**An Indian Political Life: Charan Singh and Congress Politics, 1937 to 1961**, by Paul R. Brass, London, Sage Publications, 2011, xxx + 575 pp., ISBN: 978-81-321-0686-9.

Paul Brass’s latest contribution to the study of South Asian politics is a detailed, well-written biography of Charan Singh that not only rescues this towering middle-peasant leader from the scorn and neglect of the Indian intellectual class, but also opens up the inner workings of Congress machine politics for the benefit of contemporary readers. Nearly three decades of acquaintance with Charan Singh and access to his private papers enable Brass to portray his subject as an ambitious yet principled politician, who, in Max Weber’s terms, lived for rather than off politics. Singh’s ambition drove him to seek and hold on to power at all costs, even when snubbed by his party’s leadership and the prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Yet, as Brass notes, Singh sought power not for personal aggrandizement, but to pursue the interests of the Jat community to which he belonged as well as middle and poor peasants throughout India.

Charan Singh’s policy proposals have failed to capture the scholarly imagination in postcolonial India, says his biographer, for two reasons. Firstly, the urban bias of Indian intellectuals and policymakers has prevented them from sharing Singh’s enthusiasm for peasant agriculture as the backbone of the Indian economy. Secondly, Left scholars have tended to view Charan Singh as a representative of *kulaks* or the rich peasantry in north India, the prime beneficiaries of the Green Revolution, and as a fierce opponent of collectivization and redistribution of land. These reasons have led to a massive under-appreciation of this great Jat leader’s role in abolishing the *zamindari* system of landlordism and his vision of a self-sufficient ‘economy of small farms’ (114). This economic vision rested on a microeconomic theory that posited an inverse relationship between the size of landholdings and agrarian efficiency. Efficient small- and medium-sized farms were, for Charan Singh, the basis for democratic citizenship in an agrarian society. Yet policymakers in India have typically privileged an urban industrial economy and/or large-scale redistribution of land to the poor and landless in the countryside. With Brass’s careful analyses of Charan Singh’s economic ideas, readers are now well-positioned to appreciate a major policy alternative foregone in postcolonial India.

Contemporary readers will also learn much from Paul Brass’s painstaking reconstructions of patronage networks in north India. We learn about accusations and counter-accusations traded between politicians in Uttar Pradesh, questioning each other’s integrity, and how Charan Singh went to great lengths to prove his honesty under these circumstances. We also learn about the patron-client networks through which Charan Singh and his political rivals, notably C.B. Gupta and Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, ascended to and jockeyed for power. Charan Singh’s relationship with his father-like patron, G.B. Pant, the first chief minister of UP, is particularly revealing in terms of the mutual expectations and advantages of patronage politics. While it is clear that Singh did not profit, like his rivals in the UP Congress, from the emerging nexus between politicians and businessmen in early postcolonial India, it is harder to conclude that he did not favor his own caste and community. Charan Singh’s ‘dislike of the Muslim religion’ (360) and what Nehru called ‘Jatpan’ or ‘Jatism’ (386) do not go unnoticed in Brass’s biography. But these tendencies in UP and Indian politics, encouraged by patronage politics, should not be underplayed vis-à-vis law and order concerns and anti-brahminical sentiments respectively The political grievances of Muslims and lower caste groups in UP have taken on myriad forms since Charan Singh’s death, at least some of which challenge directly the hold of middle-peasant castes such as the Jats and Yadavs on the state’s patronage politics.

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