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## FROM CASTE STRUGGLE TO NATIONAL LEADERSHIP : THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF BABU JAGJIVAN RAM

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### Abstract:

Babu Jagjivan Ram, a towering figure in India's freedom movement and post-independence era, was a leader whose contributions to nation-building and social justice are unparalleled. This research article delves into his multifaceted legacy, highlighting his role as a freedom fighter, advocate for Dalit rights, and key architect of India's development politics. Born into a Dalit family, Jagjivan Ram's early experiences of social discrimination shaped his lifelong commitment to the upliftment of marginalized communities. His leadership in the Dalit movement aligned it with the broader national struggle for independence, motivating other leaders to address caste-based inequalities.

Jagjivan Ram's political career, spanning over five decades, was marked by his service in various central ministries, where he implemented transformative policies. As Labour Minister, he introduced the Minimum Wages Act and the Employees' State Insurance (ESI) Act, laying the foundation for labor welfare in India. His tenure as Agriculture Minister saw the nation through severe droughts and led to the first Green Revolution. As Defence Minister, he oversaw the liberation of Bangladesh, contributing to one of India's greatest military triumphs.

The study employs a historical approach, drawing on primary and secondary sources, including speeches, parliamentary debates, and official records, to explore Jagjivan Ram's contributions. Despite his significant role in Indian politics, his legacy is often overlooked, particularly within the Dalit movement. This article argues that Babu Jagjivan Ram's vision of development politics—using political power as a tool for societal growth and equity—remains highly relevant today. His commitment to social justice and inclusive development continues to inspire and guide India's ongoing journey toward a more just and equitable society.

**Key Words:** Social justice, Policies, Vision, Legacy

### Introduction:

Babu Jagjivan Ram was a towering figure in the Indian freedom movement and a key architect in shaping the nation's destiny in the post-independence era. Among the many great leaders and personalities who contributed to India's struggle for independence and its subsequent development, Jagjivan Ram, affectionately known as 'Babuji,' stands out as a stalwart. He was not only a freedom fighter but also a passionate advocate for social justice.

Babu Jagjivan Ram's meteoric rise in public life saw him emerge as a highly respected and popular political leader. He dedicated his entire life to the welfare of the country, making significant contributions as a national leader, parliamentarian, union minister, and champion of the marginalized communities. His influence in Indian politics spanned over half a century, leaving a lasting impact on the nation.

From the outset of his social and political career, Jagjivan Ram was a crusader for the oppressed and downtrodden. He became a national figure when he steered the Dalit movement onto the right path, aligning it with the broader national struggle for freedom. His involvement in the freedom movement as a leader of the Indian National Congress greatly



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motivated other national leaders to seriously address the issues of Dalit upliftment, the eradication of the caste system, and the abolition of untouchability as national causes.

Jagjivan Ram served as a member of the Indian government from 1946 to 1979, with only two brief interruptions. In 1963, he resigned under the Kamraj Plan, which aimed to revitalize the Congress party. Again, in February 1977, he resigned from the Congress party to form the Congress for Democracy. He was reappointed as a minister in March 1977. Throughout his illustrious career, he held various significant positions, including being a member of the Central Legislative Assembly and the Constituent Assembly (1946–1950), a member of the Provisional Parliament (1950–1952), and a member of the first eight Lok Sabhas.

## Method of Study

The present study, employs the historical method to explore and analyze his contributions and legacy. This research paper draws upon a comprehensive range of both primary and secondary sources.

Among the primary sources, the selected speeches of Jagjivan Ram, compiled by Rajendra Sharma up to 1966, serve as a valuable resource for understanding his thoughts and vision. Additionally, "Jagjivan Ram's Caste Challenge in India" provides further insights into his perspectives and challenges during his political career.

The study also relies on official records, including the annual reports of various ministries, Lok Sabha debates, and parliamentary proceedings, which offer a detailed account of his work and the impact he had across different sectors.

In addition to these primary sources, there is a vast and diverse collection of secondary sources that contribute to a deeper understanding of Babu Jagjivan Ram's life, political ideology, and influence on Indian society. These sources collectively form the foundation for this research, allowing for a thorough examination of his role as a pivotal figure in development politics in India.

## Early Life of Babu Jagjivan Ram

Babu Jagjivan Ram was born into circumstances that were far from privileged. He did not enter this world with a silver spoon in his mouth, nor even with a spade in his hand. As a member of a 'Chamar' family, the mere prospect of working in the fields, except as indentured labor, seemed hopelessly out of reach.

During his childhood, untouchables like him faced severe social restrictions. They were forbidden from drawing water from the village well, walking on public roads, using community tanks or bathing ghats, or even approaching places of worship. The so-called respectable Brahmins would go so far as to avoid even the shadow of an untouchable. It is difficult to fully imagine or describe the deep sense of alienation and injustice that young Jagjivan Ram must have felt growing up in such a stifling social environment.

He witnessed and endured the harsh realities of social injustice and discrimination from a young age. Babu Jagjivan Ram's heart rebelled against those who, instead of acknowledging their own failings, chose to lecture and demean the long-suffering Dalits. Later in life, he would often find himself in confrontations with those who hypocritically preached moral virtues while ignoring the atrocities committed against the oppressed classes.

It is remarkable that, despite being deeply familiar with the horrific treatment meted out to the depressed classes by the Hindus, Jagjivan Ram did not become consumed by hatred. It was as though he absorbed the venom of his experiences;



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though it occasionally manifested as fierce intensity, he never allowed it to dominate him. He was one of the rare individuals who saw politics as the only viable path to serve his people and uplift the marginalized.

## Babu Jagjivan Ram - key positions

Babu Jagjivan Ram held several key positions in the Indian government over a remarkable career that spanned more than three decades. His extensive experience across various ministries is a testament to his versatility and dedication to public service.

From 1952 to 1956, he served as the Minister of Communications, overseeing the nation's postal and telecommunication services. He then took on the role of Minister for Transport from 1956 to 1957, followed by his tenure as Minister of Railways from 1957 to 1962, where he played a pivotal role in modernizing and expanding India's railway network.

In 1962, Jagjivan Ram was appointed Minister for Transport and Communications, a position he held until 1963. His leadership in these sectors was marked by significant improvements in infrastructure and services. In 1966, he served as Minister for Labour, Employment, and Rehabilitation, focusing on labor welfare and employment generation.

From 1967 to 1970, he was the Minister for Food, Agriculture, Community Development, and Cooperation, where he contributed to the Green Revolution and strengthened the nation's agricultural policies. Jagjivan Ram also served as Minister of Defence from 1970 to 1974 and again from 1977 to 1979, during which he played a crucial role in shaping India's defense policies and military preparedness.

Additionally, from 1969 to 1971, he held the prestigious position of President of the Indian National Congress, further cementing his influence in the political landscape. It is exceptionally rare in public life to amass such a vast and varied experience across multiple ministries. Babu Jagjivan Ram served with distinction in every role he undertook, leaving a legacy of exemplary service and significant contributions to the nation's development.

## Babu Jagjivan Ram: A Man of Faith, Leadership, and Integrity

Babu Jagjivan Ram was a deeply religious man throughout his life, drawing immense spiritual strength and wisdom from his devotion. The Ramayana held a special place in his heart, and it was a source of both delight and moral guidance. On Sundays, when the Ramayana was recited at his home, he would take the time to explain the meaning of each verse to those gathered, sharing not only the epic's teachings but also his own reflections.

Known for his unwavering composure, Babu Jagjivan Ram never lost his temper, whether in public, in Parliament, or with his ministerial staff. His calm demeanor earned him the loyalty and respect of his subordinates at various levels. He was a leader who not only inspired dedication but also stood firmly by those who worked under him. Even in the most challenging times, his ability to maintain his poise was remarkable.

Babu Jagjivan Ram had a unique charm, characterized by his wit, humor, and a disarming smile, which allowed him to win over even his fiercest opponents. He was always logical and clear in his arguments, whether in parliamentary debates or administrative discussions. His reputation as an astute politician, an outstanding parliamentarian, and a great administrator was well-deserved.

He combined idealism with pragmatism in his approach to solving problems. In decision-making, he encouraged open and frank discussions among his advisers and officers, listening carefully to their views. He would intervene only to seek clarifications or to elaborate on complex points. Once he had gathered all the necessary information, he would provide his



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definitive opinion or decision with clarity and precision. There was a sense of finality in his decisions, and those responsible for implementing them did so with confidence, knowing that they had his full support and guidance.

Babu Jagjivan Ram's ability to achieve the desired results in his various ministerial roles was a testament to his leadership. His memory was phenomenal, enabling him to contribute persuasively and logically to any discussion or debate. His deep understanding of human nature, combined with his thorough grasp of complex subjects, made him a leading parliamentarian who commanded attention and respect.

Highly respected both as a person and as a statesman, Babu Jagjivan Ram left an indelible mark on Indian politics. His legacy is that of a leader who combined spiritual depth, intellectual clarity, and practical wisdom in the service of his country.

### Babu Jagjivan Ram: A Champion of Social Change and Dalit Rights

While pursuing his B.Sc. at Calcutta University, Babu Jagjivan Ram emerged as a powerful advocate for the marginalized communities, particularly those from Bihar, Orissa, and Bengal, who were living in deplorable conditions with no voice or identity. He organized the local depressed classes, bringing together those who worked in mills, factories, and other establishments. His efforts culminated in a massive rally at Wellington Square in Calcutta, which drew a crowd of 40,000 people. This rally was a resounding success and catapulted Babu Jagjivan Ram into the social spotlight, earning him recognition from prominent leaders of the freedom struggle in Bengal, including B.C. Roy and Subhash Chandra Bose.

Babu Jagjivan Ram was a phenomenon in every sense of the word. He never sought the limelight or deliberately crafted a strategy to advance his position. From the very beginning, he felt a deep sense of duty to champion the cause of the socially disadvantaged and economically backward. With unwavering conviction, he boldly proclaimed that only a cultural and social revolution could bring about true change. A staunch nationalist, he was deeply frustrated by the attempts of some upper-class Hindus to "reform" the untouchables by focusing on issues like drinking, gambling, and poor living conditions. "Who has kept them in this appalling state?" he would fiercely demand.

Jagjivan Ram was no ordinary individual. He possessed a sharp intellect, a resilient heart, and immense strength of character. His convictions were firm, and his purpose was clear. He had an extraordinary capacity for sustained hard work, coupled with a vision that was both grand and realistic. His clarity of thought and approach toward realizing his vision set him apart as a leader of great caliber.

Recognizing his commitment to the downtrodden, Babu Jagjivan Ram was inducted into the first Congress government under Jawaharlal Nehru as the national face of the Harijans. His unwavering loyalty to the national movement for freedom, combined with his deep concern for the oppressed and suffering, endeared him to millions across the country.

Despite his significant contributions, Babu Jagjivan Ram is often overlooked in discussions about the leaders of the Dalit movement. While figures like B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Shahu Maharaj, and Kanshi Ram are celebrated as icons, Babu Jagjivan Ram's name is seldom included, even though he was born a Dalit and played a crucial role in both the Indian freedom movement and nation-building after independence. Notably, many of these revered leaders, except for Dr. Ambedkar, did not belong to the Dalit community. From August 15, 1947, until 1984 (when the Bahujan Samaj Party was founded), it was Babu Jagjivan Ram who consistently fought for Dalit rights within the government. Yet, despite his tireless efforts and enduring legacy, he remains largely neglected by the Dalit movement.

This oversight underscores the need for a more inclusive recognition of those who have contributed to the struggle for social justice in India. Babu Jagjivan Ram's life and work deserve to be acknowledged and celebrated as a vital part of this ongoing struggle.



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## Babu Jagjivan Ram: A Legacy of Unmatched Political Longevity and Leadership

In retrospect, the achievements of Babu Jagjivan Ram seem almost unreal. His uninterrupted parliamentary career, spanning over half a century, is a world record in political longevity. Imagine standing for election and being returned unopposed on more than three occasions—a testament to his widespread respect and influence. He was instrumental in making India self-sufficient in food at a time when the nation was heavily dependent on Western aid, and he earned legendary status for his exceptional efficiency and staggering capacity for work.

As India's Defence Minister, Babu Jagjivan Ram guided the country to its greatest military triumph: the 1971 war that led to the creation of Bangladesh. His political journey reads like a modern-day epic. Emerging from the caste-plagued backwoods of Bihar, where opportunities were scarce and life was harsh, this determined crusader scaled heights of success unmatched by any other figure in post-independence history. Affectionately known as "Babuji" (father) by all, he commanded deep respect across the nation.

Babu Jagjivan Ram's evolution as a leader was driven by a singular vision of liberating the nation from foreign rule. He saw political power not as an end in itself but as an opportunity to transform people's lives and promote their welfare through bold and well-thought-out plans. His career exemplifies what can be called "development politics"—the use of political authority to foster societal growth and upliftment.

Nations are built over generations, and freedom is an expansive proposition. It is achieved through the sacrifices of the young and old alike and is preserved by the sweat and toil of successive generations. Babu Jagjivan Ram belongs to that generation of freedom fighters whose courage and convictions led to an independent India. He was closely associated with the historical figures of our freedom movement, and together they forged the vision of an independent India, a freedom we achieved after 90 years of struggle.

Babu Jagjivan Ram's life is a practical demonstration of the single-minded pursuit of equal opportunity within social and economic structures. He firmly believed that democracy and the caste system cannot coexist, and that true societal transformation can only be achieved through the functioning of democracy and adherence to constitutional values. His legacy is a powerful reminder that political power, when guided by a vision for the greater good, can be a tool for profound social change.

### Discussion: Babu Jagjivan Ram's Enduring Legacy and Relevance Today

In conclusion, reflecting on 65 years of India's independence, it becomes clear that the path to resolving the deep-seated issues of our caste-ridden society lies in the principles of cooperation, empathy, and goodwill—values that Babu Jagjivan Ram exemplified throughout his life. His approach contrasts sharply with the methods of hatred, envy, and confrontation often associated with some factions of the Ambedkarite Dalit movement.

For the Dalit movement to be truly transformative, it must embrace a positive, inclusive approach that seeks to collaborate with others in eradicating caste divisions and building a classless, equality-based society. A strategy rooted in suspicion and permanent hatred among castes risks driving the country toward caste wars and bloodshed. This is why Babu Jagjivan Ram's vision and contributions are more relevant today than ever before. His role in India's social revolution is indelible, and his contributions will never be diminished or forgotten in the annals of history.

Babu Jagjivan Ram stands as a quintessential example of development politics. He viewed political power as a means to transform people's lives and promote their welfare through bold and well-considered plans. His numerous terms as a Member of Parliament and Union Cabinet Minister provided him with the opportunity to serve the people in a meaningful





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way. As a vital member of the Constituent Assembly in post-independent India, he played a key role in enshrining social justice as a core ideal in the Constitution.

Babu Jagjivan Ram had the unique privilege of serving in several ministries within the Central Government, including Labour, Transport and Communications, Railways, Agriculture, and Defence. As Labour Minister, he laid the foundation for a new era of labor welfare and industrial productivity by championing the Minimum Wages Act and the Employees' State Insurance (ESI) Act. As Communications Minister, he nationalized private airlines and extended postal services to rural villages. As Agriculture Minister, he pulled the country out of the grips of severe drought, leading the way to the first Green Revolution. Finally, as Defence Minister under the dynamic leadership of Indira Gandhi, he oversaw the liberation of Bangladesh, marking a historic military triumph.

Babu Jagjivan Ram's legacy is one of profound impact and enduring relevance. His visionary leadership, commitment to social justice, and dedication to the welfare of the people continue to inspire and guide India's journey toward a more just and equitable society.

## Conclusion:

In exploring the life and legacy of Babu Jagjivan Ram, titled "**From Caste Struggle to National Leadership: The Life and Legacy of Babu Jagjivan Ram,**" it becomes evident that his journey is a compelling narrative of overcoming adversity and contributing significantly to India's political and social landscape. Born into the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination, Jagjivan Ram's rise from the depths of social marginalization to become a prominent national leader embodies the essence of resilience and visionary leadership.

Jagjivan Ram's contribution extends beyond his personal achievements; it reflects a broader movement towards social justice and national progress. His tenure as a leader of the Dalit movement, combined with his strategic alignment of caste issues with the national freedom struggle, highlights his role as a unifying force in India's quest for equality. Unlike many of his contemporaries, his approach was characterized by cooperation and empathy rather than confrontation and division, which underscores his enduring relevance in today's context.

Throughout his illustrious career, Ram held various pivotal positions, including those of Minister of Communications, Railways, Labour, Agriculture, and Defence. His work in these roles not only exemplified his commitment to development politics but also showcased his ability to effectuate systemic changes that addressed critical issues such as labor welfare, agricultural productivity, and national defense. His achievements, including the introduction of landmark legislations and strategic national policies, played a crucial role in shaping modern India.

Jagjivan Ram's legacy is a testament to his dedication to building an inclusive society. His efforts in transforming India's socio-political fabric reflect a deep-seated belief in the principles of democracy and social justice. As the nation continues to grapple with the challenges of caste and inequality, Babu Jagjivan Ram's life and work remain a guiding light. His journey from caste struggle to national leadership exemplifies a transformative vision that continues to inspire and inform India's ongoing pursuit of equality and progress.

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