

# Chaudhary Charan Singh

A Brief Biography

By Harsh Singh Lohit

Based on a biography by Prof. Paul R Brass

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Chaudhary Charan Singh (1902-1987), 5<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of India, was born on 23 December 1902 in the village of Nurpur, in Meerut district of the United Provinces. He was the eldest of five children of Mir Singh, then a self-cultivating tenant peasant with a reputation for hard work, and Netra Kaur. The family moved from one village to another within Meerut district, seeking suitable land for a settled agricultural life which they found in 1922 in village Bhadaula.

Charan Singh commenced schooling in Jani Khurd village and, on being found to be a capable and bright student, was moved to Meerut city from where he completed Matriculation from the Government High School in 1919. He then went on to Agra College, Agra, where he graduated BSc in 1923, an MA in History in 1925, and LLB in 1926. He commenced practising civil law in Ghaziabad, but soon after joining the Indian National Congress in 1929 gave up his intermittent legal practice for a full-time political career.

Charan Singh cherished throughout his life his upbringing in a peasant farming family and the values he associated with it, namely, incessant hard work, independence, and uncompromising honesty. The peasant way of village life was the single largest defining influence of his life, one that established his moral life principles and subsequently shaped his intellectual and political views. He condemned the *Zamindari* system patronised by the British colonists that had kept small farmers in dependence on big land holders and tax farmers, and he ultimately played the principal role in its later abolition in the state of Uttar Pradesh (as the United Provinces became known in 1947 after India's independence).

Somewhere around 1918, the Arya Samaj of Swami Dayanand entered his life as the second significant influence, the third being the Indian National Congress-led freedom movement of Mohandas Gandhi. He founded his personal and public life (which was one, and transparent) on the Arya Samaj ideal of a casteless Hindu society based on individual effort and on ancient moral teachings, without ritual dogma or the domination of high castes. During this period he also fully absorbed the rural orientation of Gandhi's teachings and life, with the spartan simplicity of an idealised self-sufficient village at the center of India's social and political life after Independence. He held an alternate developmental view of an India free from the rule of the British and the many policies that had conspired to keep the entrepreneurial and democratic spirit of the masses of rural India enslaved. He was critical of the 'brown sahibs' of independent urban India – higher caste and educated bureaucrats, politicians and capitalists - who he believed were worse exploiters of the rural masses than the former white rulers.

He was imprisoned in 1930, 1940, and 1942 during the nationalist movement and campaigns led by the Congress. His wife, Gayatri Devi (1904–2002, from the Sonapat district of present day Haryana), supported him during these movements by taking care of their five daughters and son. In later life, she herself was twice elected to the legislative assembly of Uttar Pradesh, in 1969 and 1974, and to parliament in 1980.

Charan Singh's political career involved him at all levels of the Indian political system, from his own district of Meerut in western United Provinces, to the state as a whole, and ultimately to national politics. First elected to the legislative assembly of the United Provinces in 1937, he played an active role there, raising questions on many subjects that displayed an early concern with the livelihood of the peasantry in the villages. He soon became a favourite of Govind Ballabh Pant, the premier of the state, who appointed him a parliamentary secretary (junior minister) in the second Congress government from 1946 to 1950. Despite his relatively junior status in the ministry, Pant made him the principal architect and defender of the Zamindari Abolition & Land Reforms Bill that was ultimately passed into law in 1952. Charan Singh considered this – the empowerment of millions of peasant farmers, and the peaceful destruction of an exploitative class of powerful landlords - the single biggest achievement in his political life.

From 1951 to 1967, with the exception of a period of nineteen months in 1959–60, he was a cabinet-level minister in every Congress government in Uttar Pradesh. He gained deep knowledge of a range of complex issues in state legislation, revenue, land, agriculture, forests, and law & order which provided him an unparalleled view of the many issues and

solutions for the vast problems faced by Uttar Pradesh and later the country. His two decades in government administration provided him the reputation of a crusader for efficiency in government administration, an uncompromising opponent of sloth and corruption, and a dedicated public servant who worked hard and long hours in office; if an unusually stubborn one holding strong opinions.

In his rise to power and influence Charan Singh became identified as the principal spokesman of the middle peasantry of India. Although he was himself an Arya Samajist, thus belonging to a Hindu reformist movement that rejected all forms of caste identification in social and public life, he nevertheless retained the overwhelming support of his own caste, and went on to become closely identified with the aspirations of the so-called 'backward' peasant castes of intermediate social status between the high-born élite castes and the lowest castes.

He was a politician with significant intellectual credentials, and wrote a number of books as well as numerous political pamphlets and political party manifestoes that presented a sophisticated and coherent alternative development strategy for India. He forcefully argued for an emphasis on agriculture, the village and labor intensive 'cottage' and small-scale industries - as opposed to the emphasis on capital-intensive industrialization of prime ministers Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. His views predated those of globally thinkers (like Michael Lipton) by decades, argued with data and reason. Among his prominent publications were *Abolition of Zamindari: Two Alternatives* (1947), *Agrarian Revolution in Uttar Pradesh* (1957), *Joint Farming X-Rayed: the Problem and its Solution* (1959), *India's Poverty and Its Solution* (1964), *India's Economic Policy: The Gandhian Blueprint* (1978), and *Economic Nightmare of India: Its Cause and Cure* (1981).

In 1967, after a period of intense dissatisfaction with machinations of the party machinery, Charan Singh defected from the Congress to lead the first ever non-Congress ministry of Uttar Pradesh. He then developed a new political party, the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (Indian Revolutionary Party), that drew its support principally from his mass base among the middle peasantry of Uttar Pradesh and later of northern India. He became the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1967–8 and again in 1970, and was a pioneer of coalition politics in India. In 1974, when Indira Gandhi was prime minister, he merged his forces with the Samyukta (United) Socialist Party to form the Bharatiya Lok Dal (Indian People's Party), threatening the Congress's hold on power in the central government as well as at the state level. Indira Gandhi and he often held discussions through intermediaries as well as directly on his re-joining the Congress and her Cabinet, which invariably broken down as was inevitable between two strong personalities with diametrically opposing backgrounds and views.

During Indira Gandhi's authoritarian 'Emergency' regime between 1975 and 1977 he, along with most other prominent opposition political leaders, was imprisoned for a year. Upon release from gaol Charan Singh's BLD's massive political base among the peasantry of northern India provided the principal component of the Janata Party coalition of the Jan Sangh, BLD and Congress (O), which defeated the Congress in the general elections of 1977 and brought about the temporary downfall of Indira Gandhi and the first non-Congress government in post-independence India.

Charan Singh was home minister, then deputy prime minister, to Morarji Desai in the Janata government in New Delhi between 1977 and 1979, and Prime Minister of India for a brief period after the break-up of the Janata government in July 1979. In the succeeding general election of January 1980 Indira Gandhi and the Congress returned to power. Though Charan Singh was elected to parliament in that election (his party won 41 seats in the Lok Sabha and was the second largest party in Parliament after the Congress) and again in 1984, and he continued to lead the Lok Dal, he never held government office again.

Nevertheless, he left a permanent mark on the politics of northern India, where his political descendants have retained the formidable political base among the middle peasantry, alongwith the coalition across intermediate castes and religions, that he originally created. During his long life as an active politician Charan Singh's principal hallmarks were his honesty and integrity - never successfully challenged – and his unrelenting hard work and effectiveness as an administrator. He suffered a severe, incapacitating stroke in November 1985 and died in New Delhi on 29 May 1987; by when he had dedicated a lifetime to being a fearless, relentless and articulate advocate of the interests of rural India.

#### Sources

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