

Charan Singh: a mirror to changing politics

The final volume of the former PM's biography also chronicles two of the most tumultuous decades of independent India



Ajay Singh | October 30, 2014

Chaudhary Charan Singh is arguably one of the most enigmatic political personalities of independent India. His political life, effectively covering five decades (1937-87), borrows the best from the freedom struggle led by stalwarts of the Gandhi-Nehru era, even as it leaves a dubious legacy for his political successors. Truly, this former prime minister is an enigma that gets adequately unravelled in Paul R Brass's three-volume biography.

Brass, professor (emeritus) of political science and international studies at the University of Washington in Seattle, has been an old India hand. After the appreciation for his first two volumes, the third was awaited eagerly.

Though the first two volumes of the series, titled 'An Indian Political Life', covered Charan Singh's formative years and his association with the Congress and certain party stalwarts, the third volume is exclusively devoted to what is regarded as the turning point in north India – the rise of anti-Congress politics. It covers the two decades of the most tumultuous phase of Indian politics (1967-87) that cast a shadow even in the new millennium.

For instance, his son Ajit Singh, a minister in the UPA government, was fighting a bitter battle to retain his official residence even after losing the Lok Sabha election from Baghpat. He even appealed the government to let him retain his father's legacy, by demanding to convert the bungalow into a memorial to Charan Singh. Ajit Singh's petulance has a striking similarity with the characteristic doggedness of his father in pursuing self-interest. But the comparison ends there. If Brass's biography is to be believed, Charan Singh's self-serving logic in politics was not altogether divorced of morality, but was necessitated by circumstances.

The manner in which Charan Singh left the Congress in 1967 and ingratiated himself with the politics of anti-Congressism was remarkable for his political resilience. Till the last moment of the government formation, he was engaged in talks with his arch-rival CB Gupta, but left him in no time on the pretext of not accommodating his supporters in the cabinet.

Charan Singh eventually became the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and deftly aligned himself with the largest legislative group, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), as well as with disparate political groups. Though he emerged as an able administrator, his politics proved too slippery to ensure longevity in power, and his government was toppled.

But Charan Singh soon discovered a new logic to forge a coalition with the Congress and install himself as the chief minister. Brass, who seems quite sympathetic to the Indian leader in this volume (though his earlier two volumes avoid such expressions), is at pains to disabuse readers of the notion that Charan Singh's moves were opportunistic. Sadly for Brass, he has not succeeded in his attempt. But credit must go to him for retaining the sanctity of facts, notwithstanding his coloured inferences.

What Brass's book brilliantly brings out is the context of Charan Singh's conduct which sets the perspective right. On more than one occasion he uses the word "notorious" to describe Indira Gandhi and her politics. Obviously, Charan Singh was dealing with an unusually cunning and powerful leader, according to Brass. This logic has been used to explain Charan Singh's conduct which often appeared to be patently opportunistic and at odds with his moralistic positioning. In his speeches, he described Indira Gandhi as the prime minister who rarely spoke the truth, and stopped just short of calling her a liar. But he never hesitated to take help from her to get to power.

The most curious part of the book is, of course, related to Charan Singh's conduct as deputy prime minister in the Janata Party regime and his run-ins with then prime minister Morarji Desai. The book gives a graphic and authentic account of how the arrest of Indira Gandhi was bungled by the CBI after the Janata Party came to power. The faux pas proved to be too costly as Gandhi used the episode to revive her fortunes. Similarly, Charan Singh quoted from British parliamentary practices to take an unprecedented step of sacking nine elected state governments after the 1977 elections. Despite the hollowness of Charan Singh's argument, Brass seems to be attempting to cover for him by referring to the authoritarian streak of Indira Gandhi and Nehru in sacking the first communist government of Kerala in 1959. Quite curiously, Brass seems to be more swayed by his personal fascination for Charan Singh in the final volume than in the previous two volumes.

Charan Singh's troubled ties with Desai have more to do with the former's vaulting political ambition than with his professed commitment to morality and ethics. He was the first to raise the issue of big industrial houses getting benefits due to their proximity to the prime minister's son Kanti Desai. The potshot against Desai was very shrewdly launched to take the moral

sheen off the prime minister. Charan Singh's colleague in the union cabinet, LK Advani, has given a graphic account of behind-the-scenes moves of Charan Singh, which ultimately led to the fall of the Morarji Desai government. That Charan Singh did not hesitate to side once again with Indira Gandhi is a testimony of his political resilience which Brass hesitates to call opportunism.

Though the book seems slightly biased towards Charan Singh in its inferences, it makes an interesting reading in today's context, when prime minister Narendra Modi has been dominating the political scene like Indira Gandhi did in the late 1960s and 1970s. Against Indira Gandhi, Charan Singh tried to forge a broad coalition of regional satraps and put up a formidable opposition to the Congress. But all that did not deter him from having a liaison with the Congress when it came to grabbing power. Similarly, he chose adversaries and friends at his convenience and explained his political inconsistency in the garb of moral virtue.

Like Charan Singh, his son Ajit Singh has been trying to forge a coalition of forces inimical to Modi. Just as Charan Singh forged an alliance with his Haryana counterpart Devi Lal, Ajit Singh has been courting Devi Lal's son Om Prakash Chautala to remain in the reckoning. Powerful regional satraps like Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad are gravitating towards west UP and Haryana while there are attempts to rope in Naveen Patnaik, Mamata Banerjee and leaders from the south.

For those watching the Indian political scene unfolding right now, the book gives a feeling of déjà vu with only one difference: despite all his shortcomings, Charan Singh was an able administrator, sterling stickler for honesty and averse to criminalisation of politics. The same cannot be said of his political successors.

"Prideful of himself and contemptuous of most of his political colleagues"

Charan Singh had no airs. He was, however, prideful of himself and contemptuous of most of his political colleagues. Most of all, he had clear ideas of what was good for the country and what was not, of what needed to be done or should be done to improve the lives of the people. Village-born and self-made, he had an acute intelligence and broad knowledge of the conditions in which the vast majority of the people of his country lived and what should be done to change their lives.

Charan Singh was also a nationalist, but one who respected and admired the achievements of Western countries. However, he abhorred the idea of mimicking the West, for he was clear that the conditions of the country and its people were not at all comparable to that in the United States and Europe, and that it was a huge waste of the country's resources to seek, as the Nehrus did, to imitate and catch up with the West.

Excerpt

Had Charan Singh's policies been followed instead of Nehru's, the quality of life of the 90 per cent of the country that remains poor – by any reasonable standard – in India today would have improved instead of remaining stagnant. In virtually every respect, Charan Singh felt that the policies of the Nehrus – and let us not forget that the Nehrus remain in power today, as this is written in 2013 – were faulty, were wrong. The Nehrus sought to mimic and even challenge the West, to create in the midst of the abject poverty of the country and its people, a modern, industrial country. They are still at work on this job, to which has been added the goal of being the equal of the West in military power.

Not that Charan Singh did not himself have chauvinist views about what the place of India might become in the world, but he was far more realistic about what could be done in his lifetime and that of the Nehrus.

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- See more at: <http://www.governancenow.com/views/columns/charan-singh-a-mirror-changing-politics#sthash.GaN7m9HG.dpuf>