate and commingle at the other end of the class spectrum. Charan Singh made much of his concern for the 'farming community' and for the 'rural poor'. Yet as was observed at the time of the *kisan* rally, he 'apparently does not even recognise the existence of the largest segment of the rural poor - the landless agricultural labourer' [*Anonymous*, 1978: 2053]. That is, in one sense, true, inasmuch as landless labourers are simply not mentioned in his writing, his speeches, his political programmes. But, at another level, he assuredly did recognise their existence: as a large and growing class, antagonistic to the 'farming community' which he represented.

When pushed on landless labourers, and on very poor peasants (often sharecroppers), he sometimes lost his reticence. When asked, 'what about those with no land at all, the landless peasants?', the reply was chilling and uncompromising:

> Well, landless - if a man is landless he cannot be called a farmer, peasant. Then he's a labourer. If you want to give land to the labourer - well there is no land for giving to the labourer *[Ping*, 1979b: 81*]*.

That logic extended to the poor peasant, also. If there was not land to be 'given away', the poor peasant was no more likely to be favoured. The *Kisan Sammelan* which organised the *kisan* rally, and which represented Charan Singh's ideology, resolutely opposed any land redistribution at all [*Ping*, 1079a: 55]. In none of his activities was Charan Singh less mercurial or more uncompromising.

As already pointed out, the vast bulk of landless labourers are untouchables. When, in October 1978, Charan Singh was preparing for the *kisan* rally it was reported that

> two senior Haryana dissident leaders, Mr. Rizak Ram and Swami Agnivesh ... disapproved of the way the rally was being organized. They said: 'If the kisans hold a rally to air their grievances against the Government, it is understandable, But the proposed kisan rally had assumed the colour of a fight between kisans and Harijans' [*The Hindu,* 17 October 1978].

That, of course, was denied. It would have been disastrous to acknowledge openly such a reality.

At the kisan rally itself, Charan Singh is reported to have 'rebutted the allegation mad against him and the kisan sammelan that they were "anti-Harijan" [*The Hindu,* loc. cit.]. The rebuttal, as reported, was hardly strenuous or convincing: 'He said he had the same concern for the Harijans, if not more, than those who accused him of being "anti-Harijan" (loc. cit.: for another 'denial', which is no more convincing see Naik [1979: 31-2]). The gloss he put on the rebuttal was pure mystification: 'Their problems - the age-old discrimination and poverty - were identical to those of the suffering farming community' [*The Hindu,* 24 December 1978]. What is left unsaid is that in Charan Singh's universe the vast majority of *Harijans* are not members of the 'farming community' at all. They are, for the most part, landless agricultural labourers, or very poor peasants (often grossly disadvantaged sharecroppers), whose interests are very much at variance with those of the 'farming community': especially rich peasants who hire agricultural labour and are hungry for more land, but also middle peasants.

The bitter antagonism of interests inherent in a compound of caste and class has explosive potential. Indeed, it is often suggested that Charan Singh's *Lok Dal* has been 'associate[d] ... with various atrocities committed against the poor and landless [that is, *Harijans*] in the countryside' [*Brass,* 1984 : 330]. Against this, it has been argued:

> Close scrutiny of incidents of alleged atrocities against the low castes [that is, Harijans], the poor and the landless in U.P. ... does not indicate any clear pattern of association of such incidents with the middle castes [such as Jats] of the Lok Dal. Such incidents tend to be more complex and diverse in origin and are not even necessarily tied to class struggles in the countryside *[Brass, 1984: 330]*.

It would be foolish, indeed, to deny the complexity of such 'incidents. That they are unrelated to the peculiarly potent mixture of cast and class which exists in contemporary India, or to influences unleashed by Charan Singh's brand of politics remains unproven, however. No assessment of Charan Singh can ignore the issue. Perhaps future, careful research will cast more searching light upon it.

V. CHARAN SING'S INTELLECUAL PRACTICE

(a) Intellectual Disdain for Charan Singh

Charan Singh intellectuals are seldom treated seriously. I recall that when, in 1982, Charan Singh's book, *Economic Nightmare of India* [*Singh,* 1981] was sitting on my desk in London, a highly intelligent young Indian student, from a wealthy urban family, in his final year as an undergraduate, picked it up and asked, incredulously: 'Did he write this himself?' The question was significant, in its dismissiveness of any possible credentials Charan Singh might have as an intellectual. 'Dangerous' he might be, but not a serious intellectual.

More significantly, during a six-month visit to India I made in 1978-79, when I travelled extensively throughout the country, an earlier book, *India's Economic Policy: The Gandhian Blueprint* [*Singh,* 1978] had recently appeared. Had it been published some three or so years earlier - before the Emergency - it would scarcely have been noticed (indeed, his *Economic Nightmare of India,* published in 1981, received little attention outside of *Lok Dal* circles). But, in 1978-79, there was Charan Singh on the national stage, challenging for the highest office in the land. He could hardly be ignored. I was reading it and mentioned it to several people. A common response was to suggest that he could not possibly have written it himself. Among the doubting were some prominent urban intellectuals.

Even among those few scholars who have taken Charan Singh seriously at the intellectual level, and who are familiar with his writing, there is a reluctance to give him full credit as an intellectual. Thus, for example, Paul Brass, whose knowledge and sympathetic understanding of Charan Singh are considerable, observed in 1965: 'Charan Singh is not exactly an intellectual in politics, but he is a well-read man, with an incisive intelligence which he had devoted to a continuing study of agricultural problems in Uttar Pradesh' [*Brass,* 1965: 139]

Charan Singh did have an 'incisive intelligence', and be undoubtedly applied it to 'a continuing study of agricultural problems in Uttar Pradesh'. Judgement on whether he was an intellectual, of course, turns on one's definition of 'intellectual'. My judgement it that on the most rigorous definition Charan Singh was clearly an intellectual; and not only that, a most unusual one.

(b) 'Organic' Intellectual of the Rich and Middle Peasantry

We may define an intellectual as someone who regularly uses theory (abstract knowledge), a systematic body of ideas, or organised knowledge, to explain and make judgements on general matters: who abstract from concrete, particular events their 'essential' characteristics (ef. Williams [1976: 140-42] Shils [1968: 400-400]). Within such a definition different possibilities exist.

There is a less demanding usage, which identifies as intellectuals those who perform a variety of 'specialized intellectual roles' [*Shils,* 1968: 400]: lawyers, notaries, teachers, priests, doctors, engineers, etc. (*Shils,* 1968: 400-402]; cf. also Gramsci [1971: 3, 14]). Such people 'help to locate the individual, his group, and the society in the universe' and 'to interpret, explain, and attempt to control' a variety of phenomena [*Shils*, 1968: 400]. According to that definition, Charan Singh, as a highly skilled lawyer, was an 'intellectual'. When Brass observed that he was 'non exactly an intellectual in politics', he obviously had a different definition in mind.

More demandingly, we might identify an intellectual as someone who actually produces intellectual work or works [*Shils*, 1968: 410]. Such a person, one might further insist, must possess a distinctively coherent, consistent and authoritative view of his 'universe'; a capacity for independent analytical discourse; and particular skill in communicating that view in print (we are not here dealing with societies with an essentially oral tradition). Charan Singh, I would insist, met these criteria.

Before proceeding to Charan Singh's view of the 'universe', the problems he confronted, his prescriptions, as these are communicated in print, we may consider Charan Singh's special, and unusual, role as an intellectual. With respect to the circumstances that concern us here, those of a peasantry in the prolonged throes of possible capitalist transformation, the ideas of Gramsci are of particular relevance.

Gramsci tells us: 'All men are potentially intellectuals in the sense of having an intellect and using it, but not all are intellectuals by social function' [*Gramsci,* 1971 : 3]. It is precisely in this sense, of 'intellectual by social function', that Charan Singh operated at the intellectual level. Such intellectuals are those who think, analyse and prescribe with respect to a particular social class, or classes, for, as Gramsci insists, 'the notion of "the intellectuals" as a distinct social category independent of class is a myth' (loc. cit.)

Gramsci distinguishes two quite distinct kinds of intellectual 'in the functional sense' (loc. cit.): "traditional" intellectuals and "organic" intellectuals'. The distinction has significance in relation to Charan Singh.

First,

> there are the 'traditional' professional intellectuals, literary, scientific and so on, whose position in the interstices of society has a certain limited class aura about it but derives ultimately from past and present class relations and conceals an attachment to various historical class formations [*Gramsci*, 1971: 3].

Gramsci himself gives as examples of 'traditional' intellectuals, to be found for the most part in rural areas ('rural-type intellectuals'), priests, lawyers, notaries, doctors, teachers. They, he tells us, 'are linked to the social mass of the country people and the town (particularly small town) petite bourgeoisie, not as yet elaborated and set in motion by the capitalist system' [*Gramsci,* 1971: 14]

Such, one might say, was the rural UP in which Charan Singh grew up, practiced law and became a politician. The function of such intellectuals, *inter alia,* is to 'bring into contact the peasant

masses with the local and state administration' (loc. cit.). As a young *mofussil* lawyer, Charan Singh was such a 'traditional' intellectual, and performed such a function.

Second, 'organic' intellectuals are

> the thinking and organizing element of a particular fundamental social class. These organic intellectuals are distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, but by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong [*Gramsci,* 1971: 3].

Gramsci elaborates:

> Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields. [*Gramsci*, 1971: 5].

He gives as his essential example the following: 'The capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organizers of a new culture, of a new legal system etc.' (loc. cit.).

Gramsci's writing on this issue is rich and illuminating. This we cannot consider in detail here. What we may pursue, however, is Gramsci's observations on the peasantry and intellectuals.

Gramsci held that each class *except the peasantry* produced 'organically' its own intellectuals (cf. Kiernan [1983: 231]). He observes:

> It is to be noted that the mass of the peasantry, although it performs an essential function in the world of production, does not elaborate its own 'organic' intellectuals, nor does it assimilate any stratum of 'traditional' intellectuals, although it is from the peasantry that other social groups draw many of their intellectuals and a high proportion of traditional intellectuals are of peasant origin [*Gramsci*, 1971: 6].

His editors note : 'Gramsci's general argument ... is that the person of peasant origin who becomes an "intellectual" (priest, lawyer, etc.) generally thereby ceases to be organically linked to his class of origin' [*Gramsci*, 1971: 6, note 4].

I am sure that this is, in general, a valid observation. But part of the fascination attaching to Charan Singh is that he did not conform to this generalisation. Charan Singh, of Jat peasant stock, became a lawyer, but did not 'cease to be organically linked to his class of origin'. On the contrary, he was, for most of his adult life, quintessentially an 'organic' intellectual, 'directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which he organically belonged', and, without doubt, gave that class a

'homogeneity and awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields'.

It was not, of course, the 'mass of the peasantry' to which he related, and neither was it a 'social mass of the country people ... not as yet elaborated and set in motion by the capitalist system'. It was the rich peasantry, and to some degree the middle peasantry, to which he was organically linked, and whose ideas and aspirations he directed and represented: a class of proto-capitalists, in process of being 'elaborated and set in motion by capitalism'.

We have seen the conspicuous success with which he represented that class politically. We now turn to his intellectual practice.

(c) An Indian Variant of Neo-Populism

Those acquainted with currents of thought and of political practice that have run, often with great force, outside of India, will recognise that Charan Singh fits squarely into a long-established tradition of populist and neo-populist ideas. In this case, we encounter an Indian variant of new-populism.

In a previous paper [*Byres*, 1979], I considered the ideas of Michael Lipton [Lipton, 1977], which I categorised as a modern example, devised in his own very personal style by a western intellectual, of neo-populism. I there indicated the content of Lipton's ideas and defined what I mean by populism and new-populism (others, of course, have different definitions, and still others may deny that anything that might usefully be described as populism or neo-populism even exists, but that is not my present concern). I will not repeat those definitions. What I would stress, however, is that so to place Charan Singh in the tradition of populism/neo-populism is more than a gratuitous observation of merely passing interest. It is a consideration which gives perspective to Charan Singh's writing and which helps place his ideological and political significance.

Charan Singh himself favoured and claimed kindred interest in Lipton's ideas and prescriptions. In his last substantial work he cites both Lipton's book and an earlier article [*Lipton*, 1968; *Lipton*, 1977] at length in support of his own position [Singh, 1981: 164, 182, 186, 192, 224-5, 233, 512-13]. There is a certain irony in this, inasmuch as Charan Singh had been expounding his arguments *in extenso*, with skill and with passion, for some 40 years before this. Indeed, I have already had occasion to note Charan Singh's long-standing espousal of a variant of the 'urban bias' notion. Lipton nowhere quotes Charan Singh. He might well have done so, in detail and with favour.

In fact, the genus of ideas to which Charan Singh's writing belongs, populism/neo-populism, has been most sharply defined, most powerfully formulated, and most influential, when it has grown spontaneously in indigenous soil: when it has been the specific response to particular national and/or local objective circumstances. Charan Singh's ideas fall precisely into that category. They are, in this respect and in others, to be compared with the populism and neo-populism that flourished in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, and the populism that flowered in the USA in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

This tradition, then, to which Charan Singh belongs, has included perhaps most significantly, in terms of coherence, power of formulation and influence - the great Russian populists (the *Narodnik* writers, who were Lenin's intellectual and ideological adversaries, in, for example, his *Development of*

Capitalism in Russia) and the remarkable Russian neo-populist, Chayanov, with his formidable output of work and his large and prolific school, the Organisation and Production School. That particular variant was *sui generis*: a product fashioned by the individual genius of such as Chayanov, but unmistakably the response to Russian objective circumstances.

Equally, the North American variant was unambiguously the result of American objective circumstances. Far less powerful than the Russian form, of far shorter duration, unproductive of any comparable scholarly tradition, yet coherent enough, politically important and worthy of the closest attention: and not fully comprehensibly outside of the modalities of rural America, and the particularities of American capitalism of that era.

Both the Russian and the American variants are populism/neo-populism in the high tradition, and each grew out of its own local circumstances: whatever strength it possessed deriving from the powerful tensions of those circumstances. So, too, with Charan Singh's ideas. They are recognisably in that high tradition, and have emerged from the soil of north-west India. Indeed, their power and their significance derive, in part, from this latter aspect. They are characteristically indigenous. Their roots lie deep in Charan Singh's native Uttar Pradesh. They are insistently specific, and all the more powerful for that. They are tied closely to Charan Singh's own class origins and own class allegiance, and emerged in actual and bitter political and class struggle. In Charan Singh, ideas/ideology and political practice are inextricably intertwined.

Indeed, in the variants noted, and in Charan Singh's case, too, the relevant circumstances have been those of a burgeoning capitalism in its early phases: all before it. Capitalism, with its immanent contradictions, its disruptive (and potentially more disruptive) change, and its rich variety of local circumstance and differing trajectories or paths, is confronted. So it is that populism/new-populism is likely to have a strongly anti-capitalist content: and anti-urban, too, since capitalism, in its undesirable manifestations, is likely to be identified with its apparent source, the city. So it is, too, that it may romanticise part relations in the countryside, invoking golden ages and agrarian idylls that never existed. This is the case even where, as with neo-populism, it serves the interests of those emerging classes which are likely, if capitalism develops adequately, to become fully capitalist (that is, rich peasants and some middle peasants).

Neo-populism has been, in other places at other times, and was, in Charan Singh's case, a carefully articulated ideology, whose roots lie in actual and strong class interests and class aspirations, as class formation has proceeded in the countryside: those of rich and middle peasants, before they have been transformed into capitalist farmers in the full sense. What it does, objectively, is to create space within which, under the banner of an undifferentiated and supposedly exploited countryside (exploited by exogenous influences), rich and middle peasants can appropriate whatever gains are going.

Neo-populism is an ideology which, in its concrete and differing manifestations, has been shaped in response to objective class-in-itself changes in the countryside, as yet incompletely worked out (and with no guarantee that they will be worked out completely); and which provides a rationale for class-for-itself action on behalf of those sections of the peasantry (or the 'farming community', as it is frequently described) which are clearly better-off. This is so in Charan Singh's case.

(d) Elements of Charan Singh's Ideological Analytical Discourse

Aspects of Charan Singh's ideological/analytical discourse have already emerged: a version of 'urban bias', stress on widespread rural poverty; a vision of an undifferentiated peasantry, upon which the forces perpetuating poverty bear equally and within which advantage is distributed evernly. These aer clearly features of a neo-populist position. We may now deall with his discourse more systematically.

(i) Anti-landlordism: Charan Singh's hatred of the class of large and powerful landlords, or zamindars, ran deep, and he never faltered in his uncompromising and scathing denunciation of landlordism. Agricultural production did not depend upon the existence of the landlord class, 'who render no service to the land or the tenants' [*Singh*, 1947b: 15]. Rent was 'a wholly unnecessary payment', made to 'a class of persons who simply live upon the labour of others, who take absolutely no part in any enterprise and whose profession is idleness' (loc. cit.). Landlordism 'reduces the toiling masses to the starkest poverty and degradation' (loc. cit.); it 'has cramped both men and crops ... [and] has stood for economic inequality and political reaction' [*Singh,* 1947b : iii); it is 'positively injurious and mischievous' (*Singh,* 1947b: 6). He argues a powerful and passionate case against landlordism (see *Singh* [1947b: Ch. i, especially 14-19]).

In such circumstances, one might advocate the reform of tenancy: with the state intervening to ensure security of tenure; the abolition of undesirable tenancy forms, like sharecropping; and 'fair' rents. Charan Singh would have no truck with that. Landlordism had to go.

Charan Singh has always claimed Gandhi as his mentor (his 1978 book, *India's Economic Policy,* is subtitled *The Gandhian Blueprint*). There was one feature of Gandhi's thinking which might have embarrassed him, however. That was Gandhi's notion of 'trusteeship': the idea that landlordism need not be abolished, since landlords might be regarded as 'trustees' for those who are their tenants, and could be persuaded to behave reasonably. He quoted Louis Fischer's interview with Gandhi, in June 1942, and concluded: 'according to his [Gandhi's] theory, the trustees have misbehaved and are therefore liable to removal' (Singh [1974b: 164], citing Fischer [1943 : 54]).

The eradication of landlordism was necessary. But what was the ideal system of working the land? In another terminology (and one with which Charan Singh was perfectly familiar), the agrarian question might be resolved broadly either via an attempted socialist path, that is, collectivisation; or through capitalism, that is, the development of thorough going capitalist agriculture. He was acutely aware of both of these possibilities, with a clarity that one rarely encounters among academic specialists on agriculture. He was, in the breadth of the possibilities he contemplated, an unusual intellectual. He provided a reasoned and vehement rejection of the former. He had more sympathy with a capitalist solution, but resisted the full-scale development of capitalism in the countryside. Rather, his proposal amounted to a third path: a path that was emphatically not socialist solution, based on a strong peasantry. Its fundamental prerequisite was peasant proprietorship.

(ii) Peasant Proprietorship: From the outset of the exposition of his position, in his first major work, Published in 1947, *Abolition of Zamindari: Two Alternatives* [*Singh,* 1947b], pre-eminent in his

prescriptions was 'the system of land tenure ... pleaded by the well-known French social philosopher, Proudhon, a century ago, viz., peasant proprietorship, that is ownership of the land by the man who actually tills it' [*Singh,* 1947b : 22]. That remained a constant in his discourse (see, for example, Singh [1959: v-vi, 1-3]; *Singh* [1964: v-vi, 3-6]; Singh [1978:11-12, 16, 25, 119]; *Singh* [1981: 122-3]).

A detailed case is argued [*Singh*, 1947b: Ch. v, 127-61], which we cannot pursue here. Prominent in that case, however, were two arguments, in which the apparent virtues of 'decentralisation' were extolled: a political and an economic one. Thus: 'just as decentralisation in the field of politics is our aim, so in the sphere of economic activities decentralisation happens to be the correct ideal' [*Singh,* 1947b: iv]. That decentralisation, and its accompanying benefits, could be achieved only with peasant proprietorship.

First, argued Charan Singh: 'peasant proprietorship develops a democratic rural society' [*Singh,* 1947b: 135]. He was careful to stress that property rights should not be abused, and that 'if the owner or holder does not fulfil the social and economic duties incumbent upon property, he must be treated as a speculator or a defaulter and be divested' [*Singh*, 1947b: 127]. In view of his stress upon democracy, it was hardly reassuring, however, to find him, in 1947, noting approvingly that 'these principles were adopted by the German Nazi Party also in their official manifesto dated 6th March, 1930, issued from Munich of the position of the Party with regard to the farming population and agriculture' (loc. cit.)

The second argument was the powerful incentive inherent in proprietorship. Charan Singh does not actually cite Arthur Young, but there are clear echoes of Young's famous aphorism: 'The magic of *Property* turns sand to gold' [23]. In Charan Singh's words: 'a peasant owner has been known to work harder and for longer hours than a tenant or a wage labourer ... the reward that he gets lies more in mental satisfaction and less in pecuniary gain' [*Singh,* 1947b: 132]. There is silence on those who in the Indian countryside, could not be endowed with the full magic of property: poor peasants, who are insufficiently endowed with land; and landless labourers, who have no land at all.

In support of his advocacy of peasant proprietorship, he invokes the authority of India's past: another common populist trait. Thus, he said, 'panchayat of ancient memory shows us the way on the political or administrative side' [*Singh,* 1947b:iv]. A mythical Indian past is invoked, in which the virtues of the ancient Hindu land system reigned supreme, a past when India 'was a country of small holders or peasant proprietors' [*Singh*, 1947b:9]. Quotations from ancient texts, such as the *Artha-Shastra* of Kautilya are learnedly reproduced; references to the Indian 'village community', of apparent equals, are made; and there is an evocation of a benevolent state intervening, it seems, only when the peasant proprietor failed to cultivate the land properly, or let it out to another (the principle, apparently, which the German National Socialist Party enshrined in its agrarian programme of 1930) [*Singh,* 1947B:5-9]). There is no word of the possible emergence of differentiation among this Arcadian brotherhood of independent peasant producers. Presumably, the benevolent state intervened to stop it. Presumably, too, the modern state might have to do likewise. The implicit theory of the state is nothing if not simplistic.

(iii) *The case against collectivisation and against co-operative agriculture:* He developed a detailed and passionate argument against collectivisation, the socialist solution to the agrarian question, and a deadly threat to his ideal of peasant proprietorship. Collectivisation was anathema.

In his first book, whose Preface is dated October 1946, socialism is rejected via a detailed examination of the only example he had before him, that of the Soviet Union [*Singh,* 1947b: Chs. ii, iv, 23-126]. He would refer often, in subsequent works, to the Soviet Union; and post 1949 China, too, attracted his attention. It is in that first book, however, that he develops his case against collectivisation, with care and in detail. I cannot here attempt to convey the full scope of his argument. Certain features of it are, however, worthy of not.

His case is made partly via a lucid and cogent exposition of Russian agrarian history in the year before and including collectivisation [Singh, 1947b: Ch. ii, 23-50], in which, *inter alia,* Stolypin's land reform law of 1906, which attempted to introduce peasant proprietorship, is singled out for praise (pp.27-8). It was, said Charan Singh, Stolypin's great achievement that 'ten years after the initiation of the land reforms of 1960 and immediately before the Revolution, a class of relatively prosperous independent peasant farmers had been created' (p. 27). This was the path that Russia should have continued along, and the one that India must follow.

He refers sympathetically to the rich peasantry. He comments, of the collectivisation period; 'those whoa a short time before had been called useful citizens and the foundation of Russian agriculture, were to their surprise and despair suddenly restigmatized as Kulaks' (pp. 43-4). 'Kulak' was a word which he detested. In subsequent years, he would be driven to fury when it was used of himself or of those whom he represented (cf. Naik, 1979: 31).

Charan Singh's thorough grasp of the possible paths away from poverty, via socialism and capitalism, is clear. His understanding of the importance of the town-country relationship, and of the significance of the inter-sectoral terms of trade emerges (see, for example, pp. 41-2). He shows an acute awareness of the divisions inherent in Russian rural society: of the differentiation of the Russian peasantry into rich, middle and poor strata. He may have chosen, both here and in his later works, to ignore this with respect to India, but he was well aware of it in the context of Russia.

The actual rejection of collectivisation has several strands. We note the following. First, he stresses the absence of rights among workers on the collective; the 'erstwhile peasants ... have even less rights in relations to their employer- the sate- than [do workers or tenants in relation] to the private capitalist, millowner or landlord' (P. 80); collectivisation deprives the peasant of those most cherished of freedoms, that freedom of conduct or the opportunity to live by one's own direction and individual initiative which are the pride and the peculiar characteristics of agriculture everywhere as practised hitherto' (P. 88). Second, the mechanisation that is, apparently, an inevitable concomitant of collectivisation in thoroughly undesirable, in that it makes 'man a mere appendage of the machine' (P. 87). Third, and very important, collectivisation in the Soviet Union has not raised the average yield of arable land (pp. 99-103). There are several reasons for this, but pre-eminent among them is the simple fact that without material incentives people will not work (pp. 107-8): a fact demonstrated in the Soviet Union by the great diversion of energy and resources to the private plot (pp. 108-110).

The arguments are familiar ones. What is striking is the thoroughness and the cogency with which they are presented by Charan Singh. There is nowhere in the Indian literature that the case against collectivisation is better presented.

Later, that early attack upon collectivisation became a detailed assault upon co-operative agriculture [*Singh,* 1959; *Singh,* 1964]. In the late 1950s, he saw the introduction of co-operative agriculture, in the sense of co-operative working of the fields rather than service co-operatives, as a true threat. He supported the latter, but opposed the former, with no less intensity than he did collectivisation. Indeed, co-operative agriculture was regarded at worst as synonymous with collectivisation, and at best as a a prelude to it.

It would create a new class of intermediaries, as bad as the hated *zamindars,* and 'prepare the ground for authoritarian control' [Singh, 1964: vii]; it would undermine and destroy peasant proprietorship; and reduce the farmer to a mere farm hand [Singh, 1964: vi]. The increase in the size of the operational unit would lead, inexorably, to a fall in output per acre; and the disadvantage of size would be compounded several times over by widespread mechanisation and its attendant evils, of pervasive unemployment, and a heavy import bill for machinery, which India could ill afford [Singh, 1964: vi-viii]. The case against co-operatives, indeed, ushered in a new concern and included a new argument against mechanisation.

> It is not generally realised that with the replacement of the bullock by the tractor, farm-yard manure will become scarce and increasing use will be made of chemical fertilizers ... the use of inorganic fertilizers reduces soil fertility, even though the immediate results may be striking. Organic manure, on the other hand, maintains soil fertility and makes the soil an inexhaustible source of food supply' *[Singh, 1964: viii]*.

This he argued in some detail.

A large amount of evidence was mustered in support of the various strands in his case against co-operative agriculture. He was an assiduous supplier of data. In fact, some of the arguments adduced by Charan Singh against collectivisation and against co-operative agriculture are arguments, too, against large-scale capitalist agriculture. What, then, of his attitude towards the development of capitalism in agriculture?

(iv) The attitude towards capitalism: Charan Singh, in true neo-populist style, displayed a less passionate, although firm, anti-capitalist stance, which was clearly stated in 1947. It would be repeated, in somewhat different from, in the 1950s and 1960s [*Singh,* 1959; *Singh,* 1964], in the 1970s [*Singh,* 1978], and in the 1980s (*Singh,* 1981]. The early statement is of particular interest. Several issues were raised.

First, there was the relationship of 'peasant proprietary' to capitalism, and there Charan Singh conducted a dialogue with Marxism. He confronted and rejected two arguments. On the one hand, there was the hackneyed objection ... that this system envisages a pre-capitalist society out of which Capitalism has emerged, and that its establishment of re-establishment would mean turning back of the

wheel of progress' [Singh, 1947b: 140]. This he denied, arguing that 'small private property in land ... instead of being a "fetter on production" is rather an encouragement to higher production [*Singh,* 1947b: 141]. We have glimpsed some of his reasoning on this, in terms of incentives. This was bolstered by evidence to which he returned again and again in his various writing, on the superior productivity of small holdings. This I discuss briefly below.

On the other hand, he apposed the argument that peasant farming had a pronounced capitalist tendency, and would inevitably 'engender capitalism' and 'develop into a system of large farms' [*Singh*, 1947b:151-2]. He insisted resolutely that with the appropriate 'checks and balances', the system of peasant ownership need never so develop. The peasant proprietor was an ideal, non-capitalist being.

> To call the peasant a capitalist is a perversion of facts since the capitalist's job of accumulating capital was never performed by the peasant. A peasant proprietor is neither a capitalist nor a labourer .... Although he may occasionally employ others, he is both his own master and his own servant .... He does not exploit others, nor is he exploited by others; for he labours for himself and his children alone and he does not look for remuneration of his hard work at the farm in the way that a factory worker does .... he is not inspired by economic motives alone [*Singh*, 1947b: 152].

He insisted that for India, peasant ownership was 'the ideal economy'. In 1947, it was 'the next step'. There was not reason why it should not be 'the final step' [*Singh,* 1947b: 154]. Capitalism, indeed, threatened peasant proprietorship, and the continued existence of the peasantry. But capitalism in agriculture was far from inevitable.

Capitalism brought with it a number of undesirable consequences, which could be avoided under peasant proprietorship. These included, indeed, widespread use of wage labour (which involved a loss of freedom, though less, perhaps, than under collectivisation) and highly undesirable mechanisation of agriculture. The argument concerning mechanisation, as developed by Charan Singh, straddles both socialist and capitalist economies [Singh, 1947b: 115-26], but is clearly seen as applicable to capitalist agriculture. It would drive people from the land and create devastating unemployment. His case against mechanisation in agriculture was developed and was to be repeated in his later books: tractorisation is uneconomical and does not increase yields per acre [*Singh*, 1964: 79-88, 108-14; *Singh*, 1978: 104-5; *Singh*, 1981: 119-20, 134-5]. The argument was not always pursued in the context of consideration of capitalist agriculture. But that was the unspoken premise, which did become explicit on occasions (for example, Singh [1964: vii]; Singh [1981: 135]).

What Charan Singh would never admit was that the peasant proprietorship which he advocated so strongly, and the political action which he took so effectively, might clear the ground for the development of a 'capitalism from below': a capitalism from within the ranks of the peasantry. Yet that is precisely what the outcome has been in his native western Uttar Pradesh, as well as in the Punjab and in Haryana. The rich peasants among his constituents, whose emergence and consolidation as a class he has helped greatly, have moved recognisably towards capitalism. They do accumulate; they do exploit the labour of others; they are clearly motivated by considerations of profit; and they have

mechanised. He encountered, in his political practice from the early 1960s onwards, the powerful contradictions so engendered. In the last decade of his life, he must have been abundantly aware of this: surrounded, as he was in western UP, by tractors and other of the outer trappings of capitalist transformation. But barely a hint is explicit in his intellectual practice - his ideology.

(v) Charan Sigh and the inverse relationship: We may briefly consider Charan Singh's use of a body of evidence which plays an important part in his discourse. This is the evidence which reveals the superior productivity (the greater output per acre) of small over large holdings: the famous inverse relationship, which, when it became known in India, gave rise to a prolonged, extensive and continuing debate among Indian economists, starting in 1962. He refers to that evidence throughout his writing, and from it he draws strong conclusions.

That celebrated debate among academic economists was initiated in 1962 by Amartya Sen, when he published an elegant article which offered an explanation of the inverse relationship [*Sen*, 1962]. Sen would later comment that he 'had the unenviable role of doing the initial poking at what has turned out to be a beehive' [Sen, 1975: 148]. But Charan Singh had been poking around since at least 1947, although he disturbed no angry academic bees. What he did, however, was use the inverse relationship for very clear political purposes. He saw its ideological significance with great clarity and came back to it again and again. Charan Singh, in fact, drew attention to the likelihood of an inverse relationship before any evidence for India had become available, and was among the first to seize upon and consider the systematic data for India. He receives no credit for that in the Indian debate. His name appears nowhere in it. In turn, he himself makes no mention of the debate.

In 1947, Charan Singh cited an early book of David Mitrany, where Mitrany quotes data showing the inverse relationship in Swiss agriculture [Singh, 1947b: 95-6] citing Mitrany [1930: 254]): data gathered by Emest Laur, the same Laur quoted by Chayanov, when he drew attention to the inverse relationship [*Chayanov,* 1966: 236]). Charan Singh also quoted data for Denmark and claimed the authority of a German professor writing in the 1920s [*Singh,* 1947b: 96]. What held in agriculture elsewhere, Charan Singh inferred, must hold in Indian agriculture.

In 1959 and again in 1964, he cites inverse relationship data extensively, in his argument against co-operative agriculture ([Singh, 1959: Ch. vi, 21-75]; and [Singh, 1964: Ch. vi, 35-105], which was a second edition of the 1959 book). He gave figures for England, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the USA, Now, however, at least by 1964, he had Indian data to cite, which clearly and systematically showed the inverse relationship: the Farm Management data for Madras, Punjab, West Bengal, Bombay, and his own state of Uttar Pradesh (Singh, 1964: 48-50]: these were not available at the time when the 1959 book was written). It was those very data, indeed, which gave rise to the inverse relationship debate, which proceeded in complete isolation from Charan Singh. He returns to the inverse relationship in the 1979s [*Singh*, 1978: 14-16] and the 1980s [*Singh,* 1981: 115-19, 147].

A fascinating range of issues are raised, which we have no space to consider here. There are aspects of Charan Singh's use of the inverse relationship which are, however, worthy of mention: partly because they reveal a relatively sophisticated treatment by him of this matter, and partly because

they highlight contradictions inherent in his ideological discourse, which he was barely able to contain. He used the inverse relationship, with some skill, in his case against collectives, co-operatives and capitalist agriculture As he summed it up himself: 'given the same resource facilities, soil content and climate ... a small farm produces, acre for acre, more than a large one, howsoever organised, whether co-operatively, collectively or on a capitalist basis [*Singh*, 1981: 115].

In pursuit of this, he considered, in a relatively sophisticated discussion, the reasons for the inverse relationship [*Singh,* 1959: 23-7; *Singh*, 1964: 38-43]: a discussion, indeed, which anticipated many of the explanations given in the academic debate, and which suggested an explanation not unlike Sen's - though without Sen's elegance and rigour, of course. He confronted, in his 1947 book, the question of whether this might be an historically specific phenomenon, which could be swept away cither by the development of capitalism or that of socialism (see, for example, Singh [1947b 96-7]). His answer was that it is not. He may be quite wrong on that. I believe that he is. But in addressing that question he showed an awareness of the essential political economy issues at stake which is relatively rare in the academic debate on the inverse relationship. Moreover, the comparative framework which he consistently maintained on this suggested questions about the Indian inverse relationship result which the academic debate seldom grasped. It is, in many ways, a remarkable performance.

Consideration of the inverse relationship raised some serious political problems, however. Charan Singh consistently opposed radical redistributive land reform. But, did not the existence of the inverse relationship constitute strong evidence in favour of such redistribution? In principle, it did, of course. He was face with a dilemma. The logic he was deploying could be used in a way harmful to the interests of his natural constituents, rich and middle peasants. There was a partial escape route open. How far down the line of holding size did the inverse lotic - whatever that was - hold? If it operated down as far as one acre, or even less, should one not be contemplating redistribution in such units? He suggested, in fact, that beneath about 2-5 acres: 'Mother Earth refuses to yield to human coaxing any further - when there are no additional returns due to additional application of human labour' [*Singh,* 1981: 119]; (see also Singh [1964: 46], where the same words are reproduced).

But Charan Singh never allowed the full implications of the inverse relationship logic, as he represented it, to conflict with his class allegiance. The 2-5 acre lower limit was used to suggest a floor, and not an ideal ceiling target, as one might have expected. He suggested a ceiling of 27.5 acres per adult worker, and a floor of 2.5 acres [*Singh,* 1978: 20; *Singh,* 1981:147]. Rich and middle peasants were not to be adversely affected by any rash application of the inverse relationship logic.

(vi) Further elements in brief: There are many other elements in Charan Singh's discourse, which a full treatment would consider in detail: elements that bear the features of a neo-populist vision. There are also those that are conspicuous by their absence. We may briefly identify examples of both.

An almost Physiocratic insistence upon agricultural primacy, which sometimes borders on the mystical, recurs throughout his writing. Thus he insisted, 'at the basis of all arts and industries lies agriculture, the art of producing raw materials from land, without which neither life nor civilization in possible'; so that 'the prosperity of a nation must largely, if not solely depend on the use that it makes of this free gift of nature, on the way that land is utilized' [*Singh,* 1947b: 3-4].

He did not deny the need for some form of industrial development: to that extent he was a neo-populist rather than a populist. But it had to be industry with a strong 'correlation to agriculture' [*Singh*, 1947b: iii], of low capital intensity, and capable of absorbing labour. Heavy industry, for a country like India, was 'economically wasteful' [Singh 1981: 398]. Rather, what is called for is 'an economy in which hand-operated industries or handicrafts and cottage industries will predominate' [*Singh,* 1978: 92]. Heavy industry, and large-scale mechanised industries, may come 'in the course of time', but that stage 'will take a very long time to come', or to be justified [*Singh,* 1978: 93]. It will come, moreover, only after an agricultural revolution has taken place, which will create the necessary base: of an adequate 'surplus of food and raw materials' and a broadly-based 'demand for manufactured goods' [*Singh*, 1978: 92-3]. For that to happen resources had to be directed towards agriculture, rather than be pumped out of it.

He opposed large -scale mechanisation in agriculture, as we have seen, and favoured an agriculture based on human and animal power. But he did not oppose all mechanisation. He advocated 'only small machines ... as in Japan, which will supplement and not supplant human labour' [Singh, 1978: 116]. He was strongly in favour of new agricultural inputs, so long as they were predominantly bio-chemical - with the exception of artificial fertilisers, his opposition to which we have noted above (see, for example, Singh [1964; 434 *et passim]).*

Anti-urban sentiments consistent with the rural idyll invoked abound: the evils of the city are deprecated and are to be avoided. He observes: 'City life has a charm, but in the long run it is fatal to a people' [*Singh,* 1947B: 88].

An urban bias thesis runs through his writing. Part of his case against collectivisation was that 'it means correspondingly so much less liberty to the worker on the land and his subordination to the urban industrial worker'
[*Singh*, 1947B: iv]. That was an argument that could be extended to capitalist industrialisation and capitalist agriculture. Contemporary India is life with an urban bias that pillages agriculture (see Singh [1981: Chs. 6-8, 161-236], for his final detailed statement of existing urban bias: where the chapter headings are 'Capital Starvation of Agriculture', 'Exploitation of the Farmer', and 'Deprivation of the Village')

That great line of division in Indian society, caste, is discussed (see, for example, Singh [1964: 329, 350-52; Singh [1981: 535-48]), and the reasonable position taken that it is an 'institution that is out of date' [Singh, 1964: 329] and should be abolished. Caste, however, hardly features prominently in his published writing.

Throughout his work there is a consistent ignoring of any possible social differentiation, along class line, that might exist among the Indian peasantry. That other line of deep division; class, is resolutely overlooked. On this, as on so much else, he and the great Russian neo-populist, Chayanov, see eye to eye. Chayanov was a distinguished academic: that common phenomenon, an ideologist *for* the rich and middle peasantry. Contemporary academia is full of them, although not all with Chayanov's gifts. Charan Singh was a consummate politician: and rare, indeed, an 'organic' intellectual of the rich and middle peasantry. Contemporary academia, it seem, has preferred to treat his with condescension.

VI. SUMMING UP

The Indian economist. G. Parthasarathy, referred, in 1978, with obvious irony, to 'our statement-scholar, Charan Singh] [*Parthasarathy*, 1978:137]. Parthasarathy was correct in implying that Charan Singh was neither a statement nor a scholar, if by statesman is meant one skilled in government, who approaches government with wisdom and without narrow partisanship; and by scholar an academic specialist, whose approach to a narrow range of problems is scrupulous and critical. Charan Singh was other than that, and of no less significance. He was a politician-intellectual and, as I have argued, a remarkably effective politician and a most unusual intellectual.

I have suggested that Charan Singh was an archetypal neo-populist. The circumstances in which neo-populism is likely to flourish are, I have indicated, those of capitalism in its early stages, before it has swept all before it (if, indeed, it is to do so), and before capitalist relations are absolutely dominant in the countryside (if, indeed, they are to become so). Such circumstances are evocatively described by Marx in his preface to the German edition of Capital. Marx captures precisely the circumstances with which we are here confronted (although he is not, of course, in any way concerned with populism or neo-populism). He says of Germany:

> we, like the rest of Continental Western Europe, suffer not only from the development of capitalist production, but also from the incompleteness of that development. Alongside of modern evils a whole series of inherited evils oppress us, arising from the passive survival of antiquated modes of production, with their inevitable train of social and political anachronisms. We suffer not only from the living, but from the dead. *Le mort saisit le vif!*" [*Marx, 1961: 9]*

This is precisely the ground on which populism/neo-populism will grow, and which imparts to it its seemingly contradictory nature.

It is the incomplete development of capitalism that is significant: the conjunction of 'modern evils', brought in capitalism's train, and the 'inherited evil' which capitalism has not yet swept away. New-populism of the kind which we are considering, is precisely a response to such a situation, and will retain its power for so long as the situation persists: the situation of 'transition', or incomplete development of capitalism'. If we want a powerful metaphor to convey the essential nature of neo-populism, it is, surely, the one given by Marx: that of *le mort saisit le vif!*. But neo-populism is no less potent for deriving its sustenance from both the living and the dead.

The fact that capitalism is opposed and attacked, and that a strong variant of neo-populism is espoused, is the peculiar interest of Charan Singh. This particular ideology is that of a class not yet become capitalist, but in process of transformation. It on the one hand serves to mask the material realities to which Charan Singh related, and on the other expresses the inherent contradictions of incomplete transformation.

NOTES

1. In this essay frequent reference is made to the division between rich, middle and poor peasants. Such a categorisation, I believe, is essential to any adequate understanding of the political economy of Charan Singh. These strata of the peasantry, or classes, need to be identified with great care, in concrete historical situations. Their precise characteristics will vary with time, place and circumstance, and according to the degree of capitalist penetration of the countryside. Thus, in 1902, in western UP, at the time of Charan Singh's birth, they had features and relationships inter se significantly different to those of 400 years later, in 1947, when Charan Singh was launched upon his career of representing 'agrarian interests'; while four decades further on still, in 1987, when he died, qualitative change of a substantive kind had wrought yet greater differences.

   With the forgoing in mind, one may cautiously hazard the following. (a) *Rich peasants* may be part-owners and part-tenants, whose land may be fragmented, and who obtain lower output per acre than either middle or poor peasants. They will, however, where they are tenants, be able to secure better tenancy terms than poor peasants. They will accumulate 'traditional' forms of capital to a certain extent; they will be marked-oriented, marketing a genuine 'commercial' surplus; and they will hire wage labour, on balance, as net hirers-in of labour. They may have some vulnerability to usurer's capital (moneylenders) and merchant's capital (traders), although to nothing like the extent of poor peasants. (b) *Middle peasants* may also be part-owners/part-tenants, and may have fragmented operational holdings. They are less market-oriented than rich peasants, and may market a smaller proportion of their output than poor peasants (since they are not subject to the compulsions which induce a 'distress' surplus). Their operational holding will be smaller; and they employ only small amounts of labour at peak seasons, family labour being their predominant source of labour input. They may not be immune from the operations of moneylenders and traders, especially in circumstances of weather failure, prince collapse, etc. (c) *Poor peasants* are far more likely to be tenants than either rich or middle peasants, and will be tenants to a greater degree, with a far greater likelihood of being sharecroppers. Their small, fragmented holdings will produce, because of the intense application of labour, higher output per acre thn those of either of the other two strata; they are likely to market a 'distress' surplus; and, in order, to survive, they will be forced to sell their labour to others (they will be net hirers-out of labour). They are especially vulnerable to the activities of moneylenders and traders. On all this (of, Byres [1974: 232-37]; Byres [1981: 420-24]). Much of it is touched, upon in the course of the essay here.

   Size of holding may be a useful, if imperfect, tratifying variable. Thus, I suggest below that, crudely, in western Uttar Pradesh, in the early and mid-1950s, those with operational holdings of up to five acres were probably mostly poor peasants; those with between five and 15 acres were probably, for the most part, middle peasants, while those with 15 acres or above were probably rich peasants.

   A further thorny issue arises. Rich peasants have to be distinguished from capitalist farmers. Great caution is necessary, but among the criteria by which one might identify the latter are the following . Rich peasants will tent to use elements of the productive forces which are not qualitatively defferent from other sections of the peasantry. A capitalist farmer, however, will be quite distinct in this respect. He will be in a wage relationship with free wage labour, extracting surplus value via that wage relation and re-investing it productively in agriculture on an increasing scale. That capital intensification will involve mechanisation of farm operations, and especially tractorisation. A capitalist farmer will be able to hold and control his marketable surplus. On some of the complexities of capitalist transformation in north-west India see Byres [1972]; Byres [1981].

2. The information in this paragraph is taken from Singh [1986: 1-2]; Singh [1981:notes on author]; India who's who 1971 [1971: 270]; Brass [1965: 137]).
3. The information in this paragraph is taken from Singh [1986:1]; Bose [1987].
4. The information in this paragraph is taken from Singh [1981]: notes on author]; Singh [1986: 1-5].
5. The information in this paragraph is taken from Singh [1981: notes on author]; Singh [1986: 1-5]; Brass [1965: 139-43].
6. The information in this paragraph is taken from Singh [1981: notes on author]; Brass [1965: 141]; Duncan [1979: 1-2,8]; India, Who's Who, 1971 [1971: 270].
7. The information in this paragraph is taken from Brass [1968: 117]; Brass [1984:120]; Duncan [1979:2].
8. The information in this paragraph is taken from Singh [1981: notes on author]; Duncan [1979:1-2]; Brass [1984:120].

9. The information in this paragraph is taken from Singh [1981: notes on author]; Byres [1981: 446]; Bhambri [1980: 9].
10. The information in this paragraph is taken from Byres [1981: 447]; Ping [1979a].
11. The information in this paragraph is taken from Singh [1981: notes on author]; Bose [1987].
12. The information in this paragraph is taken from Bose 91987].
13. So far as I know, the origins, development and regional variety of fragmentation in India have never been properly explored. A common explanation runs in term of inheritance practices, or 'the system of private law and custom' [Government of India 1976: 185]. Thus, the Report of the National Commission on Agriculture tells us:

> The sub-division of holdings is chiefly due to the law of inheritance, customary among Hindus and Muslims, which except where the Hindu joint family system is in operation, enjoining the succession to an immovable property by all the heirs. The custom of dividing private property amongst heirs in to give each heir a proportional share in all good or bad lands and not the whole equivalent of his share in a compact block. In the result, the successive generations descending from a common ancestor inherited not only smaller and smaller shares of his land but also broken up into smaller and still smaller plots. The fragmentation refers to the manner in which the land held by an individual or undivided family is scattered throughout the village area in plots separated by land in possession of others [*Government of India,* 1976: 193].

There is a certain plausibility, not to say inexorability, about this: 'once the process of fragmentation begins, it is accentuated with each succeeding generation' (Op. cit.: 184). But the issue needs far closer and more careful investigation than it has received so far.

Such an explanation is, on its own, insufficient. As the National Commission Report suggests, 'excessive fragmentation is the result of the influence of the social structure that creates too great a demand for the limited area of land by population largely dependent on it' (op. cit.: 184). We have a second, necessary hypothesis: pressure of population on land. Presumably, there should be regional variation in degree and extent of fragmentation, on the basis of varied population pressure.

The second hypothesis may be given greater precision. For example, it has been suggested that 'better irrigated regions may be subject to a higher degree of fragmentation and subdivision of farms due to the population pressure that generally exists in such regions' [*Bharadwaj*, 1974: 42].

Such explanations ignore the relations of production: assuming ownership of the land and a common set of influences throughout the peasantry. But what of those large number of peasants who are tenants? Obviously, if those who rent also own some land, the operational holding will be fragmented. Not only that, but, it has been suggested. where a big landlord rents out irrigated land, say to a sharecropper, he may prefer to parcel it out to very small tenants, in very small plots, in order 'to maximise his returns (as a share of total *gross* output on his entire land) [*Bharadwaj,* 1974: 42]. This is because 'while his bargaining position remains strong vis-a-vis the petty tenant, the latter may also have to resort to very intensive cultivation in order to eke a subsistence out of the small plot leased to him' (loc. cit.).

The matter awaits adequate investigation. For a brief and inconclusive discussion in the context of UP see Neale [1962: 261-2].

14. Neale, with UP as his focus, rehearses some of the attempts so to locate advantage in fragmentation, telling us that 'the process in not without benefits, however meagre' [Neale, 1962: 154]. He locates some of those supposed 'benefits', although he does come out strongly against fragmentation.

Thus he cites

witnesses before the Royal Commission on Indian Agriculture [of 1926] ... [who] were sometimes inclined to minimise the evils of fragmentation by mentioning security resulting from the variety of crops a cultivator could grow on different plots (loc. cit.).

This position Neale rejects, using the argument of the UP Banking Enquiry Committee (whose report was published in 1930), which, he says, 'pointed out a single good crop should keep the cultivator fed, and cited a case where consolidation resulted in almost all the land being planted to rice while the tenantry was remarkably well-to-do (loc. cit.).

Another argument dismissed by the Banking Enquiry Committee, according to Neale, was that 'fragmentation provided some protection against the random incidence of hail'. The committee felt that 'the "preventive" was worse than the disease' (loc. cit.).

The Banking Enquiry Committee, however, did think 'that there was "much force" to the argument that consolidation would require separate homesteads and thus separate drinking wells and separate threshing floors and would involve increased risk of dacoity and burglary'. This, too, Neale dismissed, quite rightly, on the grounds that 'it is a little hard to see why, for villages and their fields together average about a square mile, so there could not be any overriding reason to break up the village site' (loc. cit.).

Other writers, at other times and for other places, have also attempted to give rational justification for fragmentation: in terms of growing varieties which mature at different times, and so saving on labour, of a capacity to grow crops on both high and law ground (where high and low ground exists), and so securing risk dispersal, where, say flooding is endemic; and so on (cf. Muscat [1966: 148-9] on Thailand). It has also been argued, against consolidation, where irrigation is important, that

the cost of creating complex new waterways may be prohibitively large. But none of this is at all convincing: especially when one confronts the needs of a capitalist or proto-capitalist agriculture. It is possible, apparently, to find rationality in almost anything. The inherent, powerful disadvantages of fragmentation are discussed in the next note.

15. The famous United Nations Report, *Land Reform: Defects in Agrarian Structure as Obstacles to Economic Development*, when it wrote of 'the evils of fragmentation' [*United Nations*, 1951: 11] summed up a whole tradition of thought on the subject. One finds it echoed, for example, in the Indian Farm Management Reports, such as the one on UP [*Government of India,* 1963: 26], and in writers like Neale [*Neale,* 1962: 154]. In both cases, the same phrase is used. For useful brief statements of the inefficiencies associated with fragmentation see Government of India [1976: 195] for India: Neal [1962: 152, 154, 262} in the UP context, and Parsons, Penn and Raup (eds.) [1963: 206] more generally.

    The United Nations Report went on (loc. cit.) to refer to the 'waste of time and effort, the impossibility of rational cultivation' which fragmentation entailed. The National Commission on Agriculture points to the impossibility of 'full and proper land utilization', for a variety of reasons: 'useless expenditure and waste of time in moving labour, cattle, seed, manure and irrigation water from one plot to another, and in bringing the harvested crop to a single threshing floor'; the associated difficulties of 'supervision of farm operation'; increased 'expenses on irrigation, farming, drainage etc.; loss of land on boundaries' [Government of India, 1976: 195]. In addition: 'access to scattered fields becomes difficult during the crop season and leads to disputes and tensions over trespass etc.' (loc. cit.). Neale (loc. cit.) also touches upon some of this.

    Such disadvantages apply to all strata of the peasantry who work fragmented land for rich peasants, who may be proto-capitalists, fragmentation in likely to constitute a significant barrier to accumulation. Development of the productive forces faces a powerful constraint: whether that development takes a purely bio-chemical or a mechanised from (that is, on the one hand, for example, new seeds, the application of inorganic fertilisers, new forms of non-mechanised irrigation; on the other, tractors, tube-wells, etc.). Fragmentation poses especially difficult problems for mechanisation.
16. For Charan Singh's own account of the 'disadvantages' of fragmentation see Singh [1986: 100-101]. In short compass, he covers most of the issues identified in note 15.
17. Included in the literature on consolidation in Uttar Pradesh, the following is enlightening: [*Agarwal,* 1971; 1962; *Sreeraman,* 1966; *Trivedi and Trivedi,* 1973; *Vajpeyi,* 1964; *Ladejinsky,* 1965: 17, Section 11].
18. Net imports as a percentage of net production had stood at 1.3 in 1953-54 and had fallen to 0.8 in the following year. It then rose in each year until 1959-60, fell in 1960-61, and rose steadily thereafter, until it reached a crisis level of 16.3 in 1965-66 [Vyas and Bandyopadhyay, 1975: A3, Table 1].
19. Over the 16 years 1951 to 1966, inclusive, the government managed to purchase only 2-4 per cent of total output of foodgrains in India, which represented a mere eight per cent of the marketed surplus. In the second and third five year plan periods (1956-61 and 1961-66), respectively, the government purchased a mere 1.1 and 1.8 per cent of the total output of foodgrains, or 3.5 and six per cent of the foodgrain marketed surplus. In 1965 and 1966, the figures were: in the former year, 4.6 per cent of output or 15.2 per cent of the marketed surplus; in the latter, 5.5 per cent of output or 18.5 per cent of the marketed surplus. These figures are derived from Krishna [1967: 1697, 1705, 1706]. They indicate clearly that anything approaching socialisation of the grain surplus had not been achieved.
20. For some of the details in this paragraph, see Duncan [1979: 4-5].
21. For some of the details in this paragraph, see Duncan [1979:6-7]
22. As has been observed, each price twist in favour of farm products contributes to the holding power of surplus farmers and traders, enabling them to bid for still higher prices in the subsequent season. The fact that the tax burden, in particular the burden of direct taxes, is as good as negligible for the relatively affluent agriculturists, hs further contributed to the progressive strengthening of their capability to hold back stocks; the policy of liberal monetary advances made to this section of the farming community .... has imparted an additional bullishness, year after year to market prices for farm products, so that even a larger-sized crop has not let to a decline in prices, but it opposite [Mitra, 1977: 110-11].
23. From Arthur Young's *Travels in France*, Vol. 1, cited approvingly by John Stuart Mill in his chapter 'Of Peasant Proprietors' [Mill, 1891: 169]. In the same vein, Young wrote: 'Give a man the secure possession of a bleak rock, and he will turn it into a garden, give him a nine years lease of a garden, and he will convert it into a desert' (cited by Mill, loc. cit.). Charan Singh was squarely within that tradition.

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