

For 'Bharat Ratna' Chaudhary Charan Singh, Politics Meant the Art of the Possible

The Bharat Ratna to Charan Singh, now, indeed comes with a host of ironies. But then it seems consistent with what he set in motion in the political discourse where ideals shall wait for another day or time backstage.

By [V. Krishna Ananth](#)

13/FEB/2024

The award of Bharat Ratna to Charan Singh (along with P.V. Narasimha Rao and M.S. Swaminathan), last week does provide a context to recall his persona apart from the ideological aspects of the highest civilian award in the nation. The aspect about the award and the ideology indeed is a matter of perception and hence I will refrain from dealing with this in an elaborate manner but simply say that it is one more instance of politics as the art of the possible. Charan Singh will be remembered, at least by those belonging to a generation that lived in his times as one of those who practiced politics as the art of the possible.

Having cut his teeth in the Congress, Charan Singh rose to fame in March-April 1967 when he brought down the Congress government in Uttar Pradesh (under Chandra Banu Gupta). Elected as MLA from the Congress, Charan Singh led a host of Congress MLAs from the party (in less than a month after the general elections of 1967) to form his own party – Bharathiya Kranti Dal – and joined a hotch-potch consisting of the Socialists and the Bharathiya Jan Sangh then to become chief minister. Well, Charan Singh was among the pioneers to foreground the concerns of the farm sector in the larger economy and in that sense had differences with Jawaharlal Nehru within the Congress, his departure from the party in April 1967 had nothing to do with it. He thought the chief minister's chair in Lucknow belonged to him and went on to join anyone for that.

The Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (United Legislators Front) was the vehicle then. Charan Singh, however, lasted only for a few months. In February 1968, Chandra Bhanu Gupta was chief minister once again. Once again, in 1969, when elections were held again, Chandra Banu Gupta became chief minister with a thin majority in the assembly – 211 in a House of 425 – only to be replaced by Charan Singh in February 1970. This time, it was after Gupta decided to stay on with the Congress (O) when the Congress split in December 1969 and Indira's Congress extended support to Charan Singh; that was in February 1970. However, by October 1970, Charan Singh was pulled down and Indira Gandhi posted her own man – Tribuvan Nath Singh – as Uttar Pradesh chief minister.

The point is Charan Singh emerged as a leader in his own right but did not hesitate to shift across platforms as long as he would become chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. And all along he ensured to position himself as representing the concerns of a new class that had emerged in the agrarian sector: The farmers, as distinct from the peasants, an outcome of the Green Revolution (in whose making M.S. Swaminathan, incidentally another awardee of Bharat Ratna with Charan Singh) turned out to be Charan Singh's political constituency in the territory where the Yamuna flows (Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh and parts of Rajasthan); and Charan Singh, an astute reader of the political landscape emerged as a bulwark in the anti-Congress consolidation that began in Northern India. He led the campaign for

minimum support prices (MSP) to farm produce, subsidised fertilisers apart from the supply of electricity for free or at subsidised prices. Incidentally, these remain issues in our own times.

The Bharathiya Lok Dal, which was a new name he gave to his Bharathiya Kranti Dal (in August 1984), was perhaps the only political party that had a symbol of its own when the Janata Party took birth on January 30, 1977; and with only a few weeks left before the general elections of March 1977, Charan Singh's party's symbol was adopted as the Janata Party's then. Singh was a strong contender for the Prime Minister's job after the Janata won a landslide, and yet he was confronted with opposition against his candidature within the Janata; among those who were willing to pull all the stops against him were Chandra Banu Gupta [from the Congress(O) lot and whom he had toppled twice in the 1960s as Chief Minister, H.N. Bahuguna, whose rise in Uttar Pradesh politics had prevented Charan Singh becoming Chief Minister after 1970 and Jagjiwan Ram, also a contender for the Prime Minister's job], paving the path for Morarji Desai.

Although he was the first among the opposition leaders to forge a unity of parties against the Congress (between August and November 1974) his insistence on keeping the Congress(O) out and the fact that the Bharathiya Jan Sangh (with as many as 61 MLAs in the Uttar Pradesh assembly) meant the exercise did not go further. Meanwhile, although Charan Singh was among those arrested and detained late in the night on June 25, 1975, the fact is he along with some others as Biju Pattnaik were released in less than a year and Pattnaik had begun moving towards a reconciliation with the emergency regime. In a meeting of the four parties – the BLD, Congress-O, Jan Sangh and the Socialist Party – which Charan Singh attended in June 1976, he raised objections to letting members of the RSS join the new party. “It is a question of dual membership which should not be allowed and there should be no scope in the new party for surreptitious work,” he insisted.

Well, one of the hurdles against Charan Singh's path to the prime minister's job, in March 1977 after the Janata Party's victory was the Jan Sangh pitching for Morarji Desai against him. But Charan Singh, as home minister, in the Morarji cabinet made sure he would not let things go. And even while waiting to strike at Desai and take the prime minister's job himself, Charan Singh ordered the CBI to arrest Indira Gandhi; this was on October 3, 1977. The arrest turned out to be a squib when a magistrate's court ordered her release the very next day. Blamed by his cabinet colleagues for the fiasco, Charan Singh responded: “The wrongs committed by her warranted a trial on the Nuremburg model, but the Government rested content with a trial for prima facie offences under the ordinary law of the land.” The Janata Party continued to be caught in internecine quarrels and Charan Singh now became a ring leader and his loyalists – Raj Narain in particular – were his hatchet men. As things went on this way, Charan Singh (still home minister) went off to a retreat in Haryana and shot off a letter to the Prime Minister on June 28, 1977.

In this, he said:

“Many Emergency victims have come to me repeatedly and implored me that not only should Mrs. Gandhi be arrested immediately but that she should be kept in Chandigarh, in the same circumstances in which Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Narayan was kept, or in the Tihar Jail in the same circumstances in which Maharani Gayatri Devi and Maharani Vijeraje Scindia were confined. I have no doubt that, if we in the Government could only persuade ourselves to accept and implement this suggestion, there would be hundreds of mothers of Emergency victims who could celebrate the occasion as befittingly as

another Diwali. Of course, in any other country, she would now be facing a trial on the lines of the historic Nuremburg trial.

“I realize that this suggestion may appear to some of my friends as being extremely vindictive but those who know the mood of the country and of the people and still remember the grave misdeeds she had perpetrated, would find it very difficult to disagree with the suggestion.

“People think that we in the Government are a pack of impotent people who cannot govern the country. In fact, there is even a section of our people, especially among those who suffered grievously under her regime during the Emergency who want that Mrs. Gandhi detained under MISA which is still on the statute book.”

This indeed was a moment when the Janata Cabinet insisted on Charan Singh's exit (along with Raj Narain) from the cabinet; Singh, though, returned to the cabinet soon but this time as Finance Minister and not Home Minister as before. And soon after – in early July 1979 – he spoke for Madhu Limaye against the continuance of Atal Behari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani in the Union Cabinet unless they severed their association with the RSS. Known in our own discourse as the dual membership issue, Charan Singh ensured the fall of the Morarji government in only two weeks from then.

And behold. He took oath as Prime Minister on July 28, 1979; this happened only because the Congress party, under Indira Gandhi, extended its support to a coalition between Charan Singh's Janata (Secular) and the Congress (Urs). In other words, he would become Prime Minister whose government depended on the very same person whom he wanted to be jailed and tried under laws similar to the Nuremberg trials; and his party was called Janata (S), the 'S' standing for secular.

His political reasoning then, as it was in August 1974, was to keep the RSS out of any formation. And his support base, all his life until his demise on May 29, 1987. Both helped him stay afloat; his Janata (Secular) won the most number of seats (41) in the general elections to the Lok Sabha in January 1980 from amongst those parties that made the Janata in 1977. And this was possible because he could forge a unity of forces between the Jats and the Muslims in Western Uttar Pradesh. And the farmers stood by him like a rock until Mahendra Singh Tikait came in. And this happened after Charan Singh's son, Ajit Singh inherited the platform and the ease with which he straddled between the Congress and the BJP. Well. The cleavages in the social alliance that Charan Singh forged after he broke up the Janata Party – between the Jats and the Muslim community – through the 1980s too began showing after his demise. Charan Singh's demise in 1987, about the same time when such stalwarts as H.N. Bahuguna and Karpoori Thakur (incidentally another entry in the list of Bharat Ratna in the past weeks) enabled the formation of the Janata Dal, from the splinters of the Janata Party, in 1988 with V.P. Singh (another former Congress-man). All these are what Charan Singh's legacy is all about. And it may be reiterated that Charan Singh remained consistent insofar as his opposition to the Jan Sangh in his own times. The Bharat Ratna to Charan Singh, now, indeed comes with a host of ironies. But then it seems consistent with what Charan Singh set in motion in the political discourse – politics as the art of the possible – where ideals shall wait for another day or time backstage.

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