

# Shri Babu Jagjivan Ram: A Pioneer of Decolonisation Movement in the Independent India

## Introduction:

Shri Babu Jagjivan Ram, popularly known as Babuji, remains a towering figure in India's post-independence history. Born on April 5, 1908, in Chandwa, village of Bihar now named Bhojpur district, Jagjivan Ram, rose to prominence as a leader of the Dalit community, a champion of social justice, and a key figure in the Indian National Congress. As a prominent leader, his contributions to the nationalist movement and his relentless advocacy for social justice have left an indelible mark on Indian society. While his role in the freedom struggle is well documented, his efforts in the decolonization of independent India—especially in the removal of colonial symbols—are often overshadowed. While remembering Jagjivan's contributions to India on his birthday our Honorable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi mentioned in his speech that Babu Jagjivan Ram was the man responsible for win in the 1971 war and agricultural revolution in India and his ultimate fight for colonial symbols and social justice celebrated as Samta Divas.

Shri Babu Jagjivan Ram said that colonial symbols ranging from architectural structures, laws, educational systems, and even social practices were a constant reminder of India's subjugation under British rule. He understood that true independence was not just political but also psychological and cultural. Thus, for him the demand for their removal was not merely symbolic but was deeply tied to the broader struggle for national identity, self-respect, and the reassertion of India's indigenous culture.

## Early Life and political standings

Born into a Dalit family, traditionally considered untouchable, his early life was marked by experiences of caste-based discrimination, which instilled in him a profound sense of injustice and a determination to fight for equality. His education,

first in a local school and later at Banaras Hindu University (BHU), exposed him to nationalist ideas and the burgeoning freedom movement. His formative years saw much involvement in student politics and leadership roles wherein Jagjivan Ram developed a keen understanding of the interconnectedness of colonial oppression, caste discrimination and the movement to remove colonial symbols in independent India.

Babu Jagjivan Ram organized a Mazdoor Rally of approx. 50000 laborers in 1928 at Wellington Square and attracted the attention of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. In 1935, he was nominated to the Bihar Legislative Council under the Government of India Act 1935 and joined the Indian National Congress. He was elected from Bihar's Sasaram parliamentary constituency in 1936 and continued till 1986. He went to jail twice for participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement. The Congress was the principal organization leading the fight against British rule, but it was also dominated by upper-caste leaders, and the voices of Dalits and other marginalized communities were often marginalized. Jagjivan Ram emphasized the need for an inclusive struggle that addressed both the political independence of India and the social emancipation of its oppressed communities. He was a vocal critic of the caste system and worked tirelessly to bring the issues of Dalits to the forefront of the national movement through the establishment of All India Depressed Class League.

Babu Jagjivan Ram was the Minister of Labour in the first cabinet of free India significantly changed labour policies. He was the first Indian Labour Minister to preside over the International Labour Organisation conference on 16 August 1947 in Geneva. He held several ministerial posts in Nehru's cabinet such as communications, Transport and Railways and Transport and

Communications. In Indira Gandhi's government, he worked as minister for Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation and Union Minister for Food and Agriculture. In 1977, he resigned from the cabinet and formed the Congress for Democratic Party within the Janata coalition and became the Deputy Prime Minister.

### **Vision of a Decolonized India**

Jagjivan Ram's advocacy for social justice was closely linked to his efforts to remove colonial symbols in independent India. His vision of a decolonized India was rooted in his belief that independence was not merely about the transfer of power from the British to Indian hands but about a profound transformation of Indian society. He believed that the persistence of colonial symbols whether in the form of laws, institutions, social practices or psychological was a barrier to achieving true equality and justice, and that true freedom can only come by removal of colonial trails from all spheres.

### **Demand for removal**

In the post-independence, the presence of colonial symbols in various aspects of Indian life was seen as a reminder of the country's subjugation and a hindrance to the formation of a new national identity. The remnant of the colonial legacy was vivid in architecture, legal systems, education, and practices and rituals of daily life. The demand for removing colonial symbols was pioneered by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru; however, Babu Jagjivan Ram's role in this movement was particularly significant because he brought a unique perspective to the issue. For Jagjivan Ram, the removal of colonial symbols was not just about asserting national pride but also about addressing the deep-rooted social inequalities that had been perpetuated by both colonial rule and the caste system.

### **Decolonization of the Mind and Social Structures**

Jagjivan Ram believed that true decolonization required a conscious effort to break free from these

mental chains and to foster a sense of pride in India's indigenous culture and values. The deep imprints of colonial rule on the Indian psyche, according to him, manifested in the continued acceptance of social hierarchies, discrimination, and the belief in the superiority of Western culture. Thus, decolonisation of the mind and the social structures became a core of his vision of decolonisation.

Jagjivan Ram's efforts to eradicate caste-based discrimination were central to this vision as in his view, dismantling the caste system meant promoting social equality and decolonising India. He saw the caste system as a social structure that had been both exploited and reinforced by colonial rulers to maintain control over Indian society.

### **Economic Decolonization**

The colonial loot of India's resources was not unknown to Jagjivan Ram. He understood that the British had structured the Indian economy in a way that served their interests, leaving India with a legacy of underdevelopment and economic dependence. Hence, Jagjivan Ram's vision of a decolonized India involved transforming the economy to serve the needs of its people rather than foreign powers.

While he became India's Minister of Labour and later as the Minister of Defence, Babu Jagjivan Ram implemented policies aimed at improving the living standards of the working class, agricultural self-sufficiency and sustainability (Green Revolution), ensuring that the benefits of economic development were shared equitably. He advocated for land reforms, the promotion of indigenous industries, and the protection of workers' rights. He brought new landmark legislations such as Industrial Dispute Act 1947, Minimum Wages Act 1948, Employee State Insurance Act 1948, Labour Act 1951, Employee Provident Fund Act 1952, Mines Vocational Training Rules 1966 etc by ending previous colonial regulations.

## **Cultural Decolonization**

Jagjivan Ram relentlessly believed that India needed to reclaim and celebrate its cultural heritage, which had been marginalized during colonial rule. Cultural decolonization was another key component of his vision of decolonisation. According to him, dominance of Western art forms, languages, and educational curriculum, was a barrier to the country's progress and hence his efforts to revive traditional Indian arts, crafts, and music and to integrate them into the national consciousness. For example, the promotion of the handloom industry, financial grants, provided weavers with access to better raw materials, modern tools, and training in new designs, which helped them enhance the quality and appeal of their products. This boosted the demand for handloom products both domestically and internationally, helping to sustain the livelihoods of millions of weavers.

## **Deconstructing Colonial Architecture**

The architectural remnants of colonial rule were a visible sight that could not be uprooted from the post India's independence. The British architects designed many of India's government buildings, monuments, and public spaces in a style that reflected their imperial power, subjugation and dominance.

Babu Jagjivan Ram, a key leader after independence to repurpose or replace these colonial structures with buildings that reflected India's new identity as a sovereign nation, argued that continuing to use colonial buildings for government functions was a contradiction in a newly independent country. These buildings were to be understood as a colonial mentality that needed to be discarded, not just relics of the past.

Under his influence, several colonial-era buildings were repurposed or renamed to reflect India's new reality. The transformation of these spaces was symbolic of the larger effort to decolonize Indian society. He believed that India's new buildings

should be a reflection of its cultural heritage and democratic values, rather than a reminder of its colonial past.

## **Legal and Institutional decolonisation**

Another critical area where Babu Jagjivan Ram made significant contributions was in the legal and institutional reforms aimed at removing colonial symbols. The legal system in India, which was largely inherited from the British, contained several laws and practices that were seen as colonial relics. These included laws that were discriminatory, outdated, or inconsistent with the values of a democratic and independent nation.

As a senior leader in the government, he was a strong advocate for reviewing and repealing laws that were remnants of colonial rule. For instance, he supported efforts to abolish the practice of untouchability, which was codified in British law and reinforced social inequalities. He advocated for the inclusion of provisions that would ensure equal opportunities for SCs and STs in education, employment, and political representation. The enactment of the Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1955, which aimed to eliminate untouchability, was a significant step in this direction.

## **Educational Reforms and Knowledge Decolonization**

Jagjivan Ram was acutely aware that the British educational system in India was designed to produce a class of Indians who were loyal to the colonial administration, rather than fostering critical thinking or a sense of national rich intellectual traditions. Hence, he advocated the decolonization of knowledge through educational reforms.

He supported the introduction of Indian indigenous languages in schools and universities, the inclusion of Indian history and philosophy in the curriculum, and the promotion of indigenous knowledge alongside Western science and technology. He further advocated reservation policies for minorities of SC/ST, women education, scholarship and financial aid, support for Technical and Vocational Education. By advocating for these

changes, Jagjivan Ram sought to empower future generations of Indians to think independently and to take pride in their cultural heritage. These reforms were part of Jagjivan Ram's broader vision of creating a society that was free from the vestiges of colonialism and rooted in its own cultural and intellectual traditions.

### **The New National Identity**

Jagjivan Ram's vision of a decolonized India was inherently inclusive. He believed that the removal of colonial symbols and the decolonization of society should lead to the creation of a national identity that embraced all of India's diverse communities in an egalitarian manner and one which is rooted in India's cultural heritage. He was particularly concerned that the interests of marginalized groups, such as Dalits, tribal communities, and religious minorities, were to be fully represented in the new India. This identity, he argued, should be free from the influence of colonialism and reflective of the country's diversity and democratic values.

One of the ways in which Jagjivan Ram sought to promote this national identity was by encouraging the use of Indian languages instead of the English which was the dominant language in government, education, and the media and was a colonial hangover that needed to be addressed. While he recognized the practical advantages of English, he argued that it should not be allowed to overshadow India's indigenous languages.

Besides language, he also promoted the use of Indian culture and traditions in public life. He believed that India's rich cultural heritage was a source of strength and pride and that it should be celebrated, preserved and made accessible to all sections of society, including marginalized communities.

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### **Conclusion**

Babu Jagjivan Ram's vision of a decolonized India had a profound and lasting impact on the country's post-independence development. His contributions to legal reforms, social justice, economic empowerment, and cultural revitalization helped shape the trajectory of modern India. While the process of decolonization is ongoing, Jagjivan Ram's efforts laid the foundation for a more just and equitable society. His legacy is reflected in the progressive laws, institutions, and social policies that continue to shape India today.

He understood that the removal of colonial symbols was essential for India's self-respect and for the creation of a new national identity that was inclusive, just, and rooted in the country's rich cultural heritage. In many ways, Jagjivan Ram's work remains unfinished, as the challenges of social inequality, cultural alienation, and economic dependence continue to confront India. However, his vision provides a roadmap for continuing the work of decolonization, ensuring that India's independence is fully realized in every aspect of national life. The legacy of Babu Jagjivan Ram is continued by the current governments in the forms of implementations of the New Education Policy, changing the symbols of the Indian Navy flag, renaming of cities, places, streets etc.

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