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# Bharat Ratna: Why Charan Singh was a messiah for farmers

His land reform laws created a new socially and politically empowered middle peasantry in northern India that also saw its economic fortunes rise with the Green Revolution.

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Singh was a Jat, but sought to speak for the entire class of cultivators. (Express Archive)

“There are officers in the Agriculture Department who cannot distinguish between a barley plant and a wheat plant and those in the [Irrigation] Department who do not know how many waterings and at what time a certain crop required”.

That was [Chaudhary Charan Singh](#) in a document dated March 21, 1947, titled ‘Why 60% of Services Should Be Reserved for Sons of Cultivators’. It was the clearest articulation of his position on guaranteeing representation for the “sons or dependents of the actual tillers of the soil” in government jobs and seats in publicly-funded educational institutions.

Singh was Union home minister in the Morarji Desai-headed Janata Party government that appointed the Backward Classes Commission under B.P. Mandal in January 1979. Its report submitted in December 1980 led to the announcement of 27% reservations for OBC (other backward classes) communities, in addition to the existing 22.5% for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST), in August 1990.

## Town versus Village

Although he backed the setting up of the Mandal Commission, Singh insisted that reservations for farmers had nothing to do with caste, which “has had its day” and “must be abolished”. Except in regard to SC/STs, the caste of a candidate “should not be inquired into while seeking admission into an educational institution or public service”.

For Singh, the principal line of division in Indian society was between cultivators and city-dwellers. The latter “lord it over the poor peasantry and...have little sympathy with the troubles of the agriculturalists”. The town-bred non-agriculturalist “calls his poor countryman from the village a ‘dehati’, ‘ganwar’ or ‘dahqani’ in the same contemptuous tone in which a heaven-born European flings... ‘native’...[at all] Indians without distinction”. This was despite agriculture employing nearly 70% of India’s workforce and generating 54% of its GDP in 1950-51.

### **Explained | Bharat Ratna for Chaudhary Charan Singh: Why this is significant**

Singh saw reservations as a means “to set right the principle on which privileges of entering government service are enjoyed by one class of town dwellers, businessmen, traders and profession followers over the other class of villagers, peasants...who have so far groaned under the weight of poverty due to lack of opportunities denied to them”.

Singh was struck by a 1961 survey that showed only 11.5% of Indian Administrative Service officers with agricultural family backgrounds and 45.8% having fathers who were government servants. He, therefore, not only proposed 60% reservations for farmers’ children, but also ineligibility for government jobs to those whose parents had already benefitted from public employment.

Reservations, Singh argued, would actually improve efficiency in government departments: The agriculturalist’s son “by reason of the surroundings in which he is brought up, possesses strong nerves, an internal stability, a robustness of spirit and a capacity for administration...Agriculture is a pursuit wherein contention with the forces of nature brings home to the peasant a daily lesson in patience and perseverance, and breeds in him hardihood and an endurance, i.e. a character, denied to the followers of other pursuits...his hands and heart will not tremble in a crisis as those of a soft person from the city”. He would react differently to the farmer whose crop has been destroyed by hailstorm than the normal Tahsildar or Deputy Collector who “fixes a dozen dates for hearing a petty suit of [even Rs 100]”.

### **Criticism and present-day relevance**

The 60% quota – Singh had proposed it first at 50% before the executive committee of the Uttar Pradesh (then United Provinces) Congress Legislature Party in April 1939 – was criticised not for being excessive as much as for covering only the “sons of cultivators”. Landless labourers, constituting 28.1% of the total agricultural workforce in the 1951 Census, were excluded.

Singh’s response to that was he had no objection “to include agricultural labourers also in the category of tillers, but in that case I would put the percentage at 75 instead of 60”.

Singh was clear his proposal wasn’t about caste reservations, but about representation to tillers of the soil, irrespective of the community they belonged to. That would have, perhaps, appealed today to landowning peasant castes such as Jats, Marathas, Patidars and Kapus, who are demanding OBC status entitling them to reservations.

Singh was a Jat, but never projected himself as someone from that community. He sought to speak for the entire class of cultivators, particularly the middle peasantry drawn from the so-called MAJGAR complex of Muslim, Ahir (Yadav), Jat, Gujjar and Rajput. He endeared himself to farmers from all these castes, not just Jats.

## **Game-changing laws**

There was a reason for that popularity: His pushing through three major legislations that transformed the agricultural economy of UP.

The first was the UP Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act, 1950 (ZALR). It did away with zamindars who paid taxes to the government, from lands that they themselves owned and also from those cultivated by others, including as tenant farmers. ZALR granted all verified tenant-cultivators permanent and heritable interest in their holdings. The zamindars ceased to be tax-farmers or intermediaries between the cultivator and the state, while having ownership rights only on the lands that they could demonstrate were their own, self-cultivated holdings.

ZALR basically replaced the old zamindari agrarian system with a new rural social order based on peasant-proprietors owning and cultivating family-sized farms. Its beneficiaries were the erstwhile hereditary tenant-cultivators, mainly from the Muslim, Yadav, Gujjar, Kurmi and other OBC castes.

The second was the UP Consolidation of Holdings Act, 1953. Singh wanted the peasant-proprietor to be not just independent, but also an efficient cultivator. The new law enabled every landowner to have his scattered plots consolidated by swapping parcels of equivalent quality with other farmers in the same village. The idea was to provide every owner-cultivator with a single tract of land making it a more productive holding.

By 1976-77, about 14.2 million hectares (mh) out of a targeted 14.6 mh area in UP had been “brought under consolidation operation”, with actual “transfer and possession” taking place in over 11.5 mh. The scheme was implemented with relatively minimal corruption, which probably had to do with Singh taking personal interest in its success as revenue minister through the 1950s.

The last law was the UP Imposition of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1960. It established a cap of 40 acres of “fair quality land” per family of five members. Singh, in fact, envisaged both a minimum and maximum landholding size – his ideal range was 2.5-27.5 acres – which a cultivator and his family could viably farm with little outside labour. Consolidated holdings of a certain minimum size were necessary to also allow use of tractors and other productivity-enhancing farm machinery.

## **The legacy**

Charan Singh’s three transformative land reform laws helped in creating a socially and politically empowered middle peasantry. This new rural middle class saw its economic fortunes rise as well with the Green Revolution that entailed the introduction of high-yielding crop varieties, chemical fertilisers and labour-cum-time saving mechanisation technologies.

That roughly four-decade spell of economic prosperity from the early 1970s is practically history. Plateauing yields, crop prices not keeping pace with rising production costs, re-fragmentation of holdings and growing weather aberrations from climate change have made agriculture less rewarding than before. It has also eroded the socio-economic status of a once-proud peasant-proprietor class.

The takers for reservations in government jobs for farmers’ children would arguably be more now than during the time when Singh first mooted it.

## ***Suggested reading***

Paul R. Brass, *An Indian Political Life: Charan Singh and Congress Politics, 1937 to 1961*, New [Delhi](#): Sage Publications (2011).