Charan Singh and the politics of agrarian power

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KISAN DIWAS (December 23) marks the birth anniversary of the late Prime Minister, Chaudhary Charan Singh. Remembering him is easy; understanding him takes more care. To do that, we must place his ideas and actions alongside those of his contemporaries, not to blur differences but to expose them. They expanded the boundaries of permission and possibility and nothing alters the course of history more enduringly.

Sir Chhotu Ram operated within colonial British India, fighting peasant exploitation by moneylenders under an alien state. His strategy was pragmatic: use the colonial state itself as an instrument to protect peasants. He pushed landmark debt-relief laws and safeguards for agricultural land. Charan Singh, in contrast, functioned in independent India, where political legitimacy came from popular mandate and his struggle was against urban-industrial control. Where Chhotu Ram negotiated within constraints, Charan Singh confronted the system directly, willing to break parties and governments for principle.

Baldev Ram Mirdha, another pre-independence leader, was a regional mass leader, deeply rooted in the socio-economic realities of Rajasthan. His historic achievement lay in destroying *samantvad* or feudalism in its heartland of Rajputana. Charan Singh's battle was different; he challenged the economic priorities of the post-Independence India, questioning whose interests development truly served.

Jawaharlal Nehru's encounter with Charan Singh marked one of the earliest ideological confrontations in independent India. Charan Singh's opposition forced Nehru to abandon the idea of national cooperative farming, modelled on the disastrous Soviet *kolkhoz* system. Drawing from Gandhian thought, Charan Singh argued that no medium or large-scale enterprise should be allowed to produce goods that cottage or small-scale industries could. Time would prove that neither Nehru's industrial absolutism nor Charan Singh's agrarian purism would work for India.

Partap Singh Kairon's edge came from a rare convergence of timing and temperament — a combination few leaders have matched. As Chief Minister of Punjab during a formative decade, he, unlike Charan Singh, did not challenge the state's development model, he used it decisively. His belief was simple: farmers needed canals, roads, power, markets and administrative discipline more than rhetoric. Where Charan Singh interrogated policy, Kairon executed it. Charan Singh distrusted bureaucracy; Kairon mastered it. One argued against concretion of power, the other embodied it. Charan Singh taught India why the farmer mattered; Partap Singh Kairon showed how power could deliver to the farmer.

ENDURING: Charan Singh taught us why farmers mattered, even when power didn't listen. FILE PHOTO

Panjabrao Deshmukh, shaped by Vidarbha's chronic indebtedness and social backwardness, viewed agrarian exploitation as civilisational. Without education and social confidence, the peasantry could not meaningfully exercise political or economic power. For Charan Singh, the central agrarian problem was not moral neglect of the numerically dominant but political subordination. Deshmukh built institutions to prepare the farmer; Charan Singh forced the state to recognise the farmer as a bearer of power.

MD Nanjundaswamy and Charan Singh remind us that it is, at its core, a question of power. They had the conviction that state power, if redirected, could serve the farmer. Nanjundaswamy, emerging a generation later, was far more sceptical. He mobilised Karnataka's farmers and argued against global capital, patents, WTO norms and multinational agribusiness. Where Charan Singh sought reform from within, Nanjundaswamy chose confrontation from outside. Charan Singh tried to reclaim the state for the farmer. Nanjundaswamy tried to protect the farmer from the state.

> Kisan Diwas is meaningful only if it renews the question Charan Singh posed to India: Who truly benefits from development?

NG Ranga, the scholar-activist from Andhra Pradesh, shared Charan Singh's diagnosis but not his cure. Both rejected treating farmers as welfare subjects and demanded land rights, fair prices and dignity. Ranga trusted sustained advocacy — research, committees and parliamentary persuasion. Charan Singh was unconvinced. Persuasion without power, he believed, would always remain marginal. Ranga reminds us that policy without ideas is blind. Charan Singh reminds us that ideas without power are ignored.

VP Singh perfected the pose of the "reluctant politician." His son Ajeya Singh's remark, "It is hard for a tiger not to hunt" captures the contradiction neatly. In contrast, Charan Singh was not politically astute, never sought power for its sake. VP Singh's decision to implement Mandal reshaped social discourse and Indian democracy permanently. Charan Singh's unwavering fidelity to principle defined the narrative for all times to come. Their divergence reminds us that while conviction defines purpose, timing often determines power.

Devi Lal mobilised rural distress into electoral force through visible, immediate relief — loan waivers and price assurances — without concern for fiscal strain. To Charan Singh, power was secondary to correctness of policy and he was uneasy with populism which led to fiscal imprudence, even when advocating for farmers. But it is Devi Lal's populism that endured.

Bansi Lal imagined the state differently altogether. To Bansi Lal ideology mattered less than results. He believed rapid development, industrialisation and infrastructure required administrative control, a centralised executive capable of cutting through resistance, even by bending institutional norms. Charan Singh asked, What kind of India should we build? Bansi Lal asked, How fast can we build it?

Mulayam Singh Yadav, emerging in the post-Charan Singh era, mastered caste-based mobilisation to capture and retain power. Charan Singh refused such compromises. He was willing to accept political isolation rather than dilute economic principles. Charan Singh addressed the question: What should India's development path be? Mulayam Singh addressed a different one: Who gets to rule within the existing system?

Samajwadi tradition and Charan Singh harboured a deep suspicion of elite urban-centric dominance, opposed concentration of economic power, upper caste bias and bureaucratic overreach. Where Charan Singh differed from Samajwadi ideology was in his rejection of state-led industrial socialism, central planning and public sector expansion as engines of equality. He argued that these policies distorted both India's economy and its democracy. Charan Singh believed symbolic caste-identity politics weakened farmer unity and distracted from structural economic issues. Charan Singh was the system's anomaly who wrote books, not just speeches. He argued economics, not just interests.

Leaders who succeeded, often did so because they accommodated existing hierarchies. Leaders who wanted to upend the system were unable to convert agrarian politics into a durable national movement once identity (caste and religion) politics intensified.