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From land reforms to pollution, we must reclaim Chaudhary Charan Singh's political philosophy

From agrarian reform and rural–urban inequality to social justice and sustainability, Charan Singh's ideas offer urgent lessons for contemporary India



Singh's politics reminds us that contemporary politics needs to include the rural, rather than leave it behind (Express Archives)



ARUN KUMAR

I have flown from the UK to attend a conference on the late [Chaudhary Charan Singh](#) at my alma mater, the University of Delhi. The conference aims to do more than commemorate Singh's legacy by placing his relevance in contemporary politics. Irrespective of our political leanings, I believe that an understanding of Singh is needed, as his politics resists comfortable categorisation as left or right. They take us to a time when the rural was still at the heart of Indian politics after Gandhian interventions, but its role in the postcolonial nation-state was being debated by leaders across political parties. However, it would be wrong to contain his legacy merely as that of a leader advocating the centrality of villages. His politics was firmly anchored in a dynamic understanding of rural and urban, caste and class, capitalism and socialism, agrarian and industry, intellectualism and political leadership. As India experiences the challenges of climate change, peasants' demands for MSP, the dominance of urban India in popular media, and the persistence of "the rural" at the heart of the Indian economy, not only do we need to remember Singh on his birth anniversary, but also understand his ideas, which may help us to reflect on our own predicaments.

Singh was a follower of Gandhi's principles and built upon the notion of Gandhian political economy, stressing small-scale and localised economic production. Standing against the Nehruvian model of big industry-led economic development, Singh highlighted the centrality of village economies. He famously remarked that the path to the nation's prosperity runs through its fields and granaries. The rural, for him, did not exist in a vacuum, but was actively shaped by the politics of the urban. He saw the increasing neglect of rural India as a class conflict between urban elites and the rural poor, small peasants, and big landlords. Born into a tenant farmer's family in a Meerut village, Singh understood India through his experiences. Instead of following US models of agrarian scientific education or the Soviet-style economy, Singh emphasised solutions that underscored India's food crisis, rural–urban divide, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, corruption, and social inequalities. His various writings—

Abolition of Zamindari (1947), Joint Farming X-Rayed: The Problems and its Solutions (1959), India's Poverty and its Solution (1964), Economic Nightmare of India: Its Causes and Cure (1981), among others—are testaments to his intellectual churnings. As a newly elected member of the Uttar Pradesh Assembly in 1946, he played a crucial role in framing the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Bill, which was made law in 1952. This radical act of land reform during his tenure as revenue minister made the landless tenant a permanent owner of land.