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Babu jagjivan ram - a study

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Abstract

Jagjivan Ram, endearingly called Babuji, was a freedom fighter and a crusader for social justice. His meteoric rise in public life saw him emerge as an eminent and popular political leader, who devoted his entire life working for the welfare of the country. He belonged to the vintage era of modern Indian politics. As national leader, parliamentarian, Union Minister and champion of depressed classes, he had a towering presence and played along innings spanning half a century in Indian politics. His enduring and quintessentially twentieth century political legacy reminds us of the fervour, idealism and indomitable spirit of India's political leadership that not only fought and won freedom for the country, but also laid the firm foundation for a modern, democratic polity. Gifted with a flair for political leadership and moved by the ideals and goals of the socio-political events that enveloped the country, Babu Jagjivan Ram played a significant role in scripting our country's political and constitutional development and social change. A passionate leader dedicated to public life, he enjoyed immense respect formal quarters. Widely admired for his leadership qualities and organizational abilities, he always remained a force to be reckoned with in Indian politics. The purpose of the present paper is to analyse the leadership qualities of a great leader.

Keywords: Idealism, depressed classes, passionate leader, intellectual discourse, human dignity, marginalization

1. Introduction

“Non violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind.”

“I need hardly emphasise the importance of the new political role of the labour, except to say that increase in power means increase in responsibility. These two go together and cannot be separated. Power with responsibility will lead to disaster, that may even spell the loss of liberty and the downfall of the state”.

- Jagjivan Ram

Jagjivan Ram was born on 5 April, 1908 at Chandwa, a small village, in Shahabad district, now named Bhojpur, in Bihar. His father, Shobhi Ram was in the British Army where he learnt English and became proficient in it. He was posted in Peshawar, but due to differences with the British he resigned. In January 1914, at the age of six, Jagjivan Ram was sent to the village *pathshala*. He had barely started school, when his father died leaving the young Jagjivan in the care of his mother Vasanti Devi, who despite the social and economic hardships, insisted on Jagjivan continuing his education. Jagjivan's love for books and knowledge opened up a whole new world of ideas, thought and intellectual discourse. He would spend an hour in the library every day to read books on different subjects. Jagjivan was fluent in many languages, besides Bhojpuri. He read extensively in Hindi, English, Bengali and Sanskrit. At 6:00 every morning he would walk 3 kilometres to the Arrah railway station to read 'The Statesman' newspaper as to keep abreast of all national and international news and developments. He came across Bankim Chandra's—*Anand Math*, a Bible for the young revolutionaries and freedom fighters. He was so inspired by it that he learnt Bengali to read the book in its original form. Since childhood Jagjivan Ram had dreamed of being a scientist. But as he grew up he could no longer ignore the socio-political situations enveloping the country and he sacrificed his personal ambitions to answer the call of his motherland. The student years strengthened his resolve to fight on two fronts, for the freedom of the country and for social equality.

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2. Freedom struggle and politics

During his student years, Jagjivan Ram successfully organized a number of Ravidas Sammelans and had started celebrating Guru Ravidas Jayanti in the different districts of Calcutta. In 1934, he founded the Akhil Bhartiya Ravidas Mahasabha in Calcutta. The other organizations that he founded for social reforms were Khetihar Mazdoor Sabha for agricultural labour and the ALL India Depressed Classes League. Through his organizations he involved the depressed classes in the freedom struggle and also rallied that all Dalit leaders should unite, and not only fight for social reform but also demand political representation. On 1 June, 1935, Jagjivan Ram married Indrani Devi, daughter of Dr. Birbal, a renowned medical practitioner and a social worker of Kanpur. In 1936, when he was just 28 years old, Jagjivan Ram began his parliamentary career 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) and he also ensured the unopposed victory of his Depressed Classes League candidates in all the 14 reserved constituencies. With such an unopposed and decisive victory, Babuji emerged as the kingmaker. Subsequently, the Congress invited him to join them. As a leader of the party, Jagjivan Ram strengthened the national cause by his strong organizational work and effective participation in the various programmes the party undertook in its struggle for freedom.

3. Independence and after

In post-Independent India, his contribution to nation-building has left an indelible mark. As one of the founding fathers of the Constitution and as an important leader of the Constituent Assembly, he ensured the importance of social justice as one of the ideals enshrined in the Constitution. After Independence, when India embarked upon the task of nation building and fulfilling the dreams of the people, there were formidable developmental challenges before the nation which required the formulation of sound policy and new initiatives. Jagjivan Ram proved an ever-dependable parliamentarian who assumed the charge of various key Ministries to handle the challenging tasks when the country was passing through sensitive and delicate times and people looked towards governmental assistance and schemes to face the crises and overcome the struggling phase.

As the labour minister, he introduced time-tested policies and laws for labour welfare. He was instrumental in enacting some of the important legislations for labour, viz. the Minimum Wages Act, 1946; the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947; the Indian Trade Union (Amendment) Act; the Payment of Bonus Act, etc. He actually laid down the foundation of social security by way of enacting the two important Acts, namely the Employees State Insurance Act, 1948 and the Provident Fund Act, 1952. The people elected him as their representative to parliament and he was given a Ministerial berth.

As Minister of Communication (1952-1956), he nationalized the private airlines and spread the postal facilities to the remote villages. He piloted the Air Corporation Bill, 1953 amidst great opposition and ensured its successful enactment. The Air Corporation Act provided for reorganization and development of the Civil Aviation sector and resulted in the genesis of Air India and Indian Airlines as nationalized air carriers. There was tremendous expansion of civil aviation infrastructure during his tenure. During 1956-62, as the Railways Minister, he modernized

Railways and gave a new momentum to the expansion of Railways in the country. He took innumerable welfare measures for Railway employees and set a record by not allowing any increase in passenger fares for five years. He paid special attention to the welfare of the railway workers. The most noteworthy step was the introduction of a Pension Scheme in December 1957, similar to one applicable to the Central Government employees. Jagjivan Ram once again and during 1962-63, he was Minister of Transport and Communications. He laid the foundation for expansion of this vital service for the progress of the country. It was his policy decision that every village with a population of 2,000 must have a post office. For villages in far-flung areas, the provision was suitably relaxed, so that no one would be made to walk for more than two miles to utilize postal facilities. It was also his decision to have a telegraph office for every Tehsil town. As a matter of policy, he decided that telephone exchanges should be opened in all District towns and Public Call Offices at sub-divisional towns. Such a far-sighted step enhanced the communication network to a great extent. As Food and Agriculture Minister during 1967-70, he pulled the country out of the clutches of a severe drought, heralded the Green Revolution and for the first time made India self-sufficient in food. To overcome the food scarcity situation in the country, due to the unprecedented droughts of 1965 and 1966, Babuji took several measures and dealt with the situation successfully. Large-scale feeding programmes were organized for the benefit of the vulnerable sections of the population. The distribution of food grains from fair price shops was maintained with a view to safeguarding the interests of the consumers. Vigorous efforts were made to maximize domestic procurement of food grains and to supplement the domestic supplies through imports. As the Defence Minister during 1970-74, he changed the political map of the world and made history by liberating Bangladesh and made the Pakistan Army surrender unconditionally. The way the war was fought was unprecedented and he kept the promise he had made to the people of India that the war would not be fought on a single inch of Indian soil. In 1974, Jagjivan Ram took charge of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation. He organized the Public Distribution System to ensure that food was available to the masses at a reasonable price.

As Minister, he had unparalleled ability to look after the affairs under his Ministry and he had his priorities well defined to take on the challenges ahead. In all the Ministries and Departments at the Centre, where Babu Jagjivan Ram had held charge, he left his mark of qualitatively high performance. In political power, he saw the opportunity to transform people's lives and promote their welfare by bold and well-thought-out plans.

4. Champion of the depressed classes

Babu Jagjivan Ram had shown complete solidarity with the depressed classes since his early life. He was highly convinced of the need to improve the lot of the oppressed and the downtrodden sections of the society. The most remarkable facet of Jagjivan Ram's political life had been his nationwide recognition as one of India's tallest leaders. He was committed to dealing with the scourge of casteism, which had taken deep roots in Indian society for ages. A large number of people were denied equal opportunities in social, political and economic spheres due to casteism, which was inconsistent with a modern society and its concept of basic human dignity. Jagjivan Ram had experienced its ill-effects, such as untouchability and

marginalisation and was of the view that it is the most important barrier in the full development of human potential. Deeply hurt by the then existing situation in the country, particularly the practice of rampant caste-based discrimination and the resultant marginalization of a vast section of the society, Jagjivan Ram dedicated his leadership prowess and faculties for the upliftment of the depressed classes. Promoting people's welfare in general and the upliftment of the oppressed, in particular, became his passion in life. From his student days, he was actively involved in organising the youth from depressed classes and sought to create awareness among the members of his community to fight for their rights and to draw the attention of political leaders. Such experiences toughened his resolve to fight for justice and he made it his life-long goal to strive for eliminating the social malady that crippled a vast population. For his unwavering support and relentless struggle for the cause of the downtrodden, he has been rightly called a 'Messiah' of Dalits.

His impressive organizing capabilities saw him elected to the post of Secretary of Bihar State Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1933. In 1934, Jagjivan Ram successfully organized the All India Ravidas Sammelan in Calcutta. During this Conference, he met several social workers, with whom he shared his views and suggested that all Harijan leaders should speak from one platform. The Depressed Classes Unity Conference was held in Kanpur in 1935. In 1936, Jagjivan Ram was chosen to preside over the Lucknow Session of the All India Depressed Classes League, to be followed by many such conferences in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bombay and Punjab. He mobilized the backward classes and tried to articulate and air their genuine grievances.

5. Towards a new social order

Babuji symbolised the dawn of a new era of assertion, equality and empowerment for the depressed classes. His life was a positive statement for the backward classes, who were immensely inspired by the sustained presence of Babuji at the national political scene. His sincerity, dedication and political clout instilled confidence and courage among them. His achievements were seen as part of remarkable advancement for his community. Jagjivan Ram once appealed to the depressed classes:

"To struggle for a 'socially interdependent society which would be so changed and revolutionised that they could participate in it on terms of equality of rights and obligations." The provision for State intervention for the 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 Jagjivan Ram. He was instrumental in the making of the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955. Through out his life, he believed passionately in human dignity and individual freedom. He abhorred oppression and believed in the philosophy of 'with malice towards none and charity for all.

6. As a parliamentarian

Shri Jagjivan Ram had the unique distinction of serving as a Member of the Central Legislature uninterruptedly for as long as 40 years. In the 1930s itself, Jagjivan Ram had emerged as a popular leader with strong mass support base. Since his nomination as a

member of the Bihar Legislative Council in 1936, followed by his unopposed election to the Bihar Legislative Assembly in 1937, he never looked back and continued to get elected from the same constituency so long as he stood as a candidate. Till his last breath, he was a sitting member of the Lok Sabha-his Eighth term-never missing a Lok Sabha since the First General Election. Jagjivan Ram has had the distinction of being the longest-serving Minister in the history of Indian Parliament. A man of old-world political morality, he had mass following in his own right, before and after Independence. In his capacity as a member of Parliament, during the major part of which he was a Minister, he sought to address many long-term issues before the country in the socio-economic spheres by shaping public opinion, policy and consensus. Jagjivan Ram was an effective debater since his young days and in Parliament, his oratory was well-acknowledged and admired. He is still remembered for his calm and composed demeanour even amidst the stormiest moments of the House. He had tremendous persuasive power and logical arguments which helped him drive home his points. He spoke both Hindi and English with equal ease and eloquence.

7. A true democrat

Throughout his life, Babuji was a firm believer in democracy and democratic values. He stood by his principles and never compromised with values even during turbulent political situations. In spite of being one of the veteran Congress members and a close confidante of Smt. Indira Gandhi, Babuji did not hesitate to differ from her views. Jagjivan Ram tried to persuade Smt. Gandhi to revoke the Emergency and restore normalcy in the country. After failing in his effort to do so, he sent in his resignation to Smt. Gandhi.

8. Coalition politics

After quitting the Congress, the same day he formed a new party, the "Congress for Democracy". A man of the masses, he could sense the people's desire for a change and could foresee the results of the Sixth General Election. Indeed, he became a unifying force for the Opposition. As things unfolded, his assessment turned out to be prophetic. The multi-party alliance, which his party-the Congress for Democracy had joined, secured a landslide victory. When India's parliamentary system was entering a new phase of coalition politics, Jagjivan Ram was one of the key political actors in shaping national politics. There was a strong opinion and expectation that Jagjivan Ram should be chosen to head the first non-Congress Government at the Centre, but this was not to be. Jagjivan Ram always remained the unquestioned leader of his long-term constituency—Sasaram in Bihar. In the Seventh and Eighth General Elections to the Lok Sabha, Jagjivan Ram won from the same constituency, unaffected by the changed political equations and other factors. Jagjivan Ram always remained the unquestioned leader of his long-term constituency—Sasaram in Bihar. In the Seventh and Eighth General Elections to the Lok Sabha, Jagjivan Ram won from the same constituency, unaffected by the changed political equations and other factors. He had shown great political wisdom and understanding in dealing with the country's challenges, be it in Defence or Agriculture. He also demonstrated tremendous enthusiasm for India's development. Under his direction and guidance, various

Ministries pursued development- oriented programmes and introduced services, which were highly appreciated and welcomed by the people. He took lead in the formulation of sound and result-oriented policies and programmes concerning the Ministries and Departments under his charge and implemented them efficiently. He was sensitive to the people's needs and development requirements and was prompt at taking appropriate measures to manage various crises in the country. He knew how to handle the bureaucracy and the art of getting the best out of it. In translating the untold dreams of the people into perspective planning and meeting the many challenges before the nation, Jagjivan Ram's expertise was invaluable.

9. Conclusion

Jagjivan Ram passed away in New Delhi on 6 July 1986, at the age of 78 after a period of illness. As a leader who shared his political career with many generations from Mahatma Gandhi to Rajiv Gandhi, he has left an indelible imprint on the polity of India. He was a stalwart among the leaders of his time and a doyen of Indian Parliament. Leaders, media, general public and the entire nation expressed grief over the passing away of Jagjivan Ram. He was a pillar of strength for the Indian polity during periods of great challenge and transition. He played a significant role in the upliftment of the depressed classes, ensuring justice for the oppressed and the deprived, enhancing the country's infrastructure development and in accelerating India's march to emerge as a stronger power in the world. In his passing away, the country lost a unique leader, a patriot, a visionary and a great nationalist. His legacy will live on and continue to inspire the coming generations in social and political activities and in the continuous search for a better society.

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