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# INCARNATIONS

## INDIA IN 50 LIVES

SUNIL KHILNANI

BBC  
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# Incarnations

India in 50 Lives

Sunil Khilnani



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PENGUIN BOOKS

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# Charan Singh

## A Common Cause

### 1902–1987

How wealthy does a developing country have to become before it has a distinct class known as the poor? When, in popular imagination, are 'the impoverished' no longer synonymous with 'the people'? For India, that moment came first in the cities, where a professional elite emerged under the British and manufacturing produced, in addition to textiles and trinkets, a politically significant lower-middle class. But semi-feudal rural India appeared to these Indian elites, even at Independence, as a vast, undifferentiated mass of abjectness. In the West, the image was of ribs sticking out, begging bowls and desperation – a mental picture upon which chubby Western children were commanded to eat every last bite of their dinners.

But rural India had hierarchies as intricate as they were rigid; you just had to get closer to see them. Charan Singh, the bright, methodical child of better-off-than-average Meerut peasants, saw. He came from an oppressed cultivating caste, the Jats, and grew up to be a lawyer, then a politician, in the United Provinces (later Uttar Pradesh). He melded a generations-old knowledge of rural life with an analytical study of land reforms and agricultural subsidies

Charan Singh on his way to the farmers' rally in New Delhi on 23 December 1978, with a plough over his shoulder.







around the world to do something in North India that doesn't happen much in the country: he redistributed power and altered the social structure – without violence.

'India's villages are the colonies of the city,' Singh often complained about Nehruvian India. Today, he's remembered as a nemesis of the Nehrus: the politician who took on Indira Gandhi in the Congress party's heartland, ending its stranglehold on the national government and becoming prime minister. That his term swiftly unravelled through infighting and political treachery, and that his personality was short of panache, tends to obscure what he achieved before failing when he reached the top. Step by step, reform by reform, he became the first national public figure in India's long history to plausibly claim to represent the rural landed peasant. That's especially striking given the vast numbers of Indians involved in agriculture – probably more than in any other country. Charan Singh's life is a window onto that world.

Against the driving Nehru-era concerns of urbanization, industrialism and making India a world power, Singh prosecuted a slimmer agenda: making the rural farmer as productive and prosperous as possible. From that, he argued, all else would follow. 'Agriculture is the first condition,' he once said. 'Our people live in the villages; 72 per cent of our workers are now engaged in agriculture. So unless agricultural production goes up – unless there is purchasing power with the people – non-agricultural employments will not come up. Industry will not develop. Commerce will not develop. Transport will not develop. Unless these develop, there will be no improvement in the living standard of our people.'

The British had allowed Indian agriculture to stagnate before Independence; from 1911 to 1941, per capita access to grains decreased by a third. After Independence, there was truth in the novelist Vikram Seth's crack in *A Suitable Boy* that North India's entrenched, upper-caste landlords weren't pulling their weight in the fledgling nation: 'For most of the landlords the primary question



of management was not indeed how to increase their income but how to spend it.' Roughly 20,000 such landlords owned 60 per cent of land in the United Provinces. Singh's legislative drives played a major role in changing that. Over the course of the 1950s, after centuries of dominance, those landlords were forced to share turf and political influence with some of the people who ploughed and sowed. This and other successful political campaigns on behalf of farmers would in time help give North India a rural middle class.

Although his vision of rural development was not nearly as inclusive as he claimed, and was only partially realized, Singh would, over a political career that spanned six decades, change the fortunes of millions and millions of villagers. And yet the full bill for that achievement – from caste tension to increased rural inequality to near-catastrophic water depletion – is still being paid to this day.



*And in the winter nights we would wrap rice stalks in old discarded clothes, and then hide under that. What did we know what a quilt was? We didn't even know what shoes were!*

United Provinces sharecropper Ram Dass

To study old photographs from UP villages like the one where Ram Dass lived is to be reminded of how rural history writes upon the body. Mughal governments from the time of **Akbar (16)** had empowered large landholders, known as *zamindars*, to collect rents and taxes from the peasants, and to serve as moneylenders. The British, who considered the *zamindars* natural leaders, yeomen of the subcontinent, entrenched that tradition. So by the twentieth century, many of this elect were pale and smooth from generations of living in palatial homes that protected them from sun and rain; they were tall and broad from generations of being amply fed; they were loose-limbed from generations of being spared the daily, aching stoop to sow. At first glance, they might appear to be a different race from the manual workers whose labour funded their lifestyles,



a race whose muslin and silken robes could house two or three farmers within them.

The power of the zamindars, who were mainly Brahmin or Rajput, was challenged in a series of peasant movements between 1919 and 1921, when Charan Singh was in his late teens. A young Nehru had experienced rural India for the first time when he came out to support the peasants, who wanted to organize and become part of the Congress. But the agitation was put down by local power and tepid support from a Congress reluctant to alienate the rich landowners whose backing they needed. The British weakened the zamindars' power a little, beginning in the 1930s, but you can get a glimpse of how potent the system remained from an essay about the peasantry written by a landlord and politician in 1935:

[The villager] is a willing tool in the hands of any self-seeking, intelligent man . . . His political life is blank. He is completely ignorant of his rights and privileges. Any man with a little knowledge or power can lord it over him.

While the zamindars were essentially middlemen for the government, Singh's people, the Jats – a caste whose men and women actually worked the fields – didn't see them that way. The people to whom the Jats directly paid what they considered exploitative rents on their land seemed larger in their minds than the regional politicians and Brahmin bureaucrats with whom they rarely dealt. The zamindars were unwavering objects of Jat resentment, and became the target of Singh's first successful legislative campaign.

From early on, Singh had conceived of himself as not just a representative, but a rescuer, of his people. This was in part because he had advantages many of them lacked. He was uncommonly tall and handsome, and though he'd grown up 'under a thatched roof supported by *kachcha* mud walls', as he often put it, his father had worked his way from tenant farming to ownership of more acres than the average peasant farmed. This allowed Singh a crucial bounce off the socioeconomic springboard: he was able to study



science and history at Agra College, after which he was called to the bar. His practice lasted barely a few years: his long-term objective had been politics all along.

After joining Gandhi's civil disobedience movement, in 1930, and doing jail time for it, Singh rapidly ascended the Congress hierarchy. In 1937, at the age of thirty-four, he was one of the Congressmen elected to the new Legislative Assembly of the United Provinces. A protégé of the powerful conservative provincial operative Gobind Ballabh Pant, he was by the 1950s respected in his own right, at high political levels, for the size of his following of farmers. The peasant's son had risen from district-level politics to state politics by pulling off something that many earlier Indian social reformers had longed to do: convince peasants to make common cause with each other as a class, *across* their caste affiliation. This was a significant practical as well as a conceptual advance, for Jats on their own made up a paltry 1.2 per cent of the UP population – hardly a numerical force sufficient to confront centuries-old power structures.

In pre-Independence campaigns for debt relief for rural workers, and against rapacious traders, one of Singh's recurring themes was that farmers were habitually betrayed both by rural elites and by the urban dwellers who dominated nationalist politics and were often as unconcerned about farming as the British. To Singh, farmers were not just a majority; they were an intellectual resource, possessing under-utilized knowledge of how to expand the food economy and address poverty, including their own. But instead of being heard, they had become the nation's beasts of burden – a problem for state policy, rather than makers of it.



When you read speeches Charan Singh made to his followers, his populist riffs and habit of referring to himself in the third person seem almost demagogic. But to *hear* Charan Singh address a crowd



was to be in the presence, not of some Indian Fidel Castro but of anti-charisma. The social scientist and politician Yogendra Yadav recalls going as a teenager to hear Singh speak in his small Haryana town: 'There was no attempt to please the masses. He asked people to either sit down or leave, then went on to give a one-hour-long, school-teacher-like lecture on the political economy of Indian agriculture. This is the last thing you expect from a major politician who's out there to woo the public, but it quite characterized who he was – plain, straight, no-nonsense and to the point.'

Singh was probably more naturally suited to writing, and his many books and pamphlets on rural policy are exhaustively argued. While Russia produced more than a dozen agrarian intellectuals, and China produced a few, Singh may have been independent India's one and only. But that's part of what's affecting about the size of his following: it wasn't necessary for him to deliver stem-winders at the stump, because millions of peasants understood that he, one of their own, was in a better position to fight for their interests than anyone had ever been before.

Unlike Nehru, Singh was deeply sceptical of policies to create agricultural cooperatives, pointing to the unimpressive productivity rates that followed Russian collectivization. (Nehru would, after several such policy failures of his own, come to agree.) Instead, Singh thought that undermining the zamindari system and strengthening access to land at the 'base of the pyramid' would help India avoid not only class conflict, but also food shortages and famine.

Immediately upon Independence, after at least six years of study, Singh issued a manifesto to that end. Five years later, in 1952, legislation he had designed – the historic UP Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act – became law. The Act gave some tenant farmers secure claim to their land, allowed their children to inherit it, and eliminated the role of zamindars in collecting revenue from them. The Act didn't wholly dispossess the zamindars, however: they



kept land historically under their personal cultivation (an unfortunately expandable category) and received government payment for land they had to divest – compromises the Congress was obliged to make to keep the support of the rural rich. While the effects of the legislation were further softened by corruption in its implementation, something significant had doubtless been achieved. Zamindari ceased across 60.2 million of the states' 72.6 million acres. The peasant's son had created a new class of landowners in the United Provinces.



The thought that land had become the peasant's and his children's property 'in perpetuity', Singh wrote in 1959, 'lightens and cheers his labour and expands his horizon'. He went on, 'The feeling that he is his own master, subject to no outside control, and has free, exclusive and untrammelled use of his land drives him to greater and greater effort.'

Who were these happy, productive beneficiaries of UP's land reform? A reliable way to wind up Singh, later in life, was to accuse him of having created an Indian version of the Russian kulaks – that rich, entitled peasant class that Lenin described as 'profiteers, who fatten on famine'.

Singh had set a high cap (30 acres) on the land an individual farmer could own, against helping a greater number of peasants; and favouritism in the implementation of the new law further excluded weaker farmers. Soon after, another of Singh's legislative achievements – consolidating fragmented land holdings to help farmers increase their efficiency – gave further advantages to already somewhat advantaged peasants. Not coincidentally, many of them were Jats from Singh's home region, in western UP.

In any country, land reforms addressing immense disparities between landowners and tenant farmers create finer grades of inequality. But I wonder if Singh might have been more thoughtful



about diminishing this risk had his view of the economic behaviour of village farmers not been so rosy. The peasant, Singh contended, wasn't a normal capitalist actor. Rather, his traditional values and staunch character rendered him less money-obsessed and more virtuous than, say, a factory worker. Even when employing others to help tend his fields, he claimed, the farmer didn't exploit them.

It was probably good for the statistical incidence of apoplectic stroke in India that landless UP peasants – mainly Dalits who worked for cultivators like the Jats – had been systematically denied the leisure and education to read the collected pamphletary of Charan Singh. The lot of the landless had been touched by land reform in only one important way: a larger and more diverse group of people were now able to work them like animals and pay them little, when they got around to it. And because Singh fought to keep farmers, even very rich ones, exempt from meaningful taxation – something true to this day in UP and all across rural India – there was little wealth for a state in the agrarian heartland to redistribute.

Even now, landless Dalits view the Jats with as much distrust as the Jats had once viewed the zamindars. Though that animosity of course predated Singh, he intensified it. Through a long career in which he rhetorically positioned himself as an advocate of the masses, he initiated very little for his most needy constituents. Meanwhile, by the late 1960s, it was becoming hard to argue that his sustained largesse to cultivators had trickled down and created a better-fed populace. When modern India's first famine threatened, it was in eastern UP – not because there was not enough grain, but because the poorest lacked the cash to buy it.



At a time when Indian poverty required urgent political action, Singh's view – that preferences and subsidies given to his base of farmers would transform the wider economy – placed him at odds with the Congress, which had to appease constituencies other than



farmers. So, in 1967, Singh quit the party, announcing he was fed up with its corruption and incompetence. The Congress instantly felt the effects of losing his support. Within three weeks, the state government fell. Singh, at the head of a coalition of opposition parties, became UP's first non-Congress chief minister – a historic achieve-



Charan Singh addresses an audience of roughly one million peasant farmers at the rally in New Delhi in 1978.

ment in the heartland of Congress politics. It was a lesson he would apply nationally in the 1970s, to take on Indira Gandhi.

'The farmers are forgotten by this government,' Singh lectured on his seventy-sixth birthday to an audience massed on the broad avenue leading from India Gate up to Parliament House in Delhi. It was 1978. After imprisonment during the Emergency, he had achieved a sweet revenge, forming a joint opposition party that



brought down Indira Gandhi's government. Now he wanted to be India's first peasant prime minister. The audience he addressed was unprecedented in the capital: nearly a million farmers in dhotis and turbans, many of whom, said a *New York Times* report, were still dusty from their work in the fields.

Some in the foreign press saw the crowds as threatening and abject, but that got their relative position in Indian life quite wrong. Indira Gandhi had in the previous ten years averted famine and drastically reduced the country's dependency on foreign food aid, which had once allowed Lyndon Johnson's agriculture secretary to gloat, 'We had them over a barrel and squeezed them.' India's so-called Green Revolution – one of the final economic policy initiatives of Indira Gandhi's father – had entered its second decade, and high-yield seed varieties, tube wells and fertilizers were increasing food stores, if depleting the environment. So Singh and the farmers who gathered weren't merely begging for help; they were demanding that their vast newfound political power be rewarded. Many of the subsidies and tax breaks farmers (including fabulously wealthy ones) receive today for water, electricity, fertilizer and machinery can be found in the budget demands Singh made after his followers' strength was impressed upon Delhi. By the next year, 1979, those farmers had helped him gain the prime ministership.

That's the happy moment on which the children's-book version of the story ought rightly to end, because the denouement was fast and ugly. Members of his coalition quickly turned against one another, and Singh was gone from the highest office in a trice (just twenty-four days in power, though he remained a caretaker prime minister for several months), replaced by a returning Indira Gandhi. Decades later, we are yet to see another genuine member of the peasant class rise to become a serious contender for prime minister.

As the political economist Terence Byres says, Singh was in the vanguard of Indian 'capitalism from below', but today his popular legacy is oddly diminished. He's thought of mainly as the leader of



his own caste, the Jats. As Yogendra Yadav argues, Singh's 'inability to speak for different classes of Indian farmers, especially his inability or unwillingness to speak about the landless farmers, has proved to be a very severe limitation of his legacy'.

Though the Jats prospered during Charan Singh's lifetime, in more recent years some of the state subsidies and favourable pricing mechanisms that enabled them to do so have shrunk, leaving them more exposed to the market. Many have invested their profits in small businesses – furniture and metal workshops, real estate – and are seeking ways out of agriculture. A caste that has not traditionally valued education, Jats are now pressing to be recognized as one of the less privileged caste communities, known as the Other Backward Classes, eligible for reservations or affirmative action in educational places and government jobs. I wonder what Charan Singh would have made of the fact that the people whose farming skills he celebrated and defended are themselves giving up on the land.

*'Incarnations* makes the mind fly across time, place and history. You may smile as, mentally, you walk alongside Khilnani up some flinty slope. You will keep thinking about what he said long after'

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