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## **FREEDOM, EQUALITY AND REPRESENTATION: DR. BABU JAGJIVAN RAM IN INDIA'S NATIONAL MOVEMENT**

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**Dr. Nutakki Ashok Kumar**

Centre for Sri Babu Jagjivan Ram Chair, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur-522510, E-Mail: [samenutakki@gmail.com](mailto:samenutakki@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the contributions of Babu Jagjivan Ram to India's national movement, with attention to his role in connecting the struggle against colonial rule to the concurrent struggle against caste-based exclusion within Indian society. It argues that his political career was a sustained effort to hold the Indian National Congress accountable to the democratic and egalitarian principles it publicly claimed. His organizational work, legislative advocacy, and ministerial service produced structural changes in the position of Scheduled Caste communities within the post-independence Indian state. Drawing on biographical, historical, and political science literature, the paper examines his organizational work through the All-India Depressed Classes League, his participation in the Quit India Movement, and his transition into the institutions of independent India. The paper situates his career within broader debates about representation, inclusion, and the politics of recognition in post-colonial democracies.

**Keywords:** Jagjivan Ram, national movement, Dalit representation, caste discrimination, Scheduled Caste Federation, post-colonial democracy,

### **Introduction**

The title of this paper names three concepts that India's national movement proclaimed as its goals: freedom, equality, and representation. Jagjivan Ram was born in 1908 into a Chamar community in colonial Bihar. He entered the Indian National Congress at a time when the Congress was the most important vehicle for anti-colonial politics in South Asia and also an organization whose internal culture was shaped heavily by the upper-caste assumptions of its most powerful members. He remained in that organization for five decades. That decision to stay, and to work within the Congress rather than against it, remains the central interpretive question in any serious study of his career.

This paper does not attempt to give a clean verdict on whether his approach was right or wrong. The historical record does not permit that kind of certainty. What it does permit is a careful examination of what his approach produced, what it cost, and what structural limits it ran into regardless of his efforts. The 1977 episode, when he was effectively passed over for the Prime Ministership despite his qualifications and record, is where this paper begins, because it is the clearest evidence of where the ceiling was.

The historiography of India's national movement has not given Jagjivan Ram the attention he deserves. His relative absence from the most prominent accounts of that movement is itself a fact that requires explanation. This paper addresses both the explanation and the substance of what his career actually produced.

**The 1977 Episode and What It Revealed**

In March 1977, the Janata coalition defeated Indira Gandhi's Congress party in general elections held after the Emergency period. Jagjivan Ram had broken with the Congress in February of that year, founded the Congress for Democracy, and brought a decisive bloc of Dalit voters in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh with him. His defection is widely credited with fatally weakening the government's support base in the Hindi heartland and contributing directly to Congress's first electoral defeat since independence.

By any objective measure, he was the strongest candidate for Prime Minister. He had served in senior ministerial positions across six decades. He had administered the defence ministry during the 1971 war that created Bangladesh. He had been a member of the Constituent Assembly. He had more ministerial experience than anyone else in the Janata coalition. His break with the Emergency regime gave him moral credibility that most of the coalition's upper-caste leaders lacked.

The Prime Ministership went to Morarji Desai instead. Several accounts of the internal negotiations within the Janata leadership describe significant discomfort among coalition factions about the prospect of a Dalit Prime Minister, even as those same factions publicly proclaimed commitment to social justice (Jaffrelot, 2003). The available historical record does not allow a definitive attribution of the decision to caste prejudice alone. But the circumstantial evidence that upper-caste resistance within the coalition played a decisive role is substantial.

This outcome is the sharpest evidence available for what Mansbridge (1999) calls the limits of descriptive representation. A Dalit leader could hold the Labour portfolio, the Defence portfolio, the Railways, and the Agriculture ministry. He could administer a war and oversee a food security transformation. What he could not do, it appears, was occupy the apex of executive power. The ceiling was real. Understanding why it was there, and how Jagjivan Ram's entire career was shaped by the effort to work around it or through it, is the subject of this paper.

**The Congress and the Problem of Caste**

To understand Jagjivan Ram's position within the national movement, it is necessary to be direct about something the movement's official historiography tends to soften. The Indian National Congress was simultaneously committed to the principle of national self-determination and shaped by social assumptions that were, in practice, resistant to genuine caste reform.

Gandhi's campaigns against untouchability were real. They had consequences. But Gandhi's position on caste was also constrained by a vision of Hindu social organization that Ambedkar and others found structurally inadequate. The Poona Pact of 1932 is the clearest illustration of the tension. Ambedkar had argued for separate electorates for Depressed Classes at the Round Table Conferences in London. Gandhi responded with a fast that he framed as a protest against the division of Hindu society. Ambedkar signed the compromise agreement under conditions he later described as coercive, trading the structural protection of separate electorates for an increased number of reserved seats within joint electorates. He never stopped viewing this outcome as a defeat (Keer, 1990).

Jagjivan Ram's position within this tension was deliberately complicated. He joined the Congress formally and worked within it. He did not align with Ambedkar's institutional separatism. The conventional critical interpretation of this posture holds that he was co-opted, that his presence gave the Congress a Dalit face without requiring it to make Dalit interests genuinely central to its agenda (Omvedt, 1994).

The more defensible interpretation, and the one that the subsequent policy record partially supports, is that he calculated accurately that the Congress was going to win independence and build the post-independence state, and that having a Dalit representative with genuine institutional authority inside

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that process was more productive than principled opposition from outside it. Both interpretations have

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merit. The historical record does not resolve them cleanly. Any honest assessment of his career has to hold both simultaneously.

### **Representation and What It Actually Did**

Mansbridge (1999) argues that representatives from historically excluded groups serve functions beyond the formal legislative process. Their presence signals to members of those groups that institutional participation is possible. It introduces perspectives and interests into deliberative processes that would otherwise be absent. Jagjivan Ram's five decades of senior ministerial service constituted exactly this form of descriptive representation at the highest levels of Indian government.

The signaling function was not trivial. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh had large Scheduled Caste populations that had been excluded from political participation for the entire colonial period. Seeing a Chamar man administer the railways, direct food production policy, and oversee national defense was not symbolically empty. It had consequences for how subsequent generations of Dalit political actors understood their own relationship to state institutions (Thorat & Kumar, 2008).

The substantive dimension of his representation is also measurable, though less straightforwardly. The constitutional provisions for reservation in government employment and legislative seats survived the first decades of the republic in part because he was present in the cabinet to defend them. Upper-caste administrative cadres within the civil service routinely resisted implementing reservation provisions. Political will at the ministerial level was necessary to maintain even partial compliance. His presence provided a degree of that political will (Frankel, 2005).

His daughter Meira Kumar's election as Speaker of the Lok Sabha, the first Dalit woman to hold that position, is one measurable downstream consequence of the political culture his career helped to construct. The expanded presence of Dalit political figures in Indian public life in the decades after his death reflects, in part, a normalization of Dalit institutional participation that his career made possible. These are real contributions, even if they fall short of what genuine structural equality would require (Thorat & Kumar, 2008).

### **The All-India Depressed Classes League and Organizational Work**

In 1935, Jagjivan Ram founded the All-India Depressed Classes League. The Government of India Act of 1935 had introduced provincial autonomy and created legislative assemblies in which Depressed Class representatives would hold seats. The institutional opening existed. What was required was organized political capacity to use it effectively (Frankel, 2005).

The League's focus was deliberately practical rather than philosophical. It concentrated on minimum wage protections for workers in industries where Dalit labor was disproportionately concentrated. It advocated for access to public facilities from which untouchable communities were formally or informally excluded. It built a political constituency in Bihar capable of delivering electoral results at the provincial assembly level. It served as the platform from which Jagjivan Ram launched his successful campaign for election to the Bihar Legislative Assembly in 1936 (Omvedt, 1994).

The League functioned as a political organization in the practical sense. He set up offices across Bihar districts. These offices provided voter registration assistance and legal advice to tenants facing eviction. He traveled extensively to recruit young volunteers from rural areas and taught them how to monitor polling booths. The League's organized presence at polling stations, in groups large enough to deter the physical intimidation that upper-caste landowners routinely used to prevent Dalits from voting, was a direct response to a direct problem (Das, 1997).

This approach put him in direct, if mostly implicit, tension with Ambedkar's parallel organizational effort. Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party, established the same year, operated on a

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different theory. Ambedkar argued that the Congress was structurally incapable of serving Dalit interests

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and that independent political expression was necessary. Jagjivan Ram argued that organizational independence, however principled, was less effective than institutional access within the party that was going to govern the country. Both positions had empirical support. Neither was obviously correct (Shah, 2002).

### **The Quit India Movement and the Question of Participation**

The Quit India Movement of 1942 posed a specific question for Dalit political leaders. Ambedkar had argued at various points that Dalits had limited reason to invest in an independence movement that might simply transfer power from British colonial authorities to upper-caste Hindu political leaders without changing the structural position of untouchable communities. This was not an unreasonable concern. Subsequent history has provided it with partial support.

Jagjivan Ram participated in the movement and was imprisoned. His participation reflected a specific calculation: that Dalit communities had an interest in independence that was inseparable from their interest in the constitutional protections that an independent Indian state could provide. Active participation in the independence struggle was the most credible basis for demanding those protections. Staying outside the movement would leave the field to leaders whose commitment to Dalit welfare was less clear (Das, 1997).

The personal risk of this choice was real. The colonial authorities imprisoned movement leaders and had the capacity to prevent released prisoners from returning to active political life. His decision to participate despite that risk reflects a commitment to the national movement that went beyond pure strategic calculation about political advantage.

The debate between Ambedkar's position and Jagjivan Ram's does not have a clean resolution. Whether Dalit participation in the national movement strengthened their position in the post-independence state, or whether it bound them to a Congress whose structural commitment to their interests was limited, remains a genuinely contested question in the historiography of Dalit politics (Keer, 1990). What is clear is that Jagjivan Ram made his choice with awareness of the argument on the other side.

### **Freedom, Equality, and the Gap Between Them**

Freedom, in the sense of national independence from colonial rule, was achieved in 1947. Jagjivan Ram contributed to that achievement through organizational work, political advocacy, and the personal risk of arrest during the Quit India Movement. His place in the national movement on this dimension is beyond reasonable dispute.

Equality is harder to assess. The constitutional provisions for reservation in education, government employment, and legislative bodies were a structural intervention designed to address centuries of exclusion. Their implementation was contested, partial, and imperfect. The degree to which they produced genuine equality in the material conditions of Dalit communities across the first four decades of the republic is a subject of substantial empirical debate (Dushkin, 1967). Jagjivan Ram's ministerial advocacy contributed to the survival and partial implementation of these provisions. The structural resistance to caste equality within the institutions of the Indian state was strong enough that sustained advocacy at the senior ministerial level could not overcome it entirely.

Representation is where the analysis becomes most instructive. Mansbridge's (1999) descriptive representation framework captures the signaling function of his presence in senior government. Burns's (1978) distinction between transactional and transformational leadership maps partially onto his career: he operated primarily through transactional mechanisms, but the cumulative effect of decades of transactional work produced structural changes that exceed what the framework would predict in

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isolation. Neither framework alone is sufficient to explain what his career produced and what it did not.

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The concept of institutional casteism, which Indian political sociology has developed in the tradition of Ambedkar's own analysis, accounts for the ceiling he encountered at the apex of power (Omvedt, 1994). He could rise very high. He could not reach the top. The ceiling was not about individual capability. It was about the structural tolerance of the dominant political elite for Dalit leadership at the absolute summit of executive authority.

### **The Emergency and the Break with Congress**

The Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi on June 25, 1975 was the most serious constitutional crisis in the history of the independent Indian republic. Civil liberties were suspended. Opposition leaders were imprisoned. The press was censored. Elections were postponed. Many senior Congress figures chose to remain in the party and acquiesce.

Jaggiwan Ram did not. His resignation in February 1977, followed by the founding of the Congress for Democracy and the merger with the Janata coalition, came after five decades of investment in the Congress as his primary institutional vehicle. At age sixty-eight, this was a decision that carried genuine material risk. A Congress victory in the 1977 election would have ended his political career (Kumar, 2013).

This moment is significant not only as a biographical turning point but as evidence in the assessment of his political character. The critique that he was purely a pragmatist who subordinated principle to institutional access is complicated by the fact that when institutional access required silence in the face of authoritarian rule, he chose to leave. The break with Congress in 1977 was not a straightforward strategic calculation. It reflected a commitment to constitutional principles that his career had always nominally served, and that he chose to serve at real personal cost when the test came.

His resignation letter made a direct case against the Emergency on constitutional grounds. He spoke to the public, not just to party leaders. This public dimension of his exit was important. It gave ordinary voters across the Hindi heartland, including Dalit voters who had supported Congress for generations, permission to change their votes. Intelligence reports had assured the government that its core support base was secure. His departure demonstrated that it was not (Jaffrelot, 2003).

### **The Colonial Formation and Its Effects**

Jaggiwan Ram was born on April 5, 1908, in the village of Chandwa in the Shahabad district of colonial Bihar. He was born into the Chamar caste. The material conditions associated with this social position were enforced through mechanisms that were simultaneously legal, economic, and spatial. Untouchability in rural Bihar in the early twentieth century entailed prohibition from common wells, enforced separation in public spaces, exclusion from temples, and systematic restriction from occupational categories through which economic mobility might otherwise have been accessible (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998).

His father, Shobhi Ram, held a position within the colonial administrative apparatus that gave the family modest economic stability. His mother, Vasanti Devi, insisted on her son's education against the active resistance of a social environment that regarded educated Dalits as a structural inconvenience. This combination of marginal economic stability and maternal insistence on formal learning shaped a man who understood the mechanisms of caste discrimination from direct experience and understood that education was one of the few available levers against it (Kumar, 2013).

The schooling experience at Arrah's Town School was a daily enactment of the social hierarchy he would spend his life contesting. He was required to sit separately from upper-caste students. He was served water in a separate vessel. Teachers declined to handle his written work directly. That he persisted under these conditions and subsequently gained admission to Banaras Hindu University and later to the

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University of Calcutta reflects both individual determination and the significance of a growing network of

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social reform organizations that were, by the 1920s, beginning to contest the institutional enforcement of untouchability in urban educational settings (Das, 1997).

The schooling experience did not produce a man who wanted to destroy the institutions that had humiliated him. It produced a man who wanted to control those institutions. He observed that the social hierarchy's power came not from moral superiority but from its control of institutional spaces: the school, the court, the administrative office. If those spaces could be entered, the rules they produced could be changed from within. This was the logic that guided his entire career.

### **The Constitutional Transition and Early Republic**

The formation of the Interim Government in 1946 brought Jagjivan Ram into the central cabinet as Labour Minister. The constitutional framework that Ambedkar drafted, which came into force in January 1950, provided the legal architecture for Scheduled Caste rights within the new republic. The reservation provisions for government employment and legislative representation were written into the constitutional text as protected rights. Constitutional provisions, however, do not implement themselves (Thorat & Kumar, 2008).

Their survival against the persistent resistance of upper-caste administrative cadres within the new bureaucracy required political will at the ministerial level. Jagjivan Ram's presence in the cabinet through the Nehru years provided a degree of that will that would otherwise have been absent. His continued service across multiple portfolios, including Communications, Railways, Transport, and Food and Agriculture, established him as one of the most experienced administrators in the Indian government.

The Railways portfolio deserves particular attention. Indian Railways in the 1950s and 1960s was among the largest employers in the world. Managing it effectively required political acumen, administrative command, and the capacity to negotiate with powerful railway workers' unions. His tenure met any serious administrative standard. It also allowed him to use the Railways as an employer to enforce reservation provisions in a workforce of enormous scale, creating a route out of rural agricultural dependency for tens of thousands of Scheduled Caste families (Kumar, 2013).

The critique that he served as a Dalit face for a Congress not genuinely committed to Dalit interests has merit as a structural observation. As an account of what he actually did with the institutional positions he occupied, it is insufficient. He used his access to perform real work with material consequences for the communities he represented. That is not the same as passive accommodation.

### **Conclusion**

Any assessment of Jagjivan Ram's legacy must hold two conclusions together that are easier to hold separately. The first is that his contributions to India's national movement and to the post-independence Indian state were substantial. The labour legislation of the late 1940s, the defence of constitutional reservation provisions through the Nehru era, the ministerial administration of major portfolios, and the principled stand against the Emergency represent a record of sustained, effective work in the service of both national development and Scheduled Caste welfare (Frankel, 2005).

The second conclusion is that his career operated within structural constraints that the inside-the-tent strategy could not ultimately overcome. The caste ceiling at the apex of political power was not broken during his lifetime. The structural resistance to caste equality within the institutions of the Indian state was managed and partially mitigated over the course of his career but not dismantled. The compromises required to maintain his position within the Congress coalition imposed real costs. The national movement's promise of freedom, equality, and representation was not uniformly redeemed across the first decades of the Indian republic. The freedom part came in 1947. The equality and representation parts remained, and remain, incomplete. Jagjivan Ram's life provides one of the most instructive reference

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points available for understanding both the extent of what was achieved and the structural limits that

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constrained it. His career poses the hard questions about representation and structural change with the weight of a lifetime of actual institutional engagement behind them. That weight is what makes them worth studying.

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