



BABU JAGJIVAN RAM



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Jagjivan Ram, endearingly called Babuji, was a valiant freedom fighter and a crusader for social justice. His rise in public life saw him emerge as an eminent and popular political leader who devoted his entire life for the welfare of the country and its teeming masses. As a national leader, a distinguished parliamentarian, an able administrator, Union Minister and a vocal champion of depressed classes, he had a towering presence and played a long innings spanning half a century in Indian politics with great commitment, devotion and sincerity.

Born at a small village, Chandwa, in Shahabad district, now named Bhojpur District in Bihar on 5 April 1908, Jagjivan Ram passed his Matriculation examination from Arrah town school. Despite facing various problems and difficulties, Jagjivan Ram went on to successfully complete Inter Science Examination from the Banaras Hindu University and later graduated from the Calcutta University.

During his student years, Jagjivan Ram successfully organized a number of *Ravidas Sammelans* and also started celebrating *Guru Ravidas Jayanti* in different districts of Calcutta. In 1934, he founded the *Akhil Bhartiya Ravidas Mahasabha* in Calcutta. The other organizations that he founded for bringing about social reforms were *Khetihar Mazdoor Sabha* for the agricultural labour and the *All India Depressed Classes League*. Through his organizations he involved the depressed classes in the freedom struggle. He was of the view that Dalit leaders should not only struggle for social reforms but also demand political representation.

Jagjivan Ram played a very active role in the freedom struggle. Inspired by Gandhiji's Civil Disobedience Movement, Babuji courted arrest on 10 December 1940. After his release, he took part in the Civil Disobedience Movement and *Sathyagraha*. Babuji was arrested again on 19 August 1942 for active

participation in the 'Quit India Movement' launched by the Indian National Congress.

Babuji had a long and distinguished political career spanning over five decades. Starting his public life as a student activist and freedom fighter, he went on to become a legislator in the State at the young age of 28 as a nominated member of the Bihar Legislative Council. In 1937, he stood as a candidate of the Depressed Classes League and was elected unopposed to the Bihar Legislative Assembly from the East Central Shahabad (Rural) constituency. When the Congress Government was formed, Babuji was appointed the Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, Co-operative Industry and Village Development. He resigned in 1939 along with the entire Cabinet on the issue of the British policy of involving India in the Second World War.

Jagjivan Ram again won unopposed in the 1946 Central Elections from the same constituency and was inducted into the Interim Government on 30 August 1946 as Minister of Labour. Thereafter, he remained a Member of the Union Cabinet for nearly 33 years.

He played a pioneering role in the Indian National Congress right from 1937. During the pre-Independence period, Babuji held important offices at the State level in the Congress. After Independence, he became the axis of the Party and indispensable for party affairs as well as governance of the country. He was a member of All India Congress Committee from 1940 to 1977 and was in the All India Congress Working Committee from 1948 to 1977.

Babu Jagjivan Ram had the unique distinction of serving as a Member of the Central Legislature uninterruptedly for as long as 40 years. Till his last breath, he was a sitting Member of the Lok Sabha—his eighth term—consecutively since the First General Elections. Babuji had the distinction of being the longest-serving Minister in the history of Indian Parliament and was known for his brilliant handling of parliamentary business. His oratory was well-acknowledged and admired in Parliament. As a Union Minister, he introduced numerous Bills in the Lok Sabha and piloted their passage in Parliament.

In post-Independence India, Babuji's contribution to nation-building was monumental. He was the Minister of Labour during 1946-52, a portfolio he held again in 1966-1967. Besides the Labour Ministry, the other Ministries he held charge of, were Communications (1952-56), Railways (1952-56), Transport and Communications (1962-63), Food and Agriculture (1967-70), Defence (1970-74) and Agriculture and Irrigation (1974-77). When the Janata Party Government headed by Shri Morarji Desai was formed in 1977, Jagjivan Ram joined it as a Cabinet Minister holding Defence portfolio. He also became the Deputy Prime Minister and held the Defence portfolio from 24 January 1979 to 28 July 1979.

As Labour Minister, he introduced time-tested policies and laws for the welfare of the labour. He was instrumental in enacting some of the important labour-related legislations, viz. the Minimum Wages Act, 1946; the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947; the Indian Trade Union (Amendment) Act, 1960; the Payment of Bonus Act, 1965, etc. He laid down the foundation of social security by way of enacting two important Acts, namely the Employees State Insurance Act, 1948 and the Provident Fund Act, 1952.

Jagjivan Ram held charge of the Ministry of Communications from May 1952 to December 1956. He also held charge of the Ministry of Communications and Ministry of Transport from April 1962 to August 1963. Nationalization of air transport was one of the most significant developments of his term. As Minister of Communications, he extended the postal facilities to remote villages. Babuji was successful in enacting the Air Corporation Act, 1953 which substantially strengthened the civil aviation sector and resulted in the evolution of Air India and Indian Airlines as the national air carriers while holding the portfolio of the Transport and Communications Ministry. Realizing the huge potential of the shipping sector, Jagjivan Ram emphasized the expansion of its fleet and brought into ambit all the important trade routes of the world, which ultimately resulted in substantial increase in the total cargo shipment, and in turn, gave a boost to foreign trade and increase in foreign exchange reserve.

As the Railway Minister, he modernized Railways and took innumerable welfare measures for Railway

employees and set a record by not allowing any increase in passenger fares for five years.

As Food and Agriculture Minister, he tackled severe drought, heralded the Green Revolution and made India self-sufficient in food. He also organized the Public Distribution System to ensure that food is made available to the masses at a reasonable price.

Babu Jagjivan Ram's dynamic and inspiring leadership as Defence Minister galvanized the entire nation and the Armed Forces to deal with the crisis in East Pakistan, which culminated in the creation of a new country, Bangladesh. The moments of acute national crisis in December 1971 bear testimony to the confidence, patience and immense courage of Babuji. It was during his tenure as the Defence Minister that India entered into the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation.

Babu Jagjivan Ram symbolized the dawn of a new era of assertion, equality and socio-economic empowerment for the deprived and the downtrodden. As a member of the Constituent Assembly, he played a remarkable role in formulating provisions for safeguarding the interests of depressed classes. The provision for State intervention for the overall advancement of socially backward classes by way of reservation in public employment and reservation of seats in legislatures for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes also owes its success to leaders like Babu Jagjivan Ram. He was instrumental in the making of the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955. For his unwavering support and relentless struggle for the cause of the downtrodden, he has been rightly called the 'Messiah' of Dalits.

Leaving behind the message of human dignity and equality, Babuji breathed his last on 6 July 1986. As a national leader who shared his political career with many generations from Mahatma Gandhi to Rajiv Gandhi, he has left the legacy of a sincere and dedicated political leader, a committed public servant, a brave freedom fighter, a social reformer, revolutionary and a great humanist.

Paying tributes to the departed leader, Giani Zail Singh, the then President of India, said, "Shri Jagjivan Ram

would remain a symbol of the hope and aspirations of all backward classes and hitherto neglected sections of society. The uplift of the poor and the downtrodden was Shri Jagjivan Ram's passion. He was a great democrat and a champion of secularism, and had for long distinguished himself as an experienced administrator and left behind a record of dedicated service to the country."

Shri R. Venkataraman, the then Vice President of India said, "In the passing away of Shri Jagjivan Ram, the country has lost a courageous freedom fighter, a seasoned administrator and an eminent political leader."

Shri Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India said, "he was amongst the tallest in his generation—first as a freedom fighter and then as a builder of modern India. His personality, his mastery of expression, his formidable political and parliamentary skills, his administrative capability all led to the building and structuring of India, of bringing our societies together, of joining our country and strengthening our country."

In 2012 Babu Jagjivan Ram was posthumously awarded with the Friends of Liberation War Honour by the Government of Bangladesh for his valuable contributions during the 1971 war.