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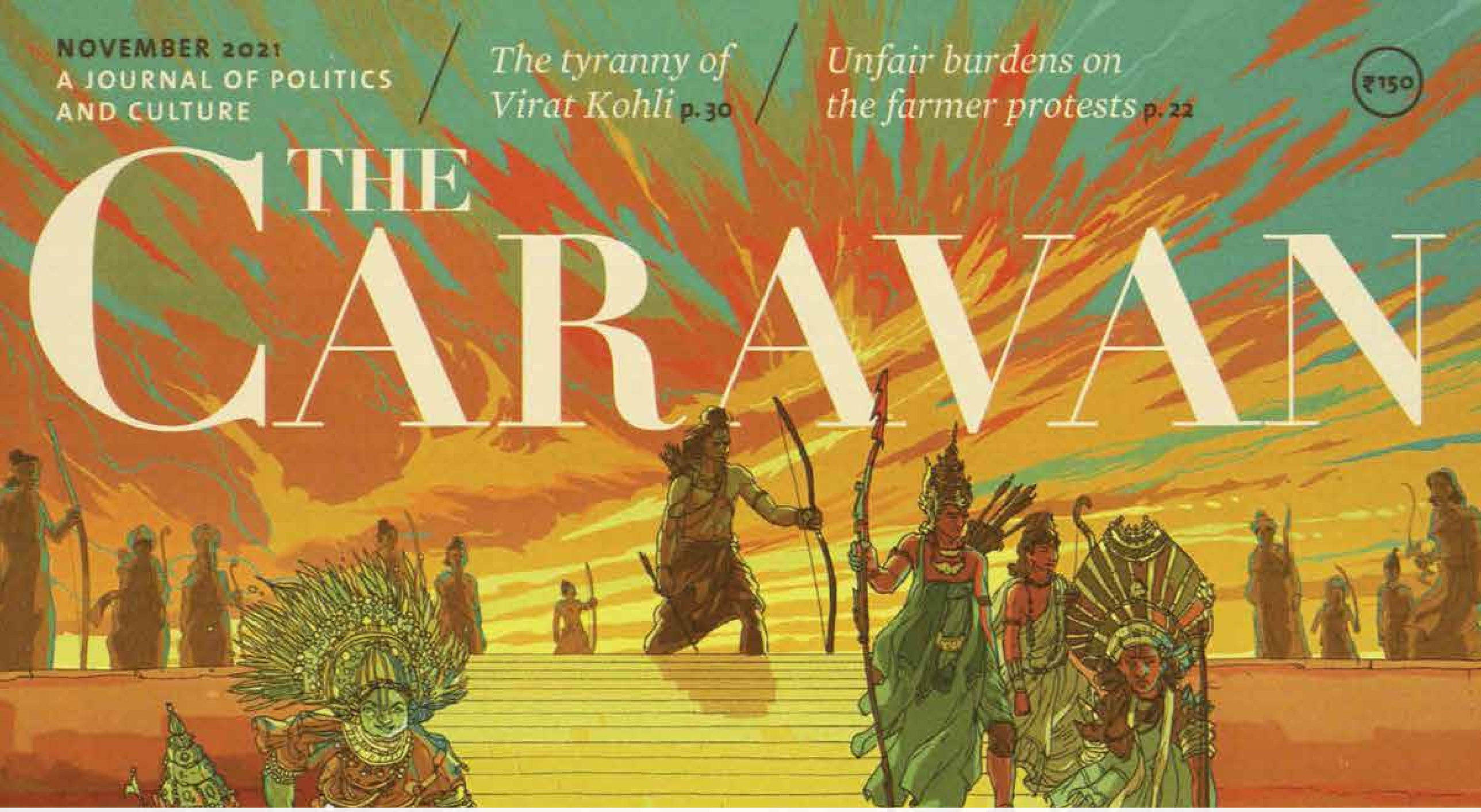


Books: Evergreen Revolution

Why Charan Singh's advocacy for agrarian interests still endures

Binit Priyaranjan

Priyaranjan is a freelance journalist and a creative writer of prose and poetry. In 2020, he studied the 6 key books written and published by Chaudhary Charan Singh, and wrote summaries of each in these in the volume '*Summary of Selected Works of Charan Singh*' published by Charan Singh Archives in 2020.

BOOKS

Evergreen Revolution

ANINDITO MUKHERJEE / BLOOMBERG / GETTY IMAGES

Why Charan Singh's advocacy for agrarian interests still endures

/ AGRICULTURE

BINIT PRIYARANJAN

ON 14 SEPTEMBER, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed his first rally in Uttar Pradesh since the farmers' protests against the new agricultural laws began, almost three hundred days earlier. He reiterated his government's commitment towards the interests of small farmers. At a function in Aligarh, after laying the foundation stone for a state university, Modi declared that his government was committed to the interests of small farmers. As the guiding light of his agricultural policies, he invoked the former prime minister Chaudhary Charan Singh. "We know the amount of benefit accrued to labourers and small farmers due to the path shown by Chaudhary Charan Singh Sahab decades ago," Modi said. "Many generations today are leading a dignified life today owing to these reforms. It is very essential that the government stands with the small farmers who Chaudhary Sahab was so concerned about."

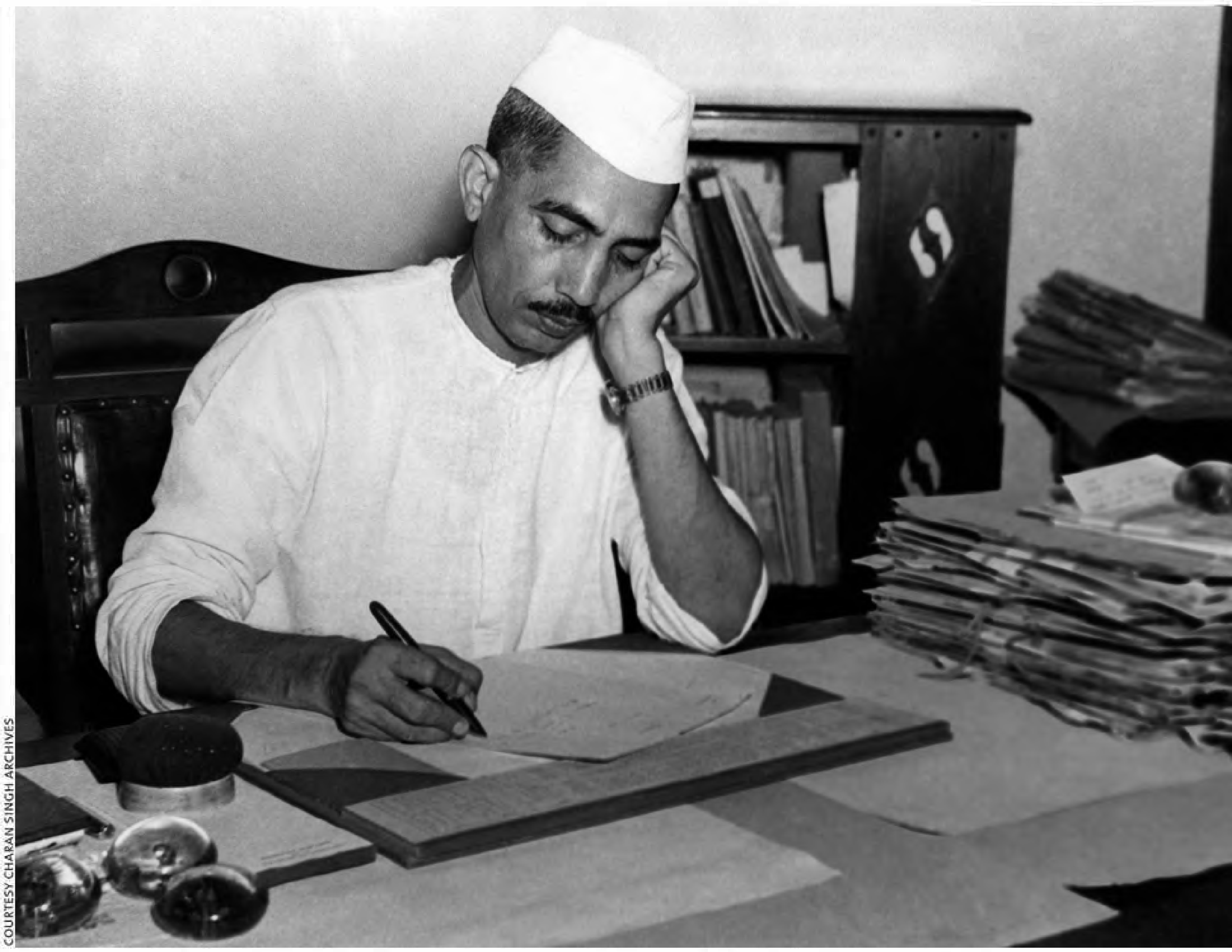
The speech was interesting for various reasons. First, Charan Singh's grandson Jayant Chaudhary, the national president of the Rashtriya Lok Dal, has been instrumental in the agitations in Uttar Pradesh against the Modi government's new farm laws. Second, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh—the precursor to Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party—responded to Singh's thinking on the interests of the peasantry with precisely the same charge that the BJP presently levels against the leadership of the farmers' movement, including the RLD: that it represents the interests of rich and landed farmers, as opposed to those of the "small farmer." Third, it demonstrates the ruling party's capacity to appropriate key historical figures for its own political purposes, as the new farm laws have little in common with Singh's agrarian ideas. Singh, India's only peasant prime minister and a two-time chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, is only the latest political giant to be appropriated in this manner by the BJP—other examples include Vallabhbhai Patel and BR Ambedkar, both of whose visions for India differed from the Hindutva agenda. At its root, this is made possible by the lack of public knowledge about the historical and intellectual legacies of these individuals.

Over a career spanning four decades, before and after Independence, first with the Congress and then against it, Singh remained a staunch Gandhian. He advanced a detailed blueprint for India's development along Gandhian principles, advocating for the primacy of agriculture over industry and of employment over mechanical production. Singh's positions epitomised Gandhi's preferred strategy for independent India, just as the positions he argued against epitomised the strategy of Jawaharlal Nehru. While Nehru was enamoured of industry and considered it the principal source of employment, Gandhi conceived of India as a collection of villages, with agriculture being the predominant occupation. After Gandhi's assassination, in 1948, the "Nehruvian consensus" prevailed, and Singh became one of the most

PREVIOUS SPREAD: A mural of Charan Singh. Over a career spanning four decades, before and after Independence, first with the Congress and then against it, Singh remained a staunch Gandhian.

RIGHT: Charan Singh advanced a detailed blueprint for India's development along Gandhian principles, advocating for the primacy of agriculture over industry and of employment over mechanical production.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Jawaharlal Nehru and MK Gandhi. Charan Singh's positions epitomised Gandhi's preferred strategy for independent India, just as the positions he argued against epitomised the strategy of Nehru.



COURTESY CHARAN SINGH ARCHIVES

trenchant critics of this development strategy. This brought him into direct conflict with Nehru, Indira Gandhi and the Congress at the height of their popularity.

Singh's books lay out a history of Nehruvian development strategy, including the matter of land reform, which was then, as it remains to this day, one of the central questions facing all postcolonial economies. They articulate the mechanisms that have led to the systematic failure of the Nehruvian approach, including rampant unemployment, environmental degradation, inequalities of income and wealth, and the crisis of indigenous capital formation. Moreover, they advance an alternative model for the Indian economy.

Singh wrote seven books through his career. Through all of them, he maintained a consistency in his ideas and demonstrated a capacity for marshalling evidence from several continents, centuries and ideological formations. What makes him unique, though, is the perspective of the countryside and farmer that his vision prioritises. As a representative of this perspective, Singh remains an "organic intellectual"—a distinction so rare that the political theorist Antonio Gramsci, who coined the term, thought it impossible for a person of Singh's background.

THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF CHARAN SINGH cannot be separated from one another. From the first of his books, *Abolition of Zamindari: Two Alternatives*, to the last, *Land Reforms in U.P and the Kulaks*, his politics and his subject matter were inextricably linked.

Abolition of Zamindari, published in 1947, was written following a decades-long engagement with the Indian freedom struggle and the Congress, as well as with improving the condition of the peasantry, which had been devastated by colonial exploitation under the zamindari system. Agricultural production was in decline at the time India gained independence, following a period of long-term stagnation. The Congress's election manifesto prior to the 1937 elections cited "the appalling poverty, unemployment and indebtedness of the peasantry" as being "the most important and urgent problem of the country." By 1947, the Congress Working Committee's manifesto called for "an urgent reform of the land system to be undertaken which involved the abolition of intermediaries between the peasants and the state i.e the Zamindars and Talukdars."

As a member of the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Committee, tasked with abolishing landlordism in Uttar Pradesh, Singh inherited the

For Singh, the Indian economy would have to organically mature from agriculture to industry and, finally, to services.

task of formulating an alternative. The first of the two alternatives his book analyses is the nationalisation of land and the collectivisation of agriculture. The second is a decentralised model based on Gandhi's dictum of providing land to whoever will till it, with the tenant proprietor as its centre. The former option was a product of the Soviet Union and communist China, and Singh described his championing of the Gandhian option as an attempt to "swim against the tide."

Regardless, the tide continued to swell, culminating in the recommendation for the collectivisation of agriculture under the independent government's Second Five-Year Plan. Singh could not disagree more. Matters came to a head in 1959, when the All India Congress Committee passed the Nagpur resolution, which adopted "cooperative farming." Nehru had led the charge in favour of the recommendation, and Singh was one of the few leaders who opposed it. His attack on cooperative farming, based on arguments put forward in *Abolition of Zamindari*, did not go down well.

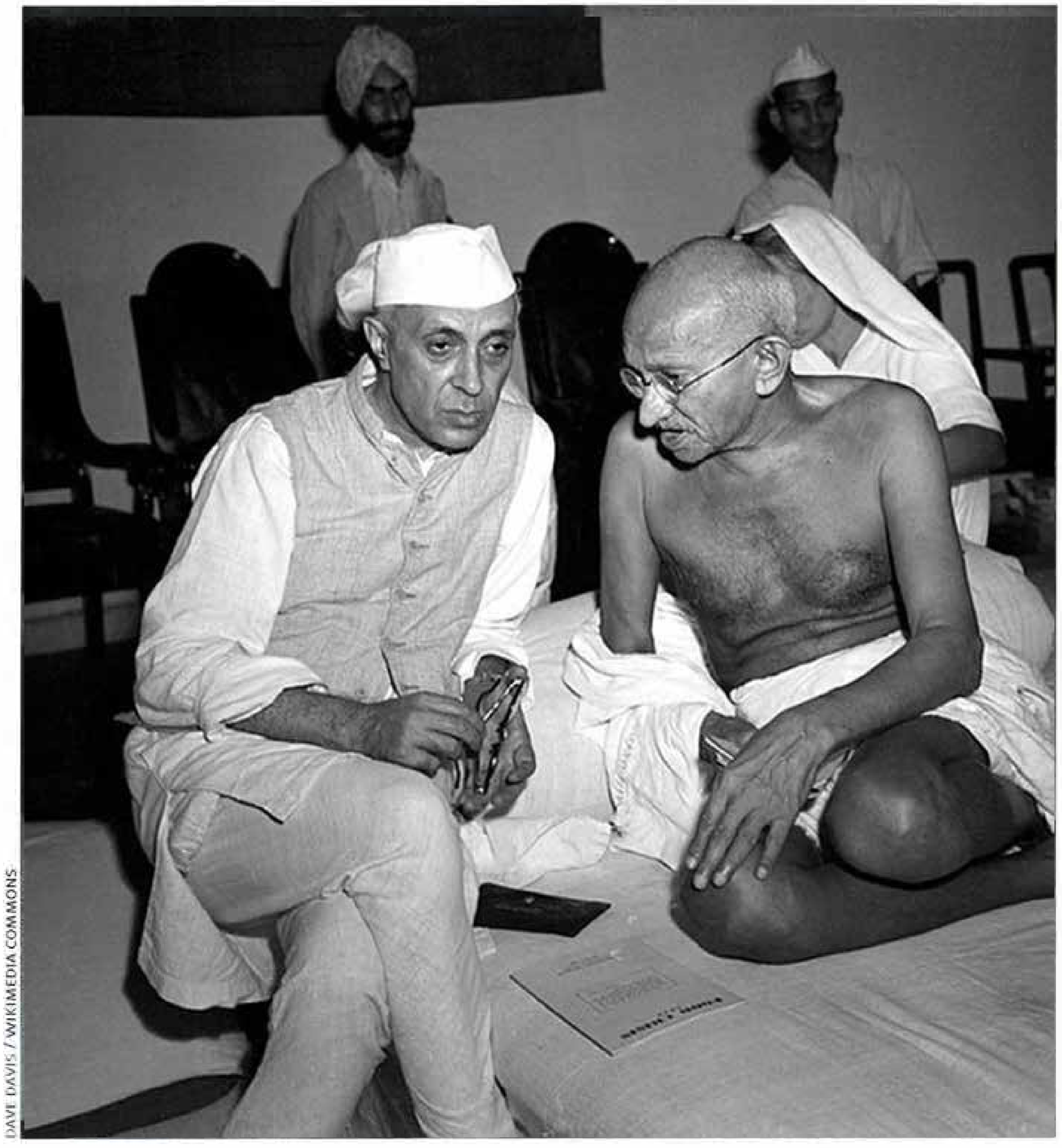
Singh anticipated well in advance the horrific consequences of cooperative farming in China and the Soviet Union—both countries Nehru visited and praised for their startling economic growth. The disappearance of these farms in those countries should be a reminder of the disaster he largely helped avert in the Indian scenario. By the end of the Third Five-Year Plan, the government's emphasis on collectivisation was significantly diminished, as it had fallen well short of expectations in its results, besides being opposed by the peasantry itself. The bulk of the intellectual argumentation against this move was provided by Singh, though this is not commonly known.

In 1964, he published *India's Poverty and Its Solution*—a restatement and expansion, with additional data, of the arguments of his earlier *Joint Farming X-rayed*. It included a proposed model for a "solution" stemming from India's factor endowments of demography, climate, ideologies and capital. This model remained unchanged in its fundamentals throughout Singh's academic work. Its main principles are the maximisation of wealth production, the provision of employment, equitable distribution of wealth and income, and the promotion of democracy.

In the fourteen years between this book and his next, India fought two wars and faced back-to-back food crises, which made the problems of agricultural production, unemployment and dependence on foreign aid the Indian economy's central concerns. This period also witnessed Indira Gandhi's authoritarian policies, epitomised by the Emergency declared in 1975. Singh and the Janata Party, which he joined after splitting from the Congress, were instrumental in Indira Gandhi's subsequent election defeat, in 1977. Singh's Bharatiya Lok Dal formed the principal electoral base for the Janata Party.

As home minister in the first non-Congress central government, Singh wrote *India's Economic Policy: A Gandhian Blueprint*. In this, he summarises his reasons for advocating a complete reversal of the economic policies the country had followed since Independence. He followed the book up with a "blueprint" of a decentralised economic system, where heavy industries form "the apex of an economic structure with agriculture and handicrafts or village industries as its base," backed by labour-intensive technologies as opposed to capital-intensive ones.

Between this 1978 blueprint and his final book, Singh published *Economic Nightmare of India*. This came in 1981, at the twilight of his political career and after his brief stint as prime minister in a bitterly factional government. (He was the first prime minister to resign without having faced parliament.) The title is the only one of his works to bear



DAVE DAVIS / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

a tone of despondency. The reason for this becomes clear as early as the preface, where Singh quotes the Italian politician Giuseppe Mazzini: "I want to see before dying, another Italy, the ideal of my soul and life, starting up from her three hundred years' grave. This is only the phantom, the mockery of Italy that I see passing before my eyes."

In the Indian context, these words reflect Singh's assessment, three decades after Independence, of the "tryst with destiny" Nehru had envisioned for postcolonial India, and the methods its leadership had chosen in order to effect this transformation. With the fall of his Janata Party government and the re-election of Indira Gandhi, Singh's last chance at implementing his Gandhian blueprint had gone. *Economic Nightmare* represents a recipe for the country's economic prosperity, supported by an array of facts, statistics, histories and personal experiences. Singh's final work, *Land Reform in U.P. and the Kulaks*, was published in 1985, just a year before his death, and offers no forward-looking insights into India's economic planning. It can be seen as his defence of his political and intellectual legacy against the charges mostly commonly levelled against him throughout his career.

AN INTEGRAL PART of the Gandhian blueprint is that its components cannot be separated from each other. Therefore, India's economic planning, for Singh as for Gandhi, could not be separated from its geography, demography, philosophy and sociopolitical endowments. These include the conditions of land, labour, capital and technology, traditionally called the factors of production, which were drastically different in India than in the Western countries, or even in the Soviet Union.

Singh's lifelong criticism of India's economic development, as well as his prescribed model, derived from this premise that India's development fundamentally had to reflect Indian factors of production. Not only that, India had chosen a democratic political structure, making it somewhat unique at the time among postcolonial economies, which routinely succumbed to dictatorships, whether communist or neo-colonialist. This meant that the task before India was herculean, and prior wisdom was in short supply.

COURTESY CHARAN SINGH ARCHIVES

BELOW: The cabinet of GB Pant, with Charan Singh standing third from right. Singh was the chief architect of the abolition of zamindari while he served as revenue minister under GB Pant.

For Singh, the Indian economy would have to organically mature from agriculture to industry and, finally, to services. These shifts had to be based on a unique model, and not on imitation of the West two centuries after it achieved industrialisation using methods not available to India. He wrote of this in several of his books—including in *Economic Nightmare of India*, where he argued that Nehru's emphasis on heavy industry, "the first strategy he adopted in trying to ape the U.S.S.R.," had caused the "original sin" of prioritising capital-intensive industries over agricultural production.

Singh's intellectual argument against this choice begins by foregrounding the Indian countryside's economic conditions and its causative factors, as well as the nationalist movement's attitude towards their amelioration at the stroke of Independence. Despite the differences about the strategy by which development was to be achieved, a broad societal consensus existed about the nature of India's economic strategy, based on self-reliance, the shunning of imperialist capital, growth with equity and land reform. This consensus was epitomised by Gandhi and Nehru agreeing on these fronts, even though their strategies for the same were antithetical.

Singh lays out the criteria for judging the performance of any planning strategy as it is enshrined in the Indian Constitution: the maximisation of production of wealth or eradication of poverty, the provision of full employment, the equitable redistribution of wealth and the promotion of a democratic way of life. Since most of the poor and unemployed lived in villages, and India was still decidedly an agrarian economy, Singh saw three clear needs based on the country's specific conditions and goals: the prioritisation of agriculture over industry, of employment over machinery, and of villages over cities.

Further, Singh's books argue that, given India's population density, the limiting factor for maximising wealth production here was agricultural productivity per unit of land, not per unit of labour. The latter is the main organisational principle for agrarian systems based on heavy machinery, whether in large capitalist farms or in communes, where land is plentiful but labour is scarce. In India, conditions were exactly the opposite. Therefore, for Indian conditions, only a method that maximised the use of land for intensive farming would be able to provide for a large population as well as create the agricultural surplus that formed the basis for capital creation in agrarian economies. Singh declares in *India's Poverty and Its Solution* that, "while in sheer theory, the size of the farm, in and of itself, did not affect production per acre, in actual practice ... given the same resource facilities, soil content and climate, a small farm produces, acre for acre, more than a large one—howsoever organised, whether cooperatively, collectively or on a capitalistic basis. And it will continue to produce more, until a device is discovered which can accelerate nature's process of gestation and growth."

As the peasant-studies scholar Terence J Byers writes, Singh articulated this key insight about this inverse relationship long before it was made famous by the economist Amartya Sen and "gave rise to a prolonged, extensive and continuing debate among Indian economists." It not only formed the basis of Singh's argument in principle against cooperative farming but also refuted Karl Marx's predictions of the "capitalist" peasant being a doomed class, bound to be subsumed by the cooperative farmer in a mechanised farm. Apart from these hard economic first principles, Singh disputed Marxist principles when applied to agriculture and Indian conditions based on political, psychological, ideological and ethical grounds.

Nevertheless, Marxist ideology dominated the minds of postcolonial, urban, Western-educated intellectuals. It was believed that land reforms coupled with the collectivisation of agriculture would automatically unlock greater economies of scale and increase agricultural production without significant capital allocation by the government. This was the agricultural vision behind Nehru's strategy and the Second Five-Year Plan's "socialistic pattern of society." This led India down an anti-egalitarian developmental path which put the existing capitalist–proletariat divide to shame, with the behemoth of industry consuming surplus capital at the expense of the education and health of its citizens, and continued exploitation of the countryside in favour of urban metropolises.

Where industries did flourish, they did so in large cities and used machinery that could not possibly employ the workforce underutilised in agriculture. The jobs they did generate created such a disparity between the value of industrial and non-industrial jobs that, Singh writes in *Economic Nightmare of India*, "a sweeper in the industrialised sectors was paid Rupees 400 per month while a university teacher made Rupees 650 per month." Education and health remained the prerogatives of a privileged few. Between 1962 and 1972, Singh writes, "the 20 per cent of India that is urban, contributed slightly more than half of all Cabinet Ministers at the Centre, while the contribution of agriculturists remained at around 17%." Similarly, the majority of the civil-services cadre came from the urban, salaried middle class, while agricultural labourers were grossly underrepresented in it. Workers migrated from the countryside to compete for the few jobs in the cities with dreams of a better life, only to inhabit slums where they remained destitute and vulnerable while working menial jobs. Singh's critique, made relevant again by the migrant crisis that unravelled in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, is as accurate today as when he wrote it.

Much has been written about the vast gulf between India's Gross Domestic Product and Human Development Index, but the structural conditions systematically producing the gulf are often not expounded on properly. Singh's work explains these conditions by reference to a "dual economy" with "small enclaves of prosperity in a hinterland of poverty, unemployment, and stagnation," where, "on the one hand, tens of thousands wallow in luxury knowing not what to make of their windfalls or ill-gotten gains, [and] on the other, tens of millions starve for want of a morsel of bread." This, in turn, was the result of the "almost mystic faith in the twin

gods of technology and heavy industry" that the country had chased for so long.

Therefore, Singh argues for a reversal of India's agricultural priorities. Centred on independent farmers tilling their own land, Singh's blueprint stems from a radically different conception of how patterns of land-ownership pertain to the national interest, as well as the notion of agriculture as a public service. According to him, farmers performed a service in working the land, as industry could not survive without the food and raw materials produced by agriculture, and agricultural output came second to none by in the list of the country's necessities. Besides, agricultural surplus was a necessary prerequisite for an organic transition from the agricultural to the service sector, and so also for economic development. Therefore, besides ensuring the optimal distribution of land, India had to strive for technological innovations to augment the human capital working it, and to provide employment to the millions sitting idle or underemployed. Surplus, over and above consumption, would form capital to be invested in improving yields with better equipment, irrigation, seeds and so on, as well as in animal husbandry and the farmer's health. The evolution of small and cottage industries allied with agriculture would take farmers into more productive employment, while the propensity to innovate in technology would emerge as labour in the fields got dearer, until such a point that it would be easier to invest in a machine than employ the amount of labour needed to do the same work. Craftspeople and artisans of the countryside would flourish, produce enough for their village ecosystem and have service and marketing cooperatives to market their surplus. In this way, people could be diverted from agriculture to other industries without the country becoming beholden to foreign capital.

Singh disputes the popular primitivist conception of Gandhi shunning of all machinery. He quotes directly from Gandhi: "In this age, electric power and steel are the key to economic development, whether it be in the field of large-scale operations, or that of cottage industry." He also writes in *India's Economic Policy*, "If agriculture has to be mechanized, it should be mechanized, as Gandhi pointed out, with machines that supplement human effort and ease or lighten its burden rather than supplant it—the Japanese style of farm machinery."

THE RELEVANCE OF SINGH'S WORKS in the present circumstances is clear. Even if the usual Gandhian critiques of India's environmental and moral degradation, a growing leviathan of a state and a symbiotic nexus between big corporations and government were to be considered too generic Singh's writings disclose useful arguments for the advancement of the agricultural sector, as well as some predictions about India's political future and farmers' place in it. Singh's works assert that independent farmers form the bulwark of Indian democracy, and the ongoing farmers' protests serve as a reminder of this message. The protests, sustained by the same constituency of voters that brought Indira Gandhi's authoritarian regime to heel in the 1977 elections, bear some other lessons for the present government as well.

Singh himself considered the greatest achievement of his political as well as intellectual career to be the abolition of zamindari in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest agrarian state.

Singh himself, however, considered the greatest achievement of his political as well as intellectual career to be the abolition of zamindari in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest agrarian state. Singh was the chief architect of this move while he served as the state's revenue minister under GB Pant. The blueprint Singh devised, detailed in *Abolition of Zamindari*, later came to be adopted by several other states as well. In this book, Singh also articulated how the subdivision of land holdings and the subsequent generation of uneconomic holdings was a structural problem, and recommended structural safeguards against it.

However, the most important contribution of Singh's writings is in their consistent advocacy for rural and agrarian interests over urban and industrial ones. His work exposes the bias "in the discrimination [the government] makes in provision of social amenities like health, housing, transport, power, and, above all, education available to the urban and rural areas—discrimination in investment in the human factor in the town and the village."

Of the many gulfs between the cities and the countryside, Singh especially singles out that of education. He thinks education is a precondition of economic development, not an effect of it. Literacy rates in villages lag considerably behind those in cities, to say nothing of the gap in the quality of education between the two settings. Urban, westernised men and women, fundamentally removed from the realities of those they govern and comment upon, overwhelmingly dominate their rural counterparts in virtually every sector involving social currency—the legislature, bureaucracy, media, academia, corporations and technical institutions.

This condition, Singh argues, is at the heart of the lack of imagination in the government's welfare policies, especially those for the rural sector, and also the poor implementation even of policies that are well-intended. He concludes that urban values and leadership have taken the driving seat in the developmental imagination of a nation dwelling primarily with rural values, far removed from the mental landscape of Delhi. This charge is valid against a government that recently insisted that millions of farmers are being "misguided" about their own best interests. It applies also to the litany of editorials in the mainstream media that, in their tone and sometimes also their content, carry the assumption of farmers being simple-minded, in need of being shown what policies are in their own best interests. Granted that the present government's methods are far more brazen than those of its recent predecessors, but the its overall approach to agriculture is only, to borrow a phrase from the journalist P Sainath, the "Congress on steroids." It does nothing to resolve the

larger crisis of structural inequality between rural and urban India, between fields and corporations.

REACTIONS TO CHARAN SINGH'S WORK, especially his opposition to cooperative farming, show clearly how Nehru's—and, subsequently, Indira Gandhi's—cult of personality and Marxist ideology prevailed over concrete ideas based on expertise and experience. The political scientist Paul Brass wrote that "Singh was seen as an obscurantist opponent of the 'modernisation' of India" and a representative of a class of peasants who, for "many planners and intellectuals in Delhi, are an abstraction not a reality. They represent backwardness, encrusted tradition and uncouthness, people best kept out of sight while the country 'modernises.'"

Even so, the tropes thorough which Singh's works have typically been criticised are themselves informative. The budget he presented as finance minister in 1979, with the ideas of *India's Economic Policy* in mind, was described as the "kulak" budget, which Singh understood as an ideological misunderstanding of his political legacy. *Land Reforms in U.P and the Kulaks*, his last work, was written precisely to defend his legacy against this charge. In the book, Singh defines a "kulak" as "a dishonest rural trader who grew rich not by his own labour but through someone else's—through usury, by operating as a middleman." By the 1930s, the word came to describe rich farmers in general, and was deployed by the government of the Soviet Union, in the Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn's words, "to smash the strength of the peasantry" by branding it an "accomplice of the enemy."

Singh's most fertile political constituencies—Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh—are also the ones most active in the ongoing protests. The protesters are being characterised as "rich farmers," whose concerns as a class are far removed from those of the vast majority of marginal farmers and landless labourers. These same critiques were levelled against Singh's ideological doctrine, since he came from a landed peasant background in Haryana, and the abolition of zamindari most benefitted those "middle and rich farmers" who had land under their own tillage. The book busts the characterisation of the peasantry as comprising "rich, middle and poor farmers," and demonstrates that, with the income inequality currently prevailing between rural agriculturists and urban denizens, it would be duplicitous to say that there are any rich farmers—there are only ones who are more or less poor. It also shows how the abolition of the zamindari system passed numerous benefits on to small and landless farmers as well, helping them rise up the agricultural hierarchy.

Singh's works do suffer from drawbacks. For example, his analysis of what he calls "the peasantry" as a whole class falls short of accounting thoroughly for the caste and class relations prevalent in rural India. His works also sometimes take a sanctimonious tone, and *Land Reforms in U.P. and the Kulaks* is an example of this. In a departure from the intertwined nature of his books and politics, his later works do not look squarely at the bitterly factional and sometimes opportunistic elements of his political career since his split with the Congress. Moreover, the burden of proof for the efficacy of the Gandhian blueprint is yet to be met, as it was never implemented. That being said, scholarship about Singh's intellectual works suffers from a dire lack of representation. The present scenario represents an opportune moment, over three decades since his passing, to evaluate more objectively the picture he left of an India from the bottom up. ■

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BELOW: Narendra Modi salutes Charan Singh's image on the latter's birth anniversary. Singh is only the latest political giant to be appropriated by the BJP.