

Sunday, October 23, 2011

The misunderstood leader

An Indian Political Life: Charan Singh and Congress Politics, 1937 to 1961

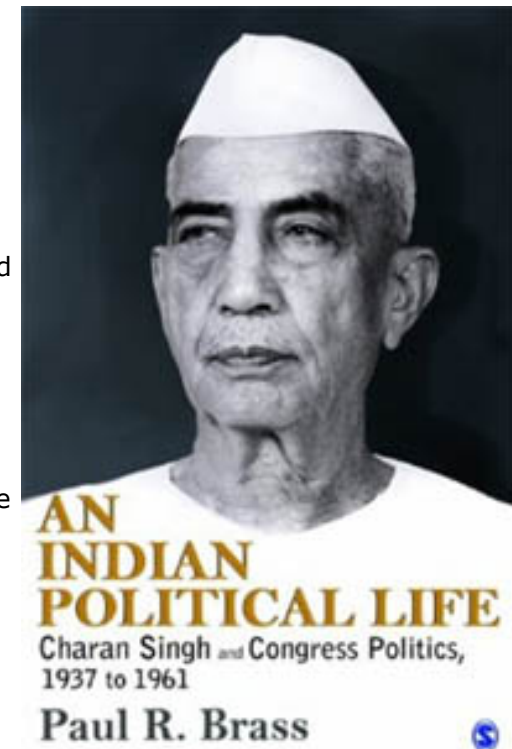
By Paul R. Brass.

Sage. Pages 575. Rs 895.

Reviewed by Kanwalpreet

PAUL R. BRASS is Professor (Emeritus) of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle, and is a name to reckon with. He has been visiting India, especially Uttar Pradesh, for research since 1961, and no research by any student is complete without reference to Brass's books. This book traces the life of Charan Singh, a politician who played a decisive role in the politics of Uttar Pradesh and later, on the national platform.

Charan Singh aimed to be a leader of the peasants. "His dream was that of a countryside in which the model figure would be the efficient farmer, improving and developing his land". Unfortunately, Charan Singh's dream hasn't been fulfilled even today. Urban and rural disparities exist even in the present times. His arguments were simple; if there was ceiling on large landholdings, then there should be ceiling on urban properties and income, too. He spoke about achieving self-respect for the



downtrodden Indian farmer. That is why he rejected Jawaharlal Nehru's idea of joint co-operative farming.

Brass brings forth the various facets of Charan Singh in an impartial manner. He devotes a lot of time and energy studying the struggle for power between Charan Singh and his rivals like C.B. Gupta, Rafi Ahmad Kidwai, Kailash Prakash among others. Brass cleverly weaves the cause and effects of factionalism and introduces his reader to the relentless race for power in which no stone is left unturned—friends become rivals and unprincipled politics become the order of the day. Factionalism is traced from the village level and how it corrupts as it moves to the national level. Charan Singh was a dedicated nationalist who felt that power should be used for the benefit of the country. Brass exposes the various links in the chain of attaining power.

The book also traces the working of the Congress Party, the party that claims to give Indians their freedom. The Congress was infested with factionalism at all levels. Sometimes, leaders at the national level, Brass feels, encouraged factionalism at the local level to draw support from the masses. Charan Singh spoke against the Special Economic Zones, which, he felt, helped in grabbing land from the peasant at throwaway prices and was given to private property dealers who reaped benefits. Ghaziabad is an example.

Brass traces the growth of caste, casteism and communalism before and after the first general elections. Uttar Pradesh was then a large state. The going-ons in the state could be said to be a reflection of the happenings in the other states. Therefore, Charan Singh's role during that time has to be studied to understand the larger picture.

Charan Singh, as we learn, used his resignation at many times to prove his point. Brass writes that this tool was effectively used by Charan Singh to mould his seniors who respected his integrity, though they were not very happy with his frankness which was often tantamount to bluntness. At other times, the resignation did not have the desired effect.

Brass has pondered over every material that he has managed to lay his hands on. He has gone through the personnel files, letters and diaries of Charan Singh to know the man and his thoughts. Charan Singh replied to people who wrote to him offering suggestions. Those letters have also been dissected to give a near-accurate picture of the leader who aspired to be a leader of reckoning yet who remained simple throughout his life. As S. Gurdish Singh Grewal, a senior lawyer in Punjab who knew the leader, says, "Ch. Charan Singh is the most misunderstood leader of our times". Paul Brass set about to correct this expression.

This book is the first volume covering an era from 1937 to 1961. Brass promises to bring forth two more volumes that would deal with the Emergency in India and Charan Singh's role in the formation of the Janata Party that defeated the Congress in the 1977 elections and the volume would culminate with the death of Charan Singh in 1987. The volumes are eagerly awaited.

