

Bharat Ratna for Chaudhary Charan Singh: Former PM who championed farmers' causes

Singh started his political career in the Congress but left the party to form the first non-Congress government in UP in 1967. He twice served as the state's CM before becoming more involved in national politics.

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Chaudhary Charan Singh addressing a public meeting at Barot in Uttar Pradesh. (Express archive photo by S Paul)

The Centre on Friday announced it would award the Bharat Ratna posthumously to former Prime Minister and farmer leader Chaudhary Charan Singh.

“It is an honour of our government that former Prime Minister of the country Chaudhary Charan Singh is being honoured with Bharat Ratna. This honour is dedicated to his incomparable contribution to the country,” Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) wrote on X, announcing the award for Singh.

Modi said Singh dedicated his entire life to farmers' rights and welfare. “Be it the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh or the Home Minister of the country and even as an MLA, he always gave impetus to nation building. He also stood firmly against the Emergency. His dedication to our farmer brothers and sisters and his commitment to democracy during the Emergency is inspiring to the entire nation,” said the PM.

The PM also announced Bharat Ratna for former PM P V Narasimha Rao and agriculture scientist Dr MS Swaminathan. “This exemplifies the Modi government's commitment to the agricultural sector, as reflected by the selection of two out of three awardees, Chaudhary Charan Singh and Dr M S Swaminathan, who have significantly championed the cause of agriculture,” said a source.

The source added, “Two of the awardees, Narasimha Rao and Chaudhary Charan Singh, come from non-[BJP](#) backgrounds, indicating Prime Minister Modi’s belief in conferring national honours in a very party-agnostic manner.”

The Bharat Ratna for Chaudhary Charan Singh comes at a time when there are talks of [Rashtriya Lok Dal](#) (RLD) headed by Singh’s grandson Jayant Chaudhary joining the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance. Though the RLD does not have a single Lok Sabha MP, the party has its base among farmers and the Jat community in west Uttar Pradesh. Responding to the PM’s announcement, Jayant Chaudhary posted on X, “Dil jeet liya (Won my heart).”

Rise in UP politics

Chaudhary Charan Singh was born in a family of farmers in the village of Noorpur in Uttar Pradesh’s Meerut district in 1902. He was first elected to the UP Assembly in 1937 from Chhaprauli. In June 1951, he became a state Cabinet minister — a stepping stone to his rise to the highest political office in the country. At the time, he was one of the Congress’s main leaders in UP. But dissatisfied with the direction of the party, Singh left the Congress to form the first non-Congress government in UP. He also formed the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD). Singh served as UP Chief Minister twice — first, from April 3, 1967, to February 25, 1968; and second from February 18, 1970, to October 1, 1970. After that, he became more involved in national politics.

In 1974, he merged his party with the Samyukta (United) Socialist Party to form the Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD). At the time, Indira Gandhi was the prime minister and an almost invincible political force. When Gandhi declared Emergency the following year, Singh, like other prominent Opposition leaders, was imprisoned for a year.

Following the revocation of Emergency, the BLD emerged as a crucial component of the Morarji Desai-led Janata Party government that came to power in 1977. The Janata Party was formed that January year but merged with four Opposition parties — the Congress (Organisation), the BLD, the Jana Sangh, and the Socialist Party — after the elections in March. In the polls, the BLD got a majority, winning 295 of the 405 seats it contested. The Congress was routed, registering its worst performance since Independence as it won only 154 seats of the 492 it contested. Singh became the Union Home Minister, holding the portfolio from March 24, 1977, to July 1, 1978. With discord in the party increasing, Desai appointed Singh the Deputy PM and Minister of Finance on January 24, 1979. He remained in the post till July 16.

170 days as PM

With internal fights showing no signs of abating, Desai stepped down as PM. The Janata Party split and the Janata Party (Secular) was formed. This was the beginning of the end of the Janata experiment. Singh staked his claim to form the government with the Congress’s support and was sworn in as PM on July 28, 1979. Soon after assuming office, he addressed the nation and spelt out the challenges and priorities of his government. “I am speaking to you tonight as your first public servant ... Poverty has to be eliminated and the basic necessities of life made available to every single citizen. Political leadership of the country must remember that nothing mocks our values and dreams more than the desperate struggles of our people for

existence ... Nothing could, therefore, be a more patriotic objective for our political leaders than to ensure that no child will go to bed hungry ...”

He added, “Unemployment is on the increase. There cannot be a greater misery than those young men fully qualified and wanting gainful employment, find themselves idle.”

Singh could never prove his government’s majority on the floor of Parliament. Though the five-year term of the sixth Lok Sabha was to end in March 1981, President Neelam Sanjiva Reddy dissolved the House on August 22, 1979. Singh continued functioning as a caretaker PM till January 14, 1980. In all, he spent 170 days in office.

In the 1980 elections, Singh contested on a Janata Party (Secular) ticket from Baghpat in Uttar Pradesh and was re-elected to Parliament. Though his party won 41 seats and ended up as the second-largest group in Parliament, the Indira Gandhi-led Congress won the election in a landslide.

Though Charan Singh was re-elected from Baghpat in the 1984 general elections held in the aftermath of Gandhi’s assassination — he defeated the Congress’s Mahesh Chand — his party, the Lok Dal, faced a crushing defeat. It won only three of the 171 seats it contested. The Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress swept to power by winning 404 seats.