

Paul R. Brass, *An Indian Political Life: Charan Singh and Congress Politics*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications. *Volume 1, 1937 to 1961*. 2011. 575 pages. ₹950; *Volume 2, 1957 to 1967*. 2012. 475 pages. ₹1,050; *Volume 3, 1967 to 1987*. 2014. 309 pages. ₹995.

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Paul Brass (PB) met Charan Singh (CS) in 1962 after he had written *Factional Politics in an Indian State: The Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh*, his first book, which CS had read; CS told Brass that he had been much too kind to him. Recognizing perhaps a kindred soul, the author kept in touch with CS over the years, and developed a rapport with him which resulted in CS agreeing to give Brass access to the entire set of files he had kept carefully over the years during his long career at the district, state and central levels, containing speeches, statements, letters and notes on important events and issues, including acerbic differences with his colleagues over policy. In writing these volumes, PB felt he had to do full justice to the wealth of material in the archives, not just on CS, for the light they threw on the whole texture of politics and administration in UP in all its grittiness, ‘groupism and venality’, and on the recent history of north India generally. This multiplicity of objectives explains why this work is so long, about 1,350 pages spread over three volumes. Perhaps, Brass is atoning for not having produced the work before CS passed away in 1987 (he says CS was disappointed, but was too good to say so). The length is also the result of the author’s excursions into a variety of topics for which CS’s concerns at the time are no more than a peg. Many of these topics are sought to be brought up to date by field visits and supplementary material and hundreds of interviews between 1961 and 2010.

The result is a meticulous and yet highly readable history of the life and times of CS. Although there is considerable overlap between the volumes, with the first taking us through district- and state-level politics to 1959 when CS resigned from the state cabinet after many years as agriculture and revenue minister, portfolios which enabled him to make his greatest contribution, land reform in UP. The second deals with the decline of the Congress as the dominant party in the state and the sources of CS’s discontent with it, leading to his defection in 1967 to form a new party and to the emergence of non-Congress politics at the state level. Volume 3 deals with his two stints as chief minister leading coalition governments, his long and complicated struggle with Indira Gandhi, who sought to regain control of the state before and during the emergency, and all too briefly, his stints in the central government as home, finance and then prime minister.

The picture that emerges is of a politician with a very unusual combination of qualities. Not only was CS scrupulously honest, he was what we would call today ‘issues oriented’. He had a firmly held world view and policy beliefs, which he stuck to rigidly, and which explain his loyal following and steadily growing appeal at the time among the vast number of medium and small cultivators in north India (and certainly not just Jats, who are a relatively small group). Third, and as a consequence, he did not have to depend on the politics of patronage, or of dispensing favours to caste and group followers, political allies, and government servants (who most politicians cultivate for some future advantage in a mutually beneficial relationship), unlike rivals like CB Gupta and the vast majority of his other colleagues who were interested mainly in ‘persons, postings and positions’. He did have a tendency to jump ship, which led to charges of ambition and opportunism, but it was employed in life-long pursuit of a cause.

Volume 1 is perhaps the strongest, with a clear and comprehensive exposition of the main components of his land reforms when he was agriculture and revenue minister: the abolition of intermediaries or zamindars between the state and cultivators, which gave erstwhile tenants the ownership rights and security of tenure required for land improvements, and later for investments under the Green Revolution; consolidation of holdings; and third, a ceiling on landholding size (which was not expected to lead to a redistribution of land, but to prevent the emergence of large holdings in the future, an objective not

always achieved as discussed in the chapter in this volume on land grabbing in the Tarai). Another component of his land reform was the prohibition of tenancy (except on the part of the aged, inform and handicapped). This was to prevent concentration of holdings in the future under the guise of tenancy. Many would argue today that this restriction has tied too many marginal farmers to uneconomic holdings and they ought to be able to rent out their land while taking advantage of more productive employment elsewhere. Or alternatively to be able to rent in land to cultivate their holdings more economically. A great deal of tenancy and sharecropping of this kind has in fact emerged, although its scale is not easy to document. Interestingly, there is no description in the book of another of CS's land reforms, the abolition of the traditional system of hereditary patwaris, who maintained (and fiddled) the village land records, and who were replaced by lekhpal appointed by the government, after an unsuccessful strike by the patwaris.

Brass defends CS convincingly against the leftist charge of being interested only in an alleged constituency of 'kulaks', while conceding that marginal farmers and landless labourers were beyond the scope of his radar. But CS would have pointed to his espousal of small and cottage instead of large industry as likely to create much more alternative employment for them, and to the scope for 'labour absorption' through the intensification of agriculture (had the term been current at his time), which eventually did exert upward pressure on rural employment and wages. However, it is true that this constituency had to wait for the populism of Indira Gandhi and later the caste appeal of Mayawati to find a champion.

A subsequent chapter documents CS's impassioned remonstrations with his chief minister and colleagues about the on-going displacement of kisans by land acquisition in Ghaziabad and elsewhere for urban housing and industries, and that too for a pittance, and usually in excess of requirements. It took several decades before the solution he and a few others advocated, which is to leave it to negotiations and the market to determine the amount of compensation, was in fact adopted in recent amendments to the land acquisition act.

Several chapters in this and the other volumes deal with corruption, tracing its roots primarily to the license-permit-quota raj, and the willingness of politicians of all hues to buy support by favouring supporters and relatives in working the system, as in the chapter titled somewhat misleadingly the 'Political Economy of the Hindu Joint Family' (since it does not really tell us much about the workings of joint families). One is left with the feeling that the complexities and other causes of the problem, including almost universal corruption by grass roots government servants in delivering services to the poor—and possible solutions, which CS himself seems not to have had, other than an expectation of honesty on the part of other politicians and government servants—are left largely uncovered. The author hints at but does not really pursue one of the main solutions, when he refers to other scholars' explanation for the relative cleanliness of consolidation of holdings operations because of the openness of the procedures adopted, or what we could refer to today as transparency based on the right to information, assisted by technology (which of course was not available at the time).

It is fascinating too to read about how widely and frequently false and malicious allegations of corruption were bandied about in order to malign and discredit rivals by political opponents, and by corrupt government servants who were under the scanner themselves, against their seniors trying to discipline them. One of the chapters describes the skulduggery and extreme lengths to which conspiracies would be hatched to do so. Given the lack of trust in the system most such allegations have to be inquired into, leading to a huge cost in terms of time and energy. Despite his reputation, even CS had to put in a great deal of effort in warding off these attacks.

There is a very poignant chapter in this volume on the death of CS's sister-in-law soon after delivering a baby, and the callousness of the Meerut hospital staff in not responding in time. CS was too proud to seek the intervention of his political rival CB Gupta who was health minister at the time. Brass speculates

that the known connection of the patient with CS may have contributed to the delay in treatment and refers to the incident and the whitewash of an inquiry that followed as an example of the ‘politicization of even the right to medical attention and life itself’ (v. I, p. 514). This may be putting it too strongly, and the all too common professional incompetence and dereliction of duty of government servants that CS often railed about, and just plain and simple callousness, are probably sufficient explanations. But the case brings out very well how status and hierarchy are ingrained into the bureaucratic system (as indeed in society generally). In this case, it prevented the lower staff from bringing to the notice of the civil surgeon the urgency of the case (he could not be disturbed during his siesta), and later prevented credence being given to their testimony in the inquiry.

The only chapter that throws negative light on CS comes early in this volume, dealing with his views on partition and Hindu–Muslim relations. It notes the contrasts between Nehru and Chief Minister Pant’s ‘sobriety, decency and wise caution’ in this era and CS’s views and sometimes vitriolic remarks. Brass absolves him from the charge of being an outright communalist, but concludes that his nationalism was tinged with prejudice. Along with others he played an active role in pressurizing Pant to reduce Muslim representation in the police and other departments after independence, leading eventually to a reversal of the balance in the other direction, with consequences that played themselves out in communal riots in later years, and the in the communalization of the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC), which would turn on the very victims (Muslims) it was supposed to protect. Whenever he was in charge of the home department, though, CS was for dealing strictly with riots and indeed any other form of mass mobilization and direct action, such as gheraos, forced bandhs and illegal strikes which he regarded as un-constitutional now that India was independent. In Volume 3 (Chapter 5), Brass expresses the view that CS was handicapped as home minister in not really understanding the developments that had taken place in the ‘process of riot production’.

After an interesting section on the history of the demands for the reorganization of UP and the formation of Uttarakhand, Volume 2 uses the case of the Rihand Dam as an example of the conflict between the needs of agriculture and industrialization that CS strongly perceived and often talked and wrote about. CS was concerned not only about the large share of electricity at a very favourable rate the electricity department had promised the Hindustan Aluminium Company’s new Mirzapur factory, but told the cabinet he was against the construction of the dam itself. This was a very unpopular position to take at the time (against a ‘temple of modern India’), although he did not make it public. His opposition was based not on environmental or displacement so much as ideological grounds. He was a life-long proponent of giving more priority to agriculture and had serious misgivings about industrialization based on large scale industry. His thinking anticipated Michael Lipton’s criticism of ‘urban bias’ and the questioning of the goals of self-sufficiency and import substitution that took place and eventually prevailed later. Presumably CS would have supported the dam had more of its electricity been destined for the rural areas for both tube wells and homes.

Although PB visited the dam many years later (in 2010) and describes at length the displacement and environmental destruction that had been caused by it and the other power and mining projects that it had spawned, he does not discuss whether agriculture versus industry really was an ‘either or issue’ as CS seems to have seen it. In other words, whether on the one hand agriculture in UP was indeed being denied funds it could have used usefully in 1959 when the dam was approved, or on the other, the constraints on agriculture had more to do with the absence of high-yielding varieties of seed (which were developed a few years later), extension efforts backed by research, credit and crucially, irrigation. The subsequent rapid expansion of tube wells, mostly private, initially in Western UP, took place after the seed-fertilizer revolution, and was based mostly on bank credit. As far as Rihand was concerned, topographical conditions did not allow for large-scale canal irrigation.

Agriculture and rural development was in fact a very high profile sector in UP at the time, with a huge expansion of the community development department and its newly minted multipurpose village level workers and community development blocks in the late fifties, much of it based on models developed in the high profile, American-aided, pilot community development project in Etawah district. There is no mention of this, although PB describes how CS wanted to bring under his agriculture ministry a host of allied subjects such as animal husbandry, 'minor irrigation', community development and so on, which at the time were scattered over separate ministries. This was not done (presumably to accommodate as many claimants as possible to ministerships) but all these departments were indeed put under the control of a very senior officer who was designated Agriculture Production Commissioner (although he reported to the several ministers separately).

The state government employees strike in 1965 which brought the secretariat in Lucknow to a standstill for two months is described in Volume 2. My first job as a young IAS officer posted in Etawah district was to be called to Lucknow to help maintain skeletal services in the secretariat. I had read Brass's 1962 book and had therefore learnt about CS as someone who had many admirers but few followers, but had no idea, while I carried files back and forth in the dark and deserted corridors of the labyrinthine Council House building, that CS was fighting a losing battle at the time as a member of the cabinet opposed to giving in to the employees' demands. As noted, he was one of the few state level political leaders who did not owe his position to patronage, including that of government servants who were numerous enough to be of considerable electoral significance, and he was ahead of his times in worrying about the huge share of resources being eaten up by a rapidly burgeoning government establishment, which he regarded as being largely unproductive and engaged chiefly in making work for itself. He would have been in favour of abolishing some at least of the over 1 lakh posts lying vacant at the time, instead of the filling them up, which was one of the strikers' demands. While the employees returned to work after a couple of months, the agitation ended only when he became chief minister in 1967, although not for long enough to make a permanent dent on the problem.

If I may be permitted a further aside, there are other parts of this book also which make it a sort of homecoming, since it puts into context for me many other episodes about which I can say 'I was there'. One of these is Chapter 12 in Volume 1, containing case studies on the criminalization of politics in three districts including Etawah, where I used to meet, while on election duty, one of the 'history sheeters' who figures prominently in the chapter (apart from Mulayam Singh, then a first time MLA and later CS's successor in the kisan movement). Also, I was one of the 'Receivers' appointed to take over and run one of the first batch of sugar factories, in Bareilly, ostensibly for non-payment of dues, during the partial 'nationalization' of the sugar industry in UP in 1971, discussed in Chapter 4 in Volume 3 as following.

Although titled 'last days in Lucknow', the first part of Volume 3 covers the eventful years between 1967, when CS defected to become the state's first non-Congress chief minister (initially for a year, and then again briefly in 1970, on both occasions heading fractious coalitions as the leader of his new party, the Bhartiya Kranti Dal), and 1975, when he was jailed under the emergency. It was during this period that the state government had to respond to a couple of central government initiatives engendered by Indira Gandhi's turn to populism in her struggle to attain ascendancy. The first of these related to the 'nationalization' of the sugar industry (the largest industry in the state) and the second to a further round of activity on land ceilings. Chapter 4 describes the charade played out by the state and the centre on the former issue, with both pretending to be strongly in favour while trying to push the onus of action onto the other. The second, discussed very usefully in Chapter 6 which revisits and amplifies the earlier discussion on ceilings in Volume 1, shows that this latest round of proposals—when CS was in the opposition in UP, and in favour of the reduction being proposed, but also for placing a floor on the minimum size of holding below which no sales or subdivision would be allowed—was so much 'smoke and mirrors'

because of various loopholes and non-implementability). Indeed, its main effect was to lead to a further resumption of land from erstwhile (disguised) tenants and to the subdivision of holdings among family members (on paper, so as to evade the lowered ceiling). Inequality in the distribution of holdings only increased. This conveys a sense of what might have been possible given a different political economy, given the limited achievements on land ceilings and redistribution of ceiling-surplus land in West Bengal.

The last few chapters of Volume 3 are rather sketchy and confusing. The constant moving back and forward in time, inconsistencies between the text and the chronology at the beginning of the volume, and several typos leave the reader confused. Thus on page 251 of Volume 3, Independence Day is referred to as Republic Day, which confuses the reader about dates. President Reddy becomes 'governor' Reddy, a demotion that is accorded earlier to President Giri. The statement on the same page that CS's government 'lasted less than a month' is confusing until it becomes clear that the reference is how early in his term CS had to submit his resignation to the president because of lack of support and call for new elections, although he continued as prime minister for six months. The chronology says he was finance minister between January and July 1979 but there is not a word about this in the text or indeed anything substantive about his six months as prime minister after that. Nor is there any further discussion after several references earlier in the volumes to how Indira Gandhi had the last word in their long and difficult relationship by withdrawing her support to his government after giving him her support conveyed through emissaries less than a month earlier when he resigned from Morarji's government. A little more detail here is important because her 'trickery' and his 'opportunism' have passed into the folklore relating to the episode. Instead, the relevant chapter is taken up disproportionately with the content of documents and long statements by CS on his differences with Morarji over holding Mrs Gandhi to account for the emergency.

To conclude, this is a fascinating account of the dynamics and nitty gritty of state-level politics and administration in India, centred on the long career of an unusual politician who because of his self-belief, understanding and dogged persistence laid the foundation for future agricultural growth in India. He has been maligned and misunderstood by both the left and urban elite opinion makers. This book will do much to restore his reputation, although that is not its purpose. To reach a broader audience, a more concise version would be necessary.

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Gautam Bhan, *In the Public's Interest. Evictions, Citizenship and Inequality in Contemporary Delhi*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2016. 304 pages. ₹825.

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Gautam Bhan's meticulous, gloves-off account of evictions and impoverishment in India's National Capital Region (NCR) begins in the resettlement colony of Bawana, situated at northwest edge of Delhi where activist-resident Rafiya Khanum describes the 2004 removal of her home and neighbourhood from the banks of the river Yamuna. The demolition of Rafiya's neighbourhood was of a piece with a spate of *basti* evictions that took place in Delhi during the first decade of the millennium, when an estimated 800,000 Delhi residents were forcibly evicted from their homes. Of the 150,000 or so former residents of Rafiya's now-demolished neighbourhood, Rafiya counts herself among the lucky few; a mere 30 per cent of the dis-housed were allotted compensatory plots in far-flung resettlement colonies like Bawana.