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EDITORIAL

Role of Chaudhary Charan Singh in Farmers' Welfare

Why in News?

- Recently, former Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh was conferred with the Bharat Ratna, along with former Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao and Agriculture Scientist and Father of Green Revolution in India MS Swaminathan.

Role of Chaudhary Charan Singh in Farmers' Welfare

- In a document titled "Why 60% of Services Should Be Reserved for Sons of Cultivators", he clearly articulated his position on guaranteeing representation for the "sons or dependents of the actual tillers of the soil" in the government jobs and seats in publicly funded educational institutions.
- He played decisive role in appointment of the 2nd Backward Classes Commission under BP Mandal in January 1979. Its report led to the announcement of 27% reservations for OBC communities, in addition to Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes (SCs/STs).
- However, he 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 him, 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".
- He saw reservations as means "to set right the principle on which privileges of entering government services are enjoyed by one class of town dwellers, businessmen, traders and profession followers.
- He was struck by a 1961 survey that showed only 11.5% of Indian Administrative Service officers had agricultural family backgrounds, while 45.8% had 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 benefited from public employment.
- He argued that reservation 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 capacity for administration, his hands and heart will not tremble in a crisis as those of a soft person from the city".

Criticism and Relevance

- His proposed "60% quota" was criticized 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 1951 Census, were excluded. Though he responded that he had no objection to include agricultural labourers but in that case reservation quota to be put at 75 percentage instead of 60%.
- His proposal about the reservation was not about the caste reservations but about representation to



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tillers of the soil. That would have, perhaps, appealed today to landowning peasant castes such as Jats, Marathas, Patidars and Kapus, who are demanding OBC status.

- He sought to speak for the entire class of cultivators, particularly the middle peasantry drawn from the so called MAJGAR (Muslim, Ahir, Jat, Gujjar and Rajput). He endeared himself to farmers from all these castes.

Game-Changing Laws

- He pushed three major legislation that transformed the agricultural economy of UP. The first was the UP Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act, 1950 (ZALR). It did away with the 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 they could demonstrate were their own, self cultivated holdings.
- ZALR basically replaced the zamindari agrarian system with a new rural social order based on peasant-proprietors owning and cultivated family-sized farms. Its beneficiaries were the erstwhile hereditary tenant cultivators, mainly from the MAJGAR castes.
- The second was the UP Consolidation of Holdings Act, 1953. He wanted the peasant-proprietors to be not just independent, but also an efficient cultivator. This 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.
- The scheme was implemented with relatively minimal corruption, which probably had to do with Chaudhary Charan Singh taking personal interest in its success as revenue minister through the 1950s.
- The third 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. He envisaged both a minimum and maximum size were necessary to also allow use of tractors and other productivity enhancing farm machinery.

Legacy of Chaudhary Charan Singh

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