



Ch. Charan Singh, c 1952

“Emancipation of labour is the only worthy object of political warfarethat those who till the soil shall be its first masters, that those who raise food shall be its first partakers, that those who build mansions shall live in them” George Julian Harney. Extracted from “*The Theory & Practice of Socialism*”. John Strachey, 1936

Quote in Ch. Charan Singh’s Bareilly Central Prison notebook, 1942.

Chaudhary Charan Singh was the pre-eminent ‘organic intellectual’ peasant leader in post-independence India, and the most powerful voice speaking for rural India. He held a passionate, life-long commitment to the cause of the small, independent peasant, to agriculture and to the rural economy as the desired base of India’s socio-economic development. In a sharp contrast to Nehruvian Soviet-style thinking of the Fifties, or the contemporary neo-Liberal discourse, Charan Singh was the principal architect of the short-lived, alternative agrarian-based model of development emphasizing a self-sufficient small peasantry backed by the state with infrastructure and a host of services, small-scale industry for generating employment for the landless and those who would move to non-farm employment, the primacy of agricultural development over large-scale industry, and the creating of demand through enhanced incomes in agricultural, rural India over urban. He preempted the global rural-urban debate of the 1970s by decades, and one that we need to re-ignite today.

He combined in himself a strict puritanism from his rural upbringing and the deep influence of a resurgent Arya Samaj during his formative years (1910-1930) and the later abiding influence of Gandhi’s thinking and village centric message of social-political change; a messianic commitment to personal integrity, character and to deeply held traditional values; and a life long intellectual engagement with modern political economic thought and conditions in village India. He wrote numerous well-researched books and articles on which he based his many political manifestoes and speeches; writing easily in English while thinking organically in Hindi the language of his people.

His pursuit of political power and faith in his prescriptions became controversial once his rising political ability and popularity in the rural middle castes, his administrative effectiveness and personal incorruptibility (in the 1950-1960s) came up against the impenetrable wall of high caste domination of Uttar Pradesh society and politics. To overcome these forces of caste and urban interests in pursuance of his political objectives, he aligned with political formations ranging from the Socialists, Swatantra, Jan Sangh and the Congress of his bête noire Indira Gandhi. Unlike most, he sought power not for accumulating personal wealth or family name, but for implementing his road map for the political economy of Uttar Pradesh from 1936-1977 and then on the larger canvas of India for the decade of 1977-1987.

A slightly built man with a gentle voice, his personal manner was in the most civilized traditions of genteelness of the *Ganga-Jamuna tehzeeb*; his soft demeanor and self-deprecating humor in contrast to the image. His personal and public life was one and transparent, and his Vedic Hindu beliefs did not stand in the way of his progeny marrying out of caste or religion. His material wants were few, his clothing and lifestyle austerely Gandhian.

His critics, of which there were many, pointed to his ‘lust’ for political power as the Achilles heel which blinded him to the contradictions of his political alliances; to the exploitative nature of his political base of the land-owning middle castes who remain in constant conflict with the even poorer and socially excluded Dalits; and to his opposition to the modern world as represented by private capital, large-scale industry and the urban classes.

Objectives of these Archives

It is now 27 years since the passing away of Charan Singh, providing us a historical distance and an opportune time to bring together scholarship to evaluate his contributions to the trajectory of Indian politics, especially in North India, and to the rural-urban development discourses. The Archives of this 'organic intellectual' of peasant agriculture will be a sympathetic and intellectually honest approach to his life, not blinkered by ideology. Some questions that come to mind are as follows:

What was his family background, what were the formative influences on his political trajectory, his personal values, his personality and character, and his world-view? There are numerous hagiographic accounts of his life, though the American scholar Paul Brass stands out with a critically balanced and scholarly biography in 2013 in three volumes. A biography by an Indian author remains to be written, with the hindsight of time and availability of comprehensive information.

What were his views on land acquisition, caste, religion, landless labor, Dalits, Muslims and Islam, personal values and character, organic farming, manufacturing, corruption, women, Nehru, Indira? Why did he oppose bank nationalization and abolition of the Privy Purses? What were his contributions to 'land to the tiller' legislation in UP, and why did he not distribute 'land to the landless'? What were the examples of his personal incorruptibility, and what can we learn from this? What is his legacy for and impact on North Indian politics, and on the political formations today? A "Selected Works of Chaudhary Charan Singh" and "Selected Speeches of Charan Singh" in Hindi and English are a desirable outcome.

What did he think of the old and the new Congress, the RSS and the Jana Sangh, Socialists, Swatantra, and the Janata Party? Why did he defect from the Congress in 1967, and what did the BKD and the BLD he formed achieve? How did he thrive in the fractious politics at the UP district and state level, and how did this play out at the national level? What did his political opponents and associates think of his intellect, capability, and his politics?

This scholarship can be brought to bear once we collate the information at one location, as well as connect to the 'Charan Singh Papers' (his extensive, life long communication and writings) donated by the family to the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, Delhi in 1992. The collation of the Archives will be dogged by our collective disregard for the written word and systematic documentation, the material is geographically fragmented and in deteriorating analog shape. This needs the support of a research institution that adequately appreciates the national importance of such an archive.

The CCS Archives will bring together (a) primary sources like books, newspaper articles, other scholarly articles, speeches, manifestoes (b) secondary sources on others writing on his life, politics, administration, and personality including newspaper and magazine articles (c) interviews with his political associates and disciples, of which there are only a few left alive today but are yet hundreds in number and, finally, (d) documentation in the private and public domain (Governments in UP and Delhi) like letters, photographs, audio records and videos.

There are some other operationally key attributes of these Archives: the first, to make them accessible via the Internet, linked to other relevant on-line sources, including free digital distribution of articles, books, research papers, voice recordings and photographs using contemporary technology and social media. Second, establish an on-line community associated with the CCS Archives where issues of rural India close to Charan Singh's heart could be written and debated thereby bringing back the voice of the disappeared peasant from India's contemporary socio-political discourse.

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