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70 VISIONARIES
WHO DEFINED INDIA



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Illustration by NIRMALENDU MANDAL

A PEASANT AT THE HIGH TABLE

CHARAN SINGH (1902–1987)

The tallest farmer leader and prime minister of India for half a year in 1979

By **Ajay Vir Jakhar**

History is written by the urban elite, who cannot resist painting Charan Singh as power hungry. If that were the case, after becoming prime minister, he would not have refused to visit Indira Gandhi to thank her for the support, insisting that the support was directed to break the Janata government. Confronted between principles and convictions, he chose to give up the post of prime minister. He refused to concede to conditions put forward by the Congress for their support.

Had he lived, it seems improbable that Charan Singh would have survived the shifting of the centre of political gravity from community to caste leaders. On being falsely targeted all his life, he once remarked that the "propaganda will cease as soon as Charan Singh dies". He was wrong. It still endures.

(The writer is chairman of the Bharat Krishak Samaj)

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By Ajay Vir Jakhar, Chairman Bharat Krishak Samaj

<http://www.ajayvirjakhar.com/unedited-version-india-today-article/>

Charan Singh (1902-1987)

On being falsely targeted all his life, Charan Singh fondly called 'Choudhary Saheb', had once remarked 'this propaganda will cease as soon as Charan Singh dies'. He was wrong, the propaganda still endures.

The eldest of five children of Netra Kaur and Mir Singh, Charan Singh was born on a cold winter day of 23rd December 1902 in village Nurpur of Meerut district in U.P. All through his formative years he experienced the oppressive Zamindari system which kept the peasantry in abject poverty. The depressive state of his own community left deep scars that never healed and this is what is vowed to undo.

Having attained a degree to practice law in 1926, he sacrificed his option to set up a lucrative practice and chose to participate in the independence movement. He joined the Congress party as a full-time member in 1929, the same party he would later unravel in its own bastion of the Hindi heartland.

In 1930 in Lahore, the Indian National Congress passed the 'Purna Swaraj declaration', for complete self-rule independent of the British Empire. Soon afterwards, for his political activism Charan Singh was imprisoned for six months and many times thereafter. Agitating in the 'Quit India movement' he was jailed for 15 months.

As revenue minister in UP he was the chief architect of the revolutionary "Zamindari abolition and land reform Act 1951". Later, he was forced to resign when he openly disagreed with the PM Jawahar Lal Nehru on his proposed national policy of co-operative farming, which was similar to the ruinous 'Kolkhoz' in the Soviet Union. His singular focus on farmer prosperity never wavered and he developed a personality never to mince words. His contrarian nature was increasingly at odds with the Congress party which was evolving towards subservience and hierarchies.

Charan Singh maintained that the reversal of priorities in the 2nd five-year plan away from agriculture was the root cause of continued poverty in India which ultimately resulted in PL-480 food imports. Subsequent humiliation of in-sufficiency in food production imprinted on the nation a fear factor that impacts policy making to this day.

Expounding on the Gandhian model he proposed, "no medium or large-scale enterprise shall be allowed to come into existence in future which will produce goods and services that cottage or small-scale enterprise can produce." He opposed the heavy industries development model of Jawaharlal Nehru. Time would prove that both extremes would not work for India.

In 1967, Charan Singh formed the Bhartiya Kranti Dal with the support of Raj Narain & Ram Manohar Lohia. Thereafter, becoming the first non-congress chief minister of UP, he fueled the rebellion against the congress party. He gathered his strength from popular mass public support but always had difficulty in retaining power due to his resolute uncompromising nature.

His contempt for 'urban centric policy' and nepotism within the upper castes, capitalists and bureaucracy never ebbed. With nothing better to conjure, he is falsely vilified to always have represented his own caste; the Jats. While Jawaharlal Nehru would attend meetings of the Kashmir Brahmins regularly, Charan Singh never attended a single meeting of the Jat community, let alone speak of specific Jat demands. He even got the name of the local Jat College in Baraut changed to Janta Vedic college. In 1954, he had proposed reservation for gazette jobs whereby jobs would be only available to those who marry out of narrow circle of one's caste.

When the caste accusations fell flat, the academics projected him as advocating the interests of only the rich farmers and land-owning classes. Even when, the zamindars were the rich landowners, whose hegemony he singularly broke. Charan Singh is the most misunderstood leader of independent India. His definition of peasants went beyond limited definition of perceived landowning classes, he included in his struggle the landless, craftsmen and tradesmen too. Now, many academics hold him responsible for creating a rural middle class of small landholding farmers, which to this day need government support to survive. The socialists and the neo-liberals could never digest a mere peasant at the high table of policy making.

The constant hounding by the academia, media and business houses would have destroyed Charan Singh had it not been for his hard work, integrity and honesty. Charan Singh was a simple man, said to have never grown his hair long for he was against any sort of partition. The dhoti and the Gandhi cap were his characteristic dress. He never used soap for bathing and used neem twigs 'datun' for brushing his teeth. He had very frugal eating habits and abhorred drinking and smoking. He was a firm believer in ideals of the Arya Samaj propagated by Swami Dayananda Saraswati to reform orthodox

Hinduism. Not only was he a prolific reader, he also authored many papers and books. Amongst the many he published were 'Abolition of Zamindari' and India's Economic Nightmare: Causes and Cure'. He would play a simple game of cards 'Kot Pees' with his brethren.

He was amongst the many leaders imprisoned for over a year by PM Indira Gandhi in the emergency era. Thereafter he led the opposition to defeat Indira Gandhi in 1977. The Bharatiya Lok Dal party led by Charan Singh secured the largest number of members of Parliament followed by Jan Sangh. To stop Charan Singh from becoming Prime Minister, the smaller Jan Sangh party proposed the name of Jagjivan ram, correctly anticipating Charan Singh's response. Charan Singh had always maintained 'those who supported the resolution on imposing emergency were unacceptable to him and his supporters'. Falling into the trap set by Jan Sangh, paved the way for the compromise candidature of Morarji Desai. Big Business for the first time managed to get a prime minister of their choice. It would be only many decades later they would manage to do so again.

The Janata party experiment failed miserably. Appointed Deputy Prime Minister with charge of home minister, he blundered to arrest Indira Gandhi. Things came to a head when Charan Singh insisted to probe scandals of PM Morarji Desai's son. Consequently, he was unceremoniously dropped from the ministry.

Seizing the opportunity to topple the Morarji Desai government, Indira Gandhi agreed to support Charan Singh as prime minister. Charan Singh had reconciled to the fact that time was running out for him to lead a metamorphosis of rural communities and so he settled to inspire the generations of peasants to rise, to dream and break free from the manacles set by upper castes and urban society. He was successful in his objective; a peasant becoming Prime Minister still resonates across rural India.

But, history is written by the urban elite who can't resist painting Charan Singh as power hungry. If that were the case, on becoming the prime minister, he would not have refused to visit Indira Gandhi to thank her for the support, insisting support was directed to break the Janata government. Confronted to choose between principles and convictions he chose to give up the post of the Prime Minister within weeks. He refused to concede to conditions put forward by the congress for extending support.

The tallest farmer leader of the nation breathed his last in the summer of 1987 and left a void yet to be filled. A farming community waiting for a leader is a pitiful state to be in. Since his passing the rural political landscape changed beyond recognition; Mandal commission recommendations cut through the very fabric of rural unity dividing communities on caste lines. Had he lived, it seems improbable, Charan Singh would have survived the shifting center of political gravity from community leadership to caste politics.