

Summary and Bibliography

# India's Poverty and its Solution

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Charan Singh



1964

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Published July 2020 by  
**Charan Singh Archives**

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Mir Singh and Netar Kaur, parents of Charan Singh.  
Village Bhadaula, District Meerut. Uttar Pradesh. 1950.

## Charan Singh: An Introduction

Charan Singh was moulded by three key influences: his early life in a self-cultivating peasant family and the realities of the village, the teachings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati and those of Mohandas Gandhi. His thoughts, ideals and friendships took shape during the mass movement for *Swaraj* and freedom from colonial British rule led by Gandhi. His private and public life was one, his incorruptibility and high character recognised by all who encountered him. Singh believed deeply in a democratic society of small producers and small consumers brought together in a system not capitalist or communist instead one that addressed as a whole the uniquely Indian problems of poverty, unemployment, inequality, caste and corruption. Each of these issues remains intractable today, and his solutions as fresh and relevant to their amelioration and ultimate eradication.

Charan Singh was born on 23 December 1902 in Meerut District of the United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh) in an illiterate tenant farmer's village hut. His mental fortitude and capability were recognised early in life and he went on to acquire a B.Sc., M.A. in History and LL. B from Agra College. He joined the Indian National Congress, at 27, in the struggle to free India from British rule and was imprisoned in 1930, 1940, and 1942 for his participation in the national movement. He remained a member of the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh from 1936 to 1974 and was a minister in all Congress governments from 1946 to 1967, which provided him a reputation as an efficient, incorruptible and clear-headed administrator. Singh was the state's first non-Congress Chief Minister in 1967 and again in 1970, before his tenure in 1977-78 as the Union Minister for Home and, later, Finance. This journey culminated in 1979 when he became Prime Minister of India. Over much of the 70s and early 80s he remained a figure of major political significance in Indian politics till he passed away on 29 May 1987.

Charan Singh wrote scores of books, political pamphlets, manifestoes and hundreds articles on the centrality of the village and agriculture in India's political economy. Many of these thoughts are relevant to India today as we struggle with an agrarian crisis with 67% of our impoverished population living in the villages and 47% engaged in

unremunerative agricultural livelihoods. He helped write the 611-page report of the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Committee in Uttar Pradesh in 1948 and also wrote the books *Abolition of Zamindari* (1947), *Joint Farming X-Rayed* (1959), *India's Poverty and Its Solution* (1964), *India's Economic Policy* (1978) *Economic Nightmare of India* (1981) and *Land Reforms in U.P. and the Kulaks* (1986).

“Charan Singh’s political life and economic ideas provide an entry-point into a much broader set of issues both for India and for the political and economic development of the remaining agrarian societies of the world. His political career raises the issue of whether or not a genuine agrarian movement can be built into a viable and persistent political force in the 20th century in a developing country. His economic ideas and his political programme raise the question of whether or not it is conceivable that a viable alternative strategy for the economic development of contemporary agrarian societies can be pursued in the face of the enormous pressures for industrialisation. Finally, his specific proposals for the preservation and stabilisation of a system of peasant proprietorship raise once again one of the major social issues of modern times, namely, whether an agrarian economic order based upon small farms can be sustained against the competing pressures either for large-scale commercialisation of agriculture or for some form of collectivisation.”

Brass, Paul. *Chaudhuri Charan Singh: An Indian Political Life*.  
Economic & Political Weekly, Mumbai. 25 Sept 1993.

# **Summary**

India's Poverty & Its Solution. 1964

# India's Poverty and its Solution<sup>1</sup>

BY CHARAN SINGH

## Background

When colonialism retreated after the Second World War in the 1950s, many colonial territories emerged as independent nation-states possessing economies ravaged over the centuries by the colonisers. These fragile post-colonial states faced the task of formulating a vision for economic and social development suited best to their unique conditions. Research specific to economies such as these was scant. India, amongst the largest of these, chose for herself the ideals of democracy, self-reliance, and equity in the matters of wealth and land redistribution.

Colonial British exploitation over hundreds of years had left India's agriculture, indigenous industry and social structures devastated. The colonial government patronized *Zamindars* who extracted rent from tenanted peasants, in exchange for ownership of vast land. These landlords enjoyed too many idle privileges to even think of investing in improving their lands, or in improving the condition of the tenants toiling on them. Thus, agricultural yields in India had been on the decline and there had been little change in the technological and production base of Indian agriculture for decades prior to Independence. In 1951 there were 93,000 iron ploughs compared to 31.3 million wooden ones and only 11% of cropped lands was under improved seeds, while investment in flood-control, drainage and desalination of soil was virtually non-existent.<sup>2</sup> Not only that, preferential support for British industry at the expense of Indian had left indigenous village industries in tatters, such

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<sup>1</sup> Published 1964 by Asia Publishing House, Bombay. 527 pages. *India's Poverty and its Solution* is Charan Singh's most substantive work, its title signalling a larger canvas for his bold ideas. Singh states "no changes in the arguments or conclusions reached in the first edition is being made. Only some new evidence in favour of the old conclusions has been brought forward. ... Three or four chapters alone may be said to have been rewritten" - chapters on the industrial sector and agriculture. Singh had been re-inducted into the Uttar Pradesh Cabinet in December 1960, ending his 19-month political exile. Dissatisfied with being passed over as Chief Minister, he later attributed this to his opposition to Jawaharlal Nehru's obsession with collective farming and not to his 'capability or commitment to the people.' Singh completed this book in May 1963, just short of 61, and it was published in 1964 months before the passing of Nehru.

<sup>2</sup> Bipin Chandra et al, *India Since Independence*, Penguin, 2000. p. 15.

that a vast number of rural artisans were forced back into agriculture leading to further unemployment and rampant underemployment.

These conditions, coupled with rapidly rising rates of population growth, meant that India was in the unenviable position of catching up on industrialisation centuries after the West had achieved it with very limited capacity for capital formation. Land reforms, State planning, and a transformation in agricultural production were expected to create the surplus required for import of capital-intensive heavy industries in the public sector as the base of further industrialization. How exactly this was to be done was the great puzzle facing these post-colonial nations, the solution for most involved adopting the Marxist model on the lines of the USSR or China, or neocolonialism at the hands of capitalist countries whose capital and corporations flooded their incipient markets.

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister<sup>3</sup> and by far her most influential leader since the death of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 was heavily influenced by the socialist model on the lines of the USSR and China. So were many public intellectuals, political leaders and influencers of the Congress governments at the Center and States buoyed by the part Marxism had played in forming the ideological and philosophical backdrop for the abolition of *Zamindari* and the resistance against colonial rule. The urban elite believed that institutional changes in agriculture such as the introduction of cooperative farming, in conjunction with land reforms, would automatically increase agricultural production without significant outlays on behalf of the government.

The influential Kumarappa Committee in 1949<sup>4</sup> recommended the state should be empowered to enforce cooperative farming, even though till then the Congress government had not shown any signs of its intent to coerce the peasantry. Enthusiasm for these reforms was not shared by the peasantry but the stature and conviction of Nehru

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<sup>3</sup> Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) was India's best-known and amongst the most charismatic leaders of the movement to gain Independence from the colonial British state, next only to Mohandas Gandhi. He was the first and longest serving (1947-1964) Prime Minister of India, and a towering figure in Indian politics before and after Independence.

<sup>4</sup> The Indian National Congress' Agrarian Reforms Committee, 1949. J. C. Kumarappa, senior Congress leader from Tamil Nadu and a Gandhian, led this Committee that recommended comprehensive agrarian reform measures.

meant that by 1956 the Second Five Year Plan declared that its main task was to take essential steps as will provide solid foundations for the development of cooperative farming so that over a period of ten years or so a substantial proportion of agricultural lands are cultivated on cooperative lines.

In the same year two delegations of the Indian Union Ministry of Food and Agriculture were sent to China to study how they organized their cooperatives. Their reports stated China had registered remarkable increases in food grain production using cooperative farming. Following this, Nehru's Cabinet launched a full-blown promotion of cooperative farming in the face of resistance by state governments. Matters came to a head at the Nagpur meeting of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) which stated that the agricultural future should be one of cooperative joint farming, and it was to be implemented in just three years.

Charan Singh, Cabinet Minister of Revenue, Scarcity, Irrigation, Power & Power Projects in the UP government at the time, was in attendance at Nagpur AICC and delivered a rousing speech in opposition to the resolution. This speech was to earn him his first time out of the Congress State government since 1937 and was the harbinger of his political sidelining in the factionally fragmented State Congress party.<sup>5</sup> He published *Joint Farming X-rayed* in 1959 that detailed this opposition and presented his vision of an alternate agricultural plan he believed India should adopt. In 1964, he was again a Cabinet Minister – this time for Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Fisheries and Forests in the UP government. Much of his opposition to the policies reflected in the Nagpur Resolution had found credence amongst some political quarters. In the Third Five-Year Plan the government significantly toned down its cooperative ambitions, settling for “service cooperatives” to be set up in three years, while advocating cooperative farms to be set up “*voluntarily* wherever conditions became mature”

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<sup>5</sup> Charan Singh sat out of the Congress ministry in Uttar Pradesh from 22 April 1959 to December 1960, partly on account of his policy differences with the then Chief Minister and mainly on account of his daring in publicly opposing Nehru's vision of a collective farming peasantry. Posterity can thank this period when he had time on his hands to write *Joint Farming X-Rayed* in 1959 from his deep experience of implementing the Zamindari Abolition Act for a decade.

(emphasis in original).<sup>6</sup> However, Singh's critique of the fundamentally misguided nature of the measure was ignored, and, more egregiously, so was his alternate developmental proposal. The lopsidedness of the government's investments and their detrimental impact on rural India continued unabated.<sup>7</sup>

Singh published this updated edition of *Joint Farming X-rayed* in 1964, where, in his own words, "no change in the arguments or conclusions reached in the first edition"<sup>8</sup> was made. However, he rewrote four chapters entirely with new evidence. These four chapters go into the nitty-gritties of making agriculture productive, the inappropriateness of the industrialising model for India and how to create alternate livelihoods in rural India. As the architect for the abolition of *Zamindari* in UP in the previous decade, Singh held an intimate understanding of the interests of the peasantry, as well as the distance of the urban elite in government from rural ground realities. Even more so, he intensely scrutinises the dogmatic adoption of the industrialising policy in the face of ever-growing empirical data to the contrary and the India's unique conditions of geography, population, capital and social structure.

This book fulfills a cause more constructive than mere criticism, visible in the table of contents. The first part, a third of the book, defines the history and critical aspects of the problem that a suitable agricultural policy for India would solve. The rest of this book is dedicated to charting an alternative for the Indian economy on Gandhian principles – an alternative rejected by Jawaharlal Nehru's top-down policy which came to dominate Indian politics and economics, relegating all alternatives to the sidelines, with ramifications that are visible in the political, agricultural and economic picture of India to this very day.

The distance between orthodox Marxist thinking and Gandhi's emphasis on *Sarvodaya* where the individual subsumes his freedom in the larger community informs the gulf between the two pictures down

<sup>6</sup> Bipin Chandra et al, *India Since Independence*, Penguin, 2000. p. 554.

<sup>7</sup> Singh often cites Gandhi and Nehru's fundamental differences in defense of his own alignment with Gandhi, made crystal clear in letters exchanged in October 1945: Gandhi to Nehru, and Nehru's reply to Gandhi. Singh saw this critical fork in the road as fundamental to the 'industrialised' trajectory of India under Nehru. Singh points out that Nehru came to accept his errors much later by 1963 in speeches in the Indian Parliament, but it was simply too late as he passed away a year after his spirit broken by the China War.

<sup>8</sup> Singh, Charan (1964), *India's Poverty and its Solution*, Asia Publishing House, Preface to the Second Edition, p. xv.

to their fundamental principles, but that is not all. This book derives its dissenting convictions from an endangered perspective in Indian politics: that of a self-cultivating peasant. Charan Singh had intimate understanding of this life, being the son of a tenanted peasant one of “locally dominant peasant community of the cultivating middle classes known for their industriousness and expert skill in the methods of farming, though he started off as a landless peasant”.<sup>9</sup>

Ironically, it was the rarity of his perspective that relegated Charan Singh’s ideas and politics to the sidelines, with few willing to accept his capability of the intellect.<sup>10</sup> That has not taken away from its prescience in the light of the course that the agricultural landscape of India has taken since. This book reads like a forewarning of the many policy pitfalls and disasters that have become the stuff of history since its time. An examination of its elements, therefore, bear serious consideration, especially since agrarian distress continues to haunt the Indian countryside to the present day.

### Surveying the problem

The book begins with a summary of the historic, social and economic reasons for the abolition of *Zamindari* in his home state of Uttar Pradesh. He places land reform in the pivotal place that it was universally held in the transformation of India and other postcolonial nations and relegates landlords to their deserved title of “parasites” and “drones doing no good in the public hive”<sup>11</sup>. Having stated the reasons why land redistribution reforms were imperative, Singh states clearly that the concrete policy question of “future agrarian organisation as an economic, technical and

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<sup>9</sup> Lohit, Harsh S. (2018), *Charan Singh: A Brief Life History*, Charan Singh Archives, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Byres, Terence. *Charan Singh (1902-87): An Assessment*, Journal of Peasant Studies, 1988. 15:2, 139-189. “More significantly, during a six-month visit to India I made in 1978-79, when I travelled extensively throughout the country, an earlier book, *India’s Economic Policy: The Gandhian Blueprint* [Singh, 1978] had recently appeared. Had it been published some three or so years earlier – before the Emergency – it would scarcely have been noticed (indeed, his *Economic Nightmare of India*, published in 1981, received little attention outside of Lok Dal circles). But, in 1978-79, there was Charan Singh on the national stage, challenging for the highest office in the land. He could hardly be ignored. I was reading it and mentioned it to several people. A common response was to suggest that he could not possibly have written it himself. Among the doubting were some prominent urban intellectuals.”

<sup>11</sup> Singh, Charan (1964), *India’s Poverty and its Solution*, Asia Publishing House, p. 4.

also a social problem”<sup>12</sup> which the abolition of the *Zamindari* system brought upon the country had yet to be resolved.

Singh lists three options: an independent peasantry cultivating small land holdings, large private farms operated with hired labour, and joint farms “constituted by peasant farmers pooling their holdings voluntarily or under compulsion and worked with joint or collective labour”<sup>13</sup>. He therefore considers the nuances of the first two options largely self-evident and moves on to an analysis of the policy that was to be his country’s future.

That Charan Singh considered the superiority of small peasant proprietors’ yield as opposed to collective farms is evident in the preface. Over the course of the book, Singh criticises Marxism’s conclusion about the nature of agriculture, as well as its conception of the peasant as a ‘doomed’ class. However, that is not to say that the book does not examine the prospect it dismisses thoroughly. Quite the contrary. Singh was an unusually erudite leader for his times from the peasant community, and he had held diverse ministries in his tenures in the UP Cabinet.<sup>14</sup> He combined experience and insight from these experiences with an analytical, empirical data-based approach and his eyes fixed on the ground realities of India.

The following sections, beginning with a historical account of the most notable contemporary forms of collective farming including that of Russia and China whose model Indian agriculture was trying to emulate with modifications, dissect the organisation of the Russian Kolkhoz (collective farm), Mexican Ejido and the Israeli Kibbutz, their similarities and differences, and the extent to which the collectivization of individual resources, occurs in each of these forms. These were all collectives built on Rochdale Principles, characterized by voluntary and open membership, non-discrimination, distribution of surplus in proportion to trade and political & religious neutrality. Members pooled in their resources such as irrigation facilities, land, farming equipment etc., and in return they earned a wage equivalent to their labour or produce provided, as determined by a General Assembly of all the members in charge of rewards and punishments binding on each member.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Lohit, Harsh S (2018), *Charan Singh: A Brief Life History*, Charan Singh Archives, p. 24.

These collectives further got assistance from the government regarding technical and financial expertise, and in various degrees derived their powers and objectives from the same. Thus, the supposed independence of decision-making of a collective envisioned on paper in collective farms invariably degenerated into coercion by the government, whether direct or indirect. Singh makes particular note of this and explains by way of the Chinese model of “advanced cooperatives” which had “spontaneously” exploded in number under Chairman Mao’s ‘Great Leap Forward’ the impact of collectivization on the member’s psychology and independence and anticipates the need for coercion required to perpetuate such a collective.

The disastrous results of Chairman Mao’s policy in rural China weren’t fully known in Singh’s time as they are now, but he warns nevertheless of the course leading ultimately to the Chinese that India had envisioned for herself. The word ‘cooperative’ which occurred as the final phase of Mao’s policy was taken to be the golden mean between the Capitalist and Collectivist programs in India. It was to harmonize individualism with voluntary collectivization as per the second Five Year Plan, but Singh warns that the label of a ‘cooperative’ between members who are not economically autonomous would merely be a misnomer. He places much more emphasis on the similarities. Adequately summarised in his own words:

“Both are joint enterprises. Land, labour and capital resources are pooled both in a cooperative and a collective farm, and whatever production technique can be applied to one may be equally applied to the other. The effect on peasants-cum-labourers constituting the farm is similar in both cases and, from the point of view of agricultural production; there is nothing to choose between them.”<sup>15</sup>

Aside from minor differences, the cooperative vision regresses to collectivization on the Chinese model, and every criticism that applies to one applies to the other. Nevertheless, India’s second Five Year Plan’s insistence that “co-operative farming necessarily implies pooling of lands and joint management”<sup>16</sup> at an appropriate time in the future prompts the vast and rigorous analysis that occupies center stage for the rest of the book. Before embarking on the evaluation, Singh

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<sup>15</sup> Singh, Charan (1964), *India’s Poverty and Its Solution*, Asia Publishing House, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29.

considers it axiomatic that India's agricultural policy should be shaped by its unique natural conditions and commitments as a nation. Any dogmatic implementation of solutions from elsewhere, which didn't take into account these unique conditions, could not simply be copied and implemented in India.

Singh identifies the four conditions a solution would address: increase of total wealth/production, elimination of unemployment and underemployment, equitable distribution of wealth and the success of democracy. These, with the exception of the last, were the requirements of many postcolonial economies many of whom had taken to the Communist agricultural project as the blueprint for their development. Charan Singh couldn't disagree more.

### **Marx and the Peasant**

Charan Singh's critique of Marx comes from the same place as for Nehru: they are both urban men who do not understand the visceral nature of a peasant family's attachment to its land and the impact this relation brings to their productivity. Marx formulated his theory in industrialized England's economy, where hardly anybody was engaged in agriculture, let alone the hundreds of millions engaged on Indian soil.<sup>17</sup> For Singh, Marx simply generalized conclusions he arrived at in his analysis of industry and factories into the organic realm of agriculture, where the "economies of scale" – Marxism's entire argument for collectivization of land into large farms where mechanisation would inevitably lead to higher productivity – do not apply. Instead agriculture is constrained by land, and the cycle of productivity which is an organic process which no amount of mechanisation or technology can accelerate. Marx's predictions on agriculture and the future of the peasant are rubbished by Singh, and he cites that Marx himself had come to doubt his theory's predictions in post-colonial economies.

In any case, even if the Marxist doctrine were correct, it asked the wrong question as far as India's requirements were concerned, for it sought to maximize productivity per unit of labour. This was the same as the approach of advanced capitalist countries such as the USA, New

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<sup>17</sup> Around 20% of Britain's population was engaged in agriculture through the decades Marx formulated his theories, compared to 74% of India's workforce in 1959.

Zealand, Australia and Canada where there is a vast surplus of land over the labour available to till it. India's agricultural population, relative to its land, dictates an optimization of productivity per unit acre, as land becomes the limiting factor with so many families to be employed on a relatively fixed amount of area. According to this yardstick, an adequate agricultural policy would seek to maximize productivity per acre at the relative cost of land and capital, pointing towards intensive rather than extensive farming methods.

This requirement alone makes collectivization on Marxist principles flawed in India; combined with the Law of Diminishing Returns, which dictates that rise in productivity on a fixed agricultural area diminishes with the addition of each new member, it becomes counterproductive. India's foremost requirement since Independence was food security for its ballooning population and would remain for decades after the publication of this book. Famines were all too familiar in recent history, and concern about it was omnipresent in the thoughts of all thinkers. Maximizing overall production was a dire requirement, even at the expense of labor, and small farms were the way to go to achieve it. Singh declares with confidence:

“However, while in sheer theory, the size of the farm, in and of itself, did not affect production per acre, in actual practice and for reasons following, 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.”<sup>18</sup>

These “following reasons” include the peasant's attachment to his own land, animals and poultry, which motivates the peasant beyond the incentives provided on collective farms or capitalist labour on large farms. A peasant's family helps out on the land, charging nothing for it from the peasant, and it takes better care of the animals, poultry and soil which occur recurrently in the productivity cycle as an ecosystem. The collectivized farm, whose whole *raison d'être* of increased productivity stood refuted for Indian requirements, also performs poorly on these fronts. It relies more on machinery which produces less per acre than

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<sup>18</sup> Singh, Charan (1964), *India's Poverty and its Solution*, Asia Publishing House, p. 39.

the bullock plough, and artificial fertilizers that deteriorate the quality of soil over the long term. Charan Singh makes little of the last of the arguments for collectivization, viz., access to government machinery and credit, better technologies available on larger farms etc. and bitterly criticises the dogmatic acceptance of the “economies of scale” principle in agriculture, equating bigger with more productive.

### **Men vs Machines**

For a country like India where agriculture was by far the largest employer<sup>19</sup>, Singh maintains the use of machinery would lead to lesser employment for those joining the workforce as the population grew. Only if the wealth grew faster than the population growth would the net welfare of the country go forward, and for that to happen agriculture would have to gainfully employ its millions towards the ultimate goal of maximising returns per acre of land. These conditions necessitated production in small, independently owned holdings of land which were to strike a balance between the area of land and the number of peasant family units tilling it. Owing to the law of diminishing returns, collectivization could not produce these results if a large number of people were employed per unit of land. Furthermore, it would lead to disguised unemployment and underemployment, as the use of machinery reduces the need for labour in a scenario where labor is the most easily available of all the means of production: land, capital and labor.

Cheap labour, then, needs to be leveraged to produce the agricultural surplus, trade of which could be the road to industrialization and the expansion of the manufacturing and services industries in India. These expansions were imperatives as they were drivers of wealth and created more economic value per unit labour. To catch up with the West in competitive markets, an increase in the share of population engaged in the two sectors had to be driven up, mounted on an increase in the agricultural output and the availability of capital and labour released from agriculture. For that time, then, the resources available to India dictated a strategy which did not demand investment in industry or technology, whilst it provided employment to as many as it could at the cost of maximum yield where necessary. According to Singh, collectivization's

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<sup>19</sup> As per the 1951 census, 74% of India's labour force was engaged in agriculture.

benefits were predicated on large machinery and industry, which are both capital intensive and lead to freed surplus labor. These were simply not up to the mark to address India's problems.

### **Authoritarian footsteps**

Singh goes on to criticise the collectivist policy for its antipathy to the democratic principles India had adopted for herself. These principles are predicated on the individual, and Singh argues the bureaucratic and opaque superstructure that collectivization brings works against the democratic flow. In the case of China and Russia, where forced collectivization was implemented, it was a diktat of ideology and not of efficiency. The form of agricultural organisation was selected to conform to Communist principles and led to greater concentration of power in the hands of the government and Party officials through its access to means of production and the power to coerce membership by offering benefits, either directly or indirectly, to collective farms as opposed to small, independent ones.

Not only that, the State obtains a monopoly on production and purchase, deciding unilaterally the rewards and punishments for the commune, as well the price at which the peasants would sell to government, over and above a government-fixed limit the commune was obliged to give. Whether in China or the USSR large collectives facilitated an exploitation of the rural interests for the benefit of the urban and the overall regression of the government towards a full dictatorship. Singh's analysis is once again prescient, and foretells the close relations between collectivization and authoritarian control in the hands of the government that was to rear its ugly head in these nations.

Because the ambitious projects of industrialization dependant on the surplus produced by large-scale mechanized collectivized agriculture never took off on account of reduced productivity, the expansion of industry was exploitative of the rural peasantry whose living standards could be rationed by the government. For the sake of the individualism and democracy that Singh so cherished in an Indian citizen, and even more so in a self-cultivating peasant on his own land, these ramifications were abhorrent and he declared collectivization a failure.

The last chapter of the first half, titled "Impracticability of Large Scale Farming" makes a summary of the arguments cited above, and although

Singh leaves it to the readers' discretion if the government's policy meets all its challenges as defined, he does not leave his opinion secret. Psychologically and culturally for the Indian peasant, collectivization implies the uprooting of a whole way of life, which is bound to be met with resistance on the peasantry's part. It will reduce his productivity, and his willingness to care for collective land, animals and manure. A quick survey of the outcome of collectivization on output reveals that the policies did not meet desired results, and in large cases were carried out under orders from dictatorial regimes, or by aid of the USSR, whose assistance came at its price in policy. Wherever circumstances made allowances for it, the peasant sought to abandon the communes; perpetual coercion, therefore, had been required for their sustenance all along, even in the parent countries of USSR and China. Singh finishes with contemporary findings about the *Ejido* and *Kolkhoz* having proved failures in their respective countries and pronounces joint farming inadequate to India's needs.

### **An Alternate Vision**

The latter and larger portion of the book geared towards solutions sets for itself the same yardsticks by which it evaluates joint farming. It identifies land as the limiting factor in capital production that precedes mechanization and identifies surplus labour as a result of population as the means to generate that capital in India. Cheap labor could be dedicated to getting more land under cultivation and using the existing land to the fullest by intensive farming methods. This would generate capital which would, in turn, lead to better technologies to follow for both land and labour, slowly weaning the population away from agriculture to manufacturing and services, while population control would ensure that the increase in productivity is not drowned out by the increase in numbers to feed and sustain. Singh boils the essentials of the solutions down to "reclamation and redistribution of land, emigration to foreign countries, development of non-agricultural resources, intensive utilisation of our land resources and population control."<sup>20</sup> The chapters following each handle these aspects one after the other in an interconnected manner.

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<sup>20</sup> Singh, Charan (1964), *India's Poverty and its Solution*, Asia Publishing House, p. 176.

Reclamation of land and emigration turn out to be of little help on examination, as India already uses most of its arable land for cultivation, and the prospects of life as an emigrant for an Indian made Singh believe that the Indian immigrant would not find himself welcome in many parts of the world, certainly not in large numbers. He advocates land redistribution wherever possible but does not see much improvement in productivity resulting from it, as the land to be distributed in practical terms would not turn out to be a lot once all the government and state regulations are taken into account. Nevertheless, he proposes measures to organize land-redistribution for better results and lists out some of the possible dangers of the redistribution policy.

Singh's solution focuses simultaneously on the intensive utilization of land and developing non-agricultural livelihoods. Singh reiterates his comment that his strategy is not to promote agriculture-heavy interventions at the cost of the secondary and tertiary forms of employment and insists that the path to economic development goes inevitably through a decrease in the percentage of the population engaged in agriculture and other primary sector employment opportunities in favor of an increase in the Manufacture, Commerce and Services sector. Economically developed countries without exception demonstrate this distribution in their economic blueprints, and Singh regards this as a law:

“Land and mineral resources per head of the population being equal, and the quality of these resources and climatic conditions being similar, that country or region is comparatively more prosperous than others where more men are employed in non-agricultural activities than in agricultural”.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike agriculture, manufacture is a mechanical process, where for a fixed input a fixed outcome can be expected more or less in a fixed amount of time. It is also more flexible to changes in environment and markets, which agriculture – being an organic process – cannot guarantee. Agriculture is dependent on the crop-cycle, soil-conditions and the various levels of care taken of the soil and the produce. Power and machinery aren't available to increase production indefinitely to the agriculturist, putting a ceiling on his productivity in a given time

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 192.

or piece of land. He also works fewer hours than his counterpart in the manufacturing and services sector owing to the nature of his employment. Lastly, agriculture suffers from a lack of demand for its product and a superfluity of workers using suboptimal land for cultivation in the absence of other employment opportunities, especially in post colonialist economies, even more so in India.

Singh warns against more of the workforce engaging in agriculture in India, which had been on the rise since 1881.<sup>22</sup> He traces the beginning of the decline in colonial Britain's policies, which privileged Britain's markets and economy at the expense of once-flourishing Indian handicrafts and industry connected closely to agriculture. Thus, colonization turned India from an agriculture and village industries economy to a largely agricultural colony. He warns against the continuation of the trend even after Independence from Britain and posits diversification of labour as a prerequisite for economic growth.

Nehru's top-down plan of economic development favors industrialization as the means of boosting this diversification. It involved large-scale capital investments by the State into producing the infrastructure for heavy industry and machinery, while Singh's approach, influenced by Gandhi, argues for a 'bottom-up approach' where, in his own words, on "small-scale decentralised industry geared in with agriculture should predominate. The latter would also lay great emphasis on handicrafts and cottage or village industries."<sup>23</sup>

Singh adds 100 additional pages in this edition on why capital intensive industrialisation is not suitable for India, why agriculture is the means for economic progress and how to achieve this. Referring to Nehru's speech to the All India Congress Committee in September 1969, Singh says "The Prime Minister's argument about the relation or sequence between employment and production is naive, indeed. It assumes that, while handicrafts or small enterprises may provide comparatively more employment, they produce little or very little compared with large enterprises. It is this assumption which is responsible for an undue emphasis on heavy or capital-intensive industries in our country." He quotes Gandhi again and again in vivid juxtaposition to Nehru, as here "Perhaps, it would be a correct representation of Gandhiji's position

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 204.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 209.

to say that he approved establishment of heavy or capital-intensive industries for – and only for – purposes which could not be carried out on small scale, or for production of things which could not be manufactured by hand labour, that is, on the scale of handicrafts, or cottage industries. “But heavy industries,” he emphasized, “will occupy the least part of the vast national activity which will be carried on mainly in villages”.<sup>24</sup>

The two visions for growth are as sharply distinguished in approach as they are from the quarters they come from. Singh’s and Gandhi’s India lived in villages, while Nehru’s and the government’s effort was informed by the vast chasm between urban and rural interests and approaches. Apologists for industrialization gave the example of developed countries’ economies, their scales of production and their standards of living as self-evident proofs of the impact of mechanization on production and population control. Industrialism was deemed to usher in new employment opportunities away from just agriculture, and the large amount of Indian population was seen in and of itself as an asset in the form of a virtually inexhaustible workforce and internal market for the production and consumption of the fruits of industrialization. Singh was a soothsayer, for we know today that large scale manufacturing has destroyed jobs in India in the past three decades. In addition, increased mechanisation in production as well as the implementation of robotics and other technological advances has put even these fewer jobs at risk into the future.

Industrial thinking posits that migration to urban centers and a readjustment of the psychological and cultural conditions of the rural agricultural Indian would automatically lead to smaller families, higher education and population control, engendered by life in the city. Higher rates of taxation for the rich, coupled with the per capita increase in real income that comes from employment in non-agricultural sectors, would prove a source of equitable distribution of wealth, and the ultimate flourishing of democracy. Singh lists the above commonly cited reasons by the messiahs of industrialism, before he takes on a closer look at the fault lines surrounding each of the reasons.

Singh’s biggest target is the assumption that India’s large population, in and of itself, would prove a boon to industrialization as the Keynesian

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 210.

postulate “labour itself is capital”<sup>25</sup> dictates. Singh disagreed with this assumption and thought a vast unemployed population per unit land, with little ways to generate capital on its own, could never deliver the results on which Keynes’ predictions were made. For the industrialised economies, labour and demand were scarce, whereas availability of capital and supply were much less of a problem. India had an acute shortage of both capital and purchasing power per capita, and the increasing population would only make it worse if not checked.

Similarly, India could not aspire to emulate the developed countries’ model, as its conditions of capital formation were abysmal, and therefore the vast investments made on heavy industry and machinery would come at a dear cost to the country’s capital and foreign exchange, both of which would be tied up long term in the projects. It had no colonies to exploit to sustain industrialization’s hunger for capital and would need to produce all that it needed from a surplus on its agricultural output based on better yields from existing land and labour. Furthermore, insofar as industrialization would not be able to absorb all the surplus hands from agriculture at a fast-enough rate, the migration to cities envisioned in population control and socio-psychological readjustment thereof would also likely not occur.

Therefore, the conditions that led to industrialisation in the West could never be emulated in India, and industrialism could not be preferred to bottom-up schemes that took into account India’s realities. For any solution to work, it would have to incorporate these specifics: it would involve high labor-to-capital ratios, low investments on capital-intensive industries, (with the exception of the absolutely essential ones like that of steel, iron, electrification, railways etc.), and overall, as a target, optimization of output (and employment) per unit capital over output per head. From this point of requirement, small industries outperformed the ones based on heavy machinery, and cruder forms of technology than the “capitalist.”

Singh argues this goal assures proportionate rewards to a wider net of people for whom this form would generate employment, as opposed to the few for whom employment in the capital-intensive sectors indeed led to better wages, but whose number forever struggled to catch up with

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 223.

the rising rate of population. Singh's summary is succinct: "In a way, unemployment and consequent misery of millions of persons is the price that the country pays for profits of a few at the top."<sup>26</sup>

### **India Bottom Up**

Singh champions an economy based on an ecosystem of small scale, decentralised and cottage industries which would employ enhanced machinery on a smaller scale than massive mechanized farms or heavy industries, but Singh divorces this fact from the myth that bigger machinery automatically meant more output over all factors of concern. His arguments point repeatedly to Japan, where intensive farming on small farms was implemented along with capital investments on the improvement of farming methods and technology, which had provided innovation opportunities for machinery that was designed for small-scale enterprises. Singh points to the reversal in trend of ballooning machinery and factory sizes already underway in his time, and keeps a forward-looking approach to the decentralizing prospects of electricity, railways, better seeds etc. In fact, some of the most far-reaching predictions of the growing use of automation anticipate problems of today, long after Singh's time, whereas some of his hopes such as those from nuclear energy are far too optimistic.

Along with advancements in technology, Singh argues next for measures to increase the agricultural workforces' productivity, both by handing him better technology and by initiating changes in his training and attitude. This part of the work is the largest addition Singh makes to the text of his earlier 1959 work, and it serves to explain why the new work is titled *India's poverty and its solution*. Singh articulates in detail the changes in the attitudes and innovations with respect to agriculture imperative for economic growth, explains agriculture's primacy over industrialism as the number one priority for a densely populated agricultural sub-continent, and finally details precise ways for increasing agricultural production in keeping with the conditions and endowments prevalent in the Indian countryside.

He begins by cautioning against "the idea that economic development is primarily a matter of investment or introduction of new machines

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 255.

and production processes.”<sup>27</sup> Development of the quality of the human factor is equally important as the vigor, intelligence and character of a country's workforce can either sail or sink its endowments of capital and other natural resources. Singh points towards the rehabilitation of Japan and Germany after World War I as an example of the same and worries about the innovative propensity and capabilities alike of the Indian population on account of their literacy, health, social organization and religious attitudes. The government, too, by its lopsided preference for heavy industry and its composition based largely on urban, foreign-educated men (mostly), had not helped matters either by failing to spend enough on education and health of the average citizen, as well as failing to inspire a change in the attitudes of the peasantry by their personal lives and conduct like Mahatma Gandhi had done.

As a result, the peasant was caught in a vicious cycle: he is unable to produce more on account of ill health, and because he doesn't receive enough nutrition his health does not improve. Similarly, because only agricultural surplus can lead to capital formation in an agricultural economy the peasant needs to produce more, but in order to produce more he needs to invest capital towards improved technology and tools which lead to better yields. Thus, while production remains at subsistence level the peasant is wont to spare any of his produce for capital production, and hence his propensity to innovate, as well as the tendency for small industry to grow around the use and processing of surplus produce, is negligible.

Added to these is the illiteracy of the average peasant, which prevents him from innovating on his own, and makes it harder for the government to introduce new methods and technologies. Opportunities for technical education, in agriculture especially, were few and far between, while wherever higher education was available it served to engender an attitude geared towards the thinking of the West and a revulsion towards taking to the soil. As a result the educated men and women of the also contributed little towards agricultural innovation, while their enchantment with the West led to an aspiration to replicate their standards, visible in the wages of industrial workers or treatment of prisoners in a country that can ill afford to follow those standards.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 312.

Singh points to the attitudes of the peasantry itself, which considered the material world as something to be shunned instead of mastered owing to the religious attitudes prevalent in India for millennia. Absent this attitude, as in North America before colonization, there can be plenty of resources and yet no propensity for innovation and development, despite all efforts at the governmental level which assume that the country is interested in alleviating its conditions of poverty and contribute towards national development. In fact, Singh contends that the caste system so thoroughly divides the Indian society into self-serving strata that it precludes any development of a national feeling or propensity for cooperation so critical to increasing agricultural productivity. He asks for concerted effort to change the attitudes of the peasantry towards hard work and cooperation, while urging the government to think of health and education as investments in themselves at par, or better, than capital-intensive industries.

Singh calls clearly for the demolition of caste in Indian society, naming it a “cultural inheritance that is out of date” and “the caste system, leading directly to the fragmentation of Indian society is a great hindrance to common economic endeavour” and “thus, represents a most thorough-going attempt known to human history to introduce absolute inequality as the guiding principle in social relationships.”<sup>28</sup>

He then advances to explain how agricultural production as a priority would lead to economic development. He argues that only a rise in real income per capita can work as a driver of progress of a country with abysmal rates of capital formation like India, and since such a rise can only occur through a priority given to agriculture. Agriculture not only provides the basic necessities of food for the country, but also furnishes raw material for consumer industries such as textiles, jute, tobacco, oilseeds etc. While Singh concedes that it benefits from the consumer goods (shoes, clothes, books etc.) and capital goods (iron tools, diesel pumps, fertilizers etc.) industries respectively, along with the growing demands of an urban industrialized population which provide a market for agricultural products, in the final analysis, agriculture can subsist without the fruits of industrialization as it had before the advent of machinery. By contrast, industry must necessarily

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 328.

depend upon agriculture to feed its workers and provide raw materials for its products.

Furthermore, in India where agriculture was by far the largest source of income and employment, only an increase in surplus agricultural output could put money in the pockets of the masses, leading to the creation of an internal market for the products of industrialization. Surplus agricultural produce could be exported to gain crucial foreign exchange instead of spending it as India did on importing food grains. It contributed to capital formation for innovation and further growth in indigenous agricultural industries, and a decrease in vast unemployment and underemployment as a consequence. This growth, in turn, would increase output per unit land and unit labour, leading to the freeing of labour employed in agriculture to take up occupation in non-agricultural sectors, leading to a stop in the subdivision of land holdings to the point that they became uneconomical for agriculture.

Singh points, once again, to intensive farming on small farms with the help of innovations in technique and better utilization of natural endowments as opposed to tractors and artificial fertilizers. He advocates masonry wells, tanks and contour *bundhies* in the place of large, capital-intensive irrigation projects which tie in capital and precious foreign exchange, while providing delayed returns. Such delays lead to rise in prices in the short run, while the peasantry which is to use the resource cannot do much to accelerate its creation. By contrast, mason wells and *bundhies* can be made by the farmers themselves, are cost-effective and finish in a short span of time.

Lastly, Singh proposes measures to enhance productivity of the land itself by proper soil conservation and utilization. He critiques the assumption that farm machinery equaled 'advanced technology' compared to the bullock cart in terms of yield and its effect on the topsoil. He is against use of artificial fertilizers which have an adverse effect on soil fertility and crop resistance to diseases. Instead he suggests material available in the peasant ecosystem itself, including cow dung, which serves as excellent manure and is readily available to farmers.

The final section of the book discusses the rise of India's already large population, which, if left unchecked, would undo all the efforts of increasing wealth by providing a proportionate number of mouths to

feed. It leads to rise in unemployment and inflation, and an overcrowding in the agricultural sector and villages of the country beyond the ability of the land to sustain human life. He explains “underdevelopment” and “overpopulation” as relative concepts, each dependent on resource utilization per capita, and argues against apologists who insisted that increase in population could be sustained by proportional increase in technology and yield, as well as those holding the prejudice that Indians had higher rates of population increase than Western countries. He advocates State measures to incentivize smaller families via propaganda and policy. Singh’s usual methods derive from his Gandhian training of self-discipline, but Singh does not shy away from discussing other solutions of population control that the State should incentivize. He proposes postponement of the average marriage age by five years and includes for good measure the procedure of vasectomy being much easier for men should take the lead in voluntary methods of family control. He advocates sensitization of the country on the impact of population growth and the need for birth control, until such time as the industrialization project can be achieved, which would bring about a change in attitude that leads to urban nuclear families – an automatic, though roundabout, way of birth control.

### **Conclusion**

Separated from its preceding edition *Joint Farming X-rayed* by five years, *India’s Poverty and its Solution* indicates Charan Singh’s increased confidence in his analysis of the problems and solutions of India’s progress since 1947. We see clearly the larger canvas to which Singh’s mind had moved by 1964. He saw the mistakes made by Nehru in 1945 by rejecting Gandhi’s understanding of India as a rural nation, and felt it was yet possible to correct course. The name and enhanced content of this edition puts its purpose front and centre at a time when India was rapidly acquiring the reputation of a beggar in the international community on account of its growing food scarcity and dependence on foreign aid. What this edition retains is its commitments to intellectual rigor, objectivity, and an immense scope and ambition so rare in a work by any politician, especially one who swims so vigorously against the tide of common thought.

The book retains an emphasis on maximal land utilization as the sine

qua non for progress. It is by this principle that he organises his critique, from which a picture of his proposed solution grows. Much of Singh's thought is structured in this organic manner, one factor connecting to the other, and ultimately grounded in ground reality, like an ecosystem. This lends the book's arguments a cohesive quality as it transitions from a discussion of the problems to one of solutions and provides it an unusual intellectual honesty. Singh presents a dispassionate analysis of a vast amount of empirical data from myriad disciplines and societies across different continents, geographies, and stages of economic development. The additions he makes provide a view to problem-solving for rural areas as well as industry that can only be the product of a mind well-versed in extraordinary detail with the village way of life, their ethos and their factor endowments.

When Charan Singh delivered his speech in opposition to the Nagpur Resolution, former President of India Giani Zail Singh<sup>29</sup> had remarked upon the formidable nature of Singh's arguments, bolstered by facts, saying he could see no way for the case to be refuted given the evidence.<sup>30</sup> In this edition, Charan Singh adds to his blunt opposition to this Resolution when he states 'While it betrays a confusion of thought there are several aspects that are sinister in the implications' and goes on to point out specific inconsistencies in the text and specifically quotes Nehru's 'confused' thought at some length. It is remarkable how firmly he yet stands by his principles, with direct and measurable cost to his standing in the Congress party and thus the advancement of his political career. Much of history's march since the publication of this work has borne out Zail Singh's observation and Charan Singh's analysis of the impact of collectivization on democracy and agricultural output.

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<sup>29</sup> Giani Zail Singh (1916–1994) was the seventh President of India from 1982 to 1987. A lifelong Congressman, he had held several ministerial posts in the Union Cabinet including that of Home Minister. He wrote in *Kitni Khoobiaan Thi Is Insaan Mein*, Asli Bharat. December 1990, p. 20. CS Papers NMML. "I got an opportunity to hear Chaudhary Saheb's inspiring speech at the Nagpur session. ... Chaudhary Saheb vigorously opposed the Collective Farming proposal brought by Panditji. I was spell bound by Chaudhary Saheb's hour-long fluent speech. Panditji listened carefully to Chaudhary Saheb's powerful speech, and even smiled. In the pandal, there was all round clapping when Panditji moved the resolution, but after Chaudhary Saheb's speech it seemed as if the tables had been turned. Panditji replied to Chaudhary Saheb, and though not agreeing with Panditji, we had to support him because such was the force of his personality then. I know for sure that had I been in Panditji's place I would not have been able to argue the case put forth by Chaudhary Saheb."

<sup>30</sup> Lohit, Harsh S. (2018), *Charan Singh: A Brief Life History*, Charan Singh Archives, p. 24.

Collective farming is today nowhere to be seen and when viewed from the prism of this work it does not come as a surprise.

In a short year from the printing of this book, the great Nehru would be gone, and three years on Singh would desert the political party to which he had given all of his life and energy. His decisive intellectual break in 1959 led gradually to his political break in 1967.

Singh's analysis anticipates, in part, the horrors of which the world was to become aware after news finally broke about the price Mao's China had paid for 'The Great Leap Forward', or Stalinist Russia for her own agricultural needs and outputs as a result of forced collectivization with the incentive to accelerate industrialization. It presents a fair amount of evidence available to his contemporaries before the news from China or Russia became common knowledge, shedding unique light on the impact of Marxist ideology and the personality of India's pre-eminent leader Nehru on national policy at the cost of empirical data. As for the issues it addresses, this text makes common cause with the agrarian crisis that today worries the citizenry on burning issues of unemployment, urban-bias in government, the impact of chemical fertilizers on soil fertility<sup>31</sup> and deforestation on soil-erosion.

For all the analysis available to us today, the solutions Singh proposed have been relegated to the junkyard of policy history. Nehru's conviction about industrialization as the only way forward for the economy sidelined the incipient Gandhian project of which Charan Singh was a lifelong defender. Not only that, a prototype economy on Gandhian principles doesn't exist anywhere on the globe today and unlike joint farming it has never been duly tested. Singh's decentralised, individualistic model for the economy borrows from Gandhi and derives much of the intellectual force of its critique of Industrialism and Marxism from this perspective which puts a premium on individual effort above all else. Here is a merger of Singh's peasant upbringing and the all-pervading influence of Gandhi's worldview, one that vowed to remake India on principles that are closer to her home in the village and her office in the fields.

Some criticism of fellow Gandhians, such as Vinoba Bhave and

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<sup>31</sup> Charan Singh is the only Indian politician of stature I know of who had read all of Albert Howard's *Agricultural Testament* (written in 1943) and who has quoted it at length to buttress his own views on the necessity of chemical-free soil and agriculture. Howard is the acknowledged 'father' of Western organic farming.

his *Bhoodan* movement, indicate despite Gandhi's deep and abiding influence on Charan Singh's thinking on economic and social issues, his modifications were guided by personal experience and empiricism. Gandhian thought has often been criticised for its supposedly utopian and protectionist nature, including of course its aversion to technology that eliminates human labor. How these ideas would have worked out if implemented after Independence will never be known, though it is certainly worth speculation.

Singh's book makes a compelling case for a path to India's development on his alternate model. It asks much of the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural in order to walk the Gandhian path. It provides an alternative which works against the lopsidedness that the modern version of 'development' as progress brings, with its cities impoverishing the villages over the long term. More importantly, it speaks earnestly and scholarly on behalf of the interests it represents: the village and its population that bears the brunt of this lopsidedness, and whose poverty of credible representatives amongst the circles of influence makes this an important work as a unique alternative picture of India.

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