



CH. DEVI LAL: A GREAT ADVOCATE FOR STATE WELFAIRISM

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This paper is devoted to discuss a brief biographical sketch and analyse the various welfare oriented schemes initiated by Late Ch. Devi Lal during his tenure as Chief Minister of Haryana state, Union Minister of Agriculture and as Deputy Prime Minister of India. He not only observed and understood the problems associated with common men but also devoted his life for improving the quality of life of people by providing employment, unemployment allowance, compensation for damaged crops, better schemes for rural development, conservation of water and ecology etc. The schemes initiated during his tenure were especially focused for the rural areas where majority of the country's population live but were largely deprived of. It was his contributions in making life of millions of people better that he is widely known and remembered as *Jan Nayak*.

INTRODUCTION

Ch. Devi Lal was born on September 25, 1914 in the family of Ch. Lekh Ram, a big landlord. His place of birth was Teja Khera village of Sirsa district of present day Haryana which at that time was a part of the East Punjab. His father was a Jat peasant of Sihag gotra whose ancestral roots were in Bikaner of Rajasthan state. His great grandfather Ch. Teja Ram migrated from Bikaner to Teja Khera and migration of the family continued further when his father, Ch. Lekh Ram migrated to Chautala Village. At that time he was merely five years old. During his early period of life, he had "faced neglect, alienation and cruelty at the hands of his stepmother. Gradually, Devi Lal developed a psychological affinity with people who had suffered in any capacity" (Singh, 1999:240).



Ch. Devi Lal's early education was either from Chautala village (fourth class) or its nearby places like Dabwali (sixth and eight classes), Ferozepur (ninth), and Moga (joined tenth class). His journey as a student, social reformer, political leader, minister (state, central and as Deputy PM) continued at different places which gave him a rare opportunity to observe and understand the different social norms prevailing in different areas, ground level functioning of economy (rural economy in particular), social evils prevailing at the local level and their possible remedies. He even went to jail for the cause of country's freedom and for safeguarding the interests of a common man. In "his early life Devi Lal was arrested seven times for his role in the Civil Disobedience and Kisan Movement during the freedom struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi" (Lamba, 2003:100). Besides the impacts of his family, the overall personality of Ch. Devi Lal was deeply influenced by the thoughts of all times great like Swami Dayanand, Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Bhagat Singh, Subhash Chander Bose, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Jayaprakash Narain. The impact of the above mentioned personalities on Ch. Devi Lal was so empowering that he remained a true fighter throughout his whole life. He fought for protecting the rights of rural masses, downtrodden and common man. He "stood for village, that is, upliftment of its inmates and development of its economy. He considered, like Gandhiji, 'cities as agencies exploiting villages' and advocated a full-blooded struggle, something in the fashion of Bhagat Singh or Subhas Chandra Bose, to stop this once and for all" (Yadav, 2003:13).

He had attended the "Congress session held at Lahore on the banks of Ravi" on December 31, 1929 (Malik, 2003:240). It shows that his transformation began at quite an early age. Possibly it was the Congress Session that had invoked in him the idea of working for the countries and he got involved in the process of freedom movement led by the Congress. He was arrested on "28 August [1930] from the office of Congress party for continuing Kaluwala Morcha and put in the lock-up in Hisar jail...Transferred on 4 January [1931] to Borstal Institute and Juvenile Jail Lahore. Released on 5 March [1931] in consequence of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact. Arrested again on the charge of holding public meeting and was kept behind the bars in Hisar but was released after fifteen days. Arrested on 4 January [1933] when Gandhi ji



resumed the Civil Disobedience Movement. Released on May 1934 when the movement was withdrawn” (Malik, 2003:240-241). Despite all these hurdles, he kept on addressing various public meeting and political conferences. In fact, “Ch. Devi Lal and his elder brother Ch. Sahib Ram, both played a leading part in the Congress Movement in Haryana. They spent a number of years in jail in the Satyagraha movements” (Verma, 1990:39) that were organized during 1930s and 1940s. His “estrangement from the Congress Party was complete by the early 1970s, and in 1975 he was one of the many politicians opposed to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who were jailed during the national emergency that she imposed. He was released in 1977 and joined the newly formed Janata (People’s) Party” (Pletcher, 2 April 2023).

He became the Chief Minister of Haryana¹ on June 21, 1977 when Janata Party was voted to power in the state. The Janata Party commanded a very comfortable majority in the Haryana State Assembly. The Janata Party had contested all the 90 assembly seats. It had polled 46.70 percent vote and won 75 seats. The Indian National Congress, on the other hand, had contested 83 of the 90 seats. The average vote share of the party was 18.69 percent and it could win only three seats. The formation of the government by the Janata Party in the state was the second non-Congress government in the state. When this government was formed it was a festival like scenario in the state. It was remarked that “the enthusiasm among people was as strong as was witnessed after the country’s liberation from the British Raj in 1947” (Dahiya, 2008:93). People, especially the rural folks, rushed to Chandigarh to attend the ceremony of state government formation. When he became the Chief Minister of Haryana, it was rated as “something that had been his due for a long time. It was very much a natural choice, given the composition of the mixed breed called the Janata Party...” (Dahiya, 2008:92). He was Chief Minister for about two years, i.e. June 21, 1977 to June 1979, followed by a second tenure from June 20, 1987 to December 2, 1989. He joined the Central government on December 2, 1989 as Union Minister of Agriculture and Deputy Prime Minister of India. When he became the Chief-

¹ His contributions in the formation of Haryana were enormous. In fact, “Haryana state was not the by-product of the Punjabi Suba agitation as is generally believed. Devi Lal worked under the banner of Haryana Lok Manch for the demand of a separate linguistic state. He mobilized public opinion, influenced politicians and soon became a force to reckon with” (Singh, 1999:242).



Minister of Haryana, he “started the concept of ‘Open Darbar’ and fixed one hour of intimate contact between the Chief Minister and the groups of public men or worthy citizens or aggrieved public workers to inspire in the intimate contact, confidence and comradeship. He kept up this practice when he became Deputy Prime Minister of India” (Singh, 2003:168).

He did a lot of developmental works either in the capacity of minister/Chief-Minister of Haryana government, Union Minister of Agriculture in the Central government or Deputy Prime Minister of India. Rural development was his natural choice. Providing water to every agricultural field was one of his priority areas. It was not only for the people of rural areas, he also did commendable works for Dalits and other weaker sections of society, including the old age people. He “found that despite constitutional and legal provisions, Dalits were not allowed to use the public places in villages. They could not use the dominant castes’ *chaupals*. He helped these people to have their own *chaupals* in their villages at the government cost” (Yadav, 2003:40). Above all, his most important contribution was that he had created awareness among the rural masses and common man about their rights. He was of the firm opinion that “since 70 per cent of the Indian population was living in villages and agriculture was their main source of livelihood, a balanced growth of the economy could not take place without their development” (Verma, 2003:86). These are some of the reasons why he widely came to be known as *Jan Nayak*. He remained “a village man all through his life, giving whatever he could, to the poor...” (Yadav, 2002:48).

Some of the important welfare oriented works and works in the field of ecological development that were initiated by his governments need kind attention:

Water Supply and Water Conservation:

Understanding the ground realities of water supply in the villages and the associated problems of women regarding fetching water from distance, the government under his leadership “initiated projects for supply of drinking water to the villages. The government ensured the digging of tubewells and construction of big overhead water tanks for a cluster of two to three villages and saved women from drudgery of fetching water from long distances and the scourge of drinking undrinkable water” (Chaudhary, 2003:83). Further, the “peasants were



encouraged to go for tube wells. These tube wells were energized on top priority basis. As a result, 26,782 tubewells came up in just one year—1987-88” (Yadav, 2002:33).

In terms of investments made to improve the irrigation network in the state “a sum of Rs.8 crores was provided for irrigation schemes for the year 1978-79 alone. Rs. 50 crores were set apart to ‘irrigate 1.5 lakh hectares of parched land and completion of Siwani irrigation scheme’. Another sum of Rs. 12.5 crores was earmarked to be spent on the Jawaharlal Nehru Lift Irrigation Scheme. Rs.191 crores were borrowed from the World Bank for lining the water courses of the existing canals to check water seepage there” (Yadav, 2002:113).

The water conservation was also one of his priority areas. During his tenure of government, the “experts were assigned this work on priority basis. Steps were also taken to make maximum use of available water. The sprinkler irrigation was encouraged for this purpose. An ambitious plan was drawn and executed for the purpose of providing irrigational facilities for the thirsty lands. Not many people know that in Devi Lal’s time net area that was put under irrigation was more than what it was during Bansi Lal’s much talked about regime” (Yadav, 2003:38). During 1974-75 (Bansi Lal’s regime), the net area under irrigation was 17,54,000 hectares, whereas during 1978-79 (Devi Lal’ regime) it was 19,17,000 hectares (for details see, Yadav, 2002:114). He tried hard for ensuring the surplus water of Ravi and Beas for the farmer of Haryana. For maintaining the ecological balance and maintain bio-diversity, a large number of trees were planted along the canals and roads.

Agriculture Policy as per Agro-Climatic Zones:

He was not in favour of having a homogeneous agriculture policy for a large and ecologically diverse country like India. He was of the view that we must have different policies for the development of coastal areas, hill areas, desert lands etc. He opined that “India be divided into agro-climatic regions for this purpose. Planning should be done for every zone by keeping in view its specific requirements. A comprehensive Agricultural Policy should be formulated for this purpose. For supplementing the income of the farmers from agriculture, dairy farming, fishery and forestry should be popularized” (Singh, 2003:155).



Remunerative Prices to Crops and Compensation to Farmers for Damaged Crops:

During his tenure as Chief Minister, he was instrumental in giving higher prices for different crops in the state. Secondly, his own experience in the field of agriculture led him to think of providing compensation to farmers on account of crops damaged due to natural calamity. Prior to his tenure as chief minister of the state, the farmers did not even dream of getting compensation for the damage to their crops. It was during his tenure in March 1978 that agricultural crops were damaged due to hailstorm in large parts of the state. He personally visited the “affected areas, got the damages assessed, and announced compensation at the rate of Rs. 400 per acre to meet the losses partially. It was the first time in Indian history that the farmer received relief from the Government for the damage to his crops due to natural calamity” (Chaudhary, 2003:81).

Electricity Supply:

His government worked for the proper electricity supply especially in the rural areas. It was felt that electricity supply remained erratic in rural areas. The supply of adequate electricity was ensured to villages during the peak seasons of sowing, irrigation and harvesting. As a consequence of his efforts, the peasants got now, “over 70 Lakh units of electricity every day from June 1986 to May 1987. After June 1987, it increased to 98 lakh units a day” (Yadav, 2002:33).

Problem of Indebtedness:

On account of belonging to the peasant family, he had ground level information about the pathetic conditions of farmers, especially in relation to indebtedness. “Immediately after assuming the office of Chief Minister in June 1977, he issued order to waive off the loans, taken by the farmers from Government agencies for purchase of tractors etc...Implementation of this scheme provided a great relief to the farmers of the State and provided them an opportunity to add to their infrastructure development in the farm sector” (Chaudhary, 2003:77-78). The other “equally beneficial step was the waiving of the loans upto Rs. 10,000 of the indebted peasants, petty shopkeepers, and workers. The weaker sections of the society, that is, Dalits and backward classes were the main beneficiaries of this scheme. According to official records, by 4 August 1988, the government had waived off loans of 1,33,740 persons amounting to Rs.8.54 crores” (Yadav,2002: 32).



Abolition of Market Committee Tax on Tractors:

In present times, it would be strange to know that once the farmers were required to pay tax annually to the Market Committee of the neighbouring town if they go there on their tractors for one reason or the other. In fact, they “were required to pay a sum of Rs. 150 per annum as tax to the Market Committee of the neighbouring town for the entry of tractor in its boundary” (Chaudhary, 2003:79). The government under his leadership had abolished the tax on tractors and also allowed to use such vehicles for carrying people during the marriage ceremonies or for the purpose of religious congregations.

Spoke for Enhancing the Budget for Rural Development:

He was quite conscious of the fact that majority of the population in the country resides in the villages which also contribute enormously in the country’s GDP; however, the rural areas remain deprived in many fields like proper electricity supply, water supply, better transport connectivity, availability of schools and colleges etc. He pleaded “for 50 percent allocation of the budget for rural development. He had raised his voice for 50 percent reservation of posts of Supreme Court and High Court judges, Governors and Ambassadors for the people with rural background” (Chaudhary, 2003:81). Although all of the above could not be achieved but certainly we find enhancement of grants for the rural development programmes over the period of time.

For the purpose of generating finance for the rural development, his government came up with the idea of matching grant scheme. Under this scheme, “the villagers would collect money, and the government would provide an equal amount to the Village Panchayat for village development programmes such as improving the condition of existing streets, laying new brick streets, strengthening of school buildings, and construction of community chaupals, Health Centres, Veterinary Hospitals and such other works. This scheme was a two-prong attack on rural backwardness, involvement of the villagers on one hand and the Government on the other” (Chaudhary, 2003:78).



Employment:

“New jobs were also created by the government. Some hands were employed in the quasi-state services and by the local body and private sector employers” (Yadav, 2003:39). More initiatives were taken for educated unemployed and for those who could not get employment. The unemployment allowance was given to such persons. “It was Rs. 50 for matriculates, 75 for higher secondary pass and Rs. 100 for graduates per month” (Yadav, 2002: 123). Special incentives and financial help were provided to the educated unemployed for setting up their own rural industrial units. “They were given special loan of Rs. 1,00,000 for this purpose at a very nominal rate of interest, plus 15 percent subsidy. As a result, thousands of young men got not only self employed but gave jobs to many others...The unemployed youths who could not get jobs were given unemployment allowance. The unemployed young men were exempted from paying any fare when they travelled in government buses to attend their interview” (Yadav, 2003:39).

Health Sector:

Various new Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and Community Health Centres (CHCs) were opened that not only strengthened the existing health infrastructure but also gave more opportunities to the people for their treatment. The establishments of these centres had also created various kinds of job avenues for the people in terms of construction work, security personnel, doctors, nurses, clerical jobs etc.

Dignity to the Old People:

With the purpose of enabling the old age persons live with dignity, he initiated the Old Age Pension Scheme. Under the scheme, “old age pension of Rs. 100 per month to every person over 65 years of age, not paying income tax or drawing service pension. As many as 7.5 lakh senior citizens were benefitted by this simple welfare measure” (Yadav, 2002: 32). The scheme had changed the lives of a number of people as through this pension policy they could live their life with grace.



CONCLUSION

In the conclusion it is submitted that Ch. Devi Lal did enormous work for the people, especially those living in rural areas. Special to mention were the schemes related to remunerative prices of the crops, compensation for damaged crops, old age pension, employment generation, unemployment allowance and other schemes related to improvements in rural infrastructure and for ecological balance. His government had started various programs for rural industrialization which were aimed at not only providing employment to the rural youth but also to lessen the burden to urban centres. He was a great visionary and the programmes that were launched during his reign had far-reaching effects. He was a true patriarch who rightly understood role of the government in enhancing the welfare of people irrespective of their caste and creed. He had created social, economic and political consciousness among the farmers, workers and the poor about their rights. His policies remind us the thoughts of famous British economist John Maynard Keynes who always favoured for state intervention in enhancing the quality of life of the people. Keeping in view the works done for the people, Ch. Devi Lal is quite rightly known as *Jan Nayak*.



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