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## A Study of Dr. Babu Jagjivan ram's Contributions to Labour Rights and Worker Welfare

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### Abstract

Babu Jagjivan Ram's legislative approach focused on improving basic economic conditions rather than engaging in theoretical debates. This paper analyses his operational focus on material reforms while serving as India's first Labor Minister. Mainstream studies of social justice in India heavily favour constitutional drafting over statutory enforcement. This research shifts the perspective toward the practical mechanics of everyday governance. Evaluating the construction of the Minimum Wages Act of 1948 and the Factories Act of 1948 demonstrates how he built tangible legal shields for marginalized workers. The findings suggest that statutory implementation provides a critical, overlooked path toward subaltern economic empowerment.

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### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Theoretical Background

Achieving real social transformation in a deeply stratified society requires a shift in analytical focus. Most political science literature measures subaltern progress through the drafting of high-minded constitutional declarations. This paper challenges that emphasis by prioritizing the gritty details of labour law enforcement. For Babu Jagjivan Ram, advancing the rights of the Scheduled Castes meant controlling the immediate administrative machinery of the state. He focused his energy on setting daily wage baselines and securing physical workplace safety for landless labourers.

An evaluation of his early cabinet career highlights a major departure from the dominant political models of his era. B. R. Ambedkar sought structural justice by building independent, external political parties to challenge elite dominance. Jagjivan Ram chose a different calculus, pulling his All-India Depressed Classes League into the ruling Congress apparatus. This study evaluates his strategy by examining his major mid-century legislative acts before backtracking to analyze his initial grassroots mobilization tactics in Bihar. Investigating these distinct mechanisms reveals how a determined insider can turn standard state departments into active tools for material redistribution.

#### The Mechanics of the 1948 Labor Acts

Establishing a statutory floor for wages in a newly independent nation required an intense focus on administrative detail. Industrial relations in India in 1948 were completely broken, characterized by predatory hereditary debt, arbitrary working hours, and starvation compensation. For the millions of Dalit labourers working in leather tanneries, brick kilns, and rural agricultural fields, the end of British colonial rule did not automatically alter their physical reality. They remained completely subordinate to the whims of upper-caste employers who weaponized their social and economic dominance. Assuming control of the Ministry of Labor in the Interim Government, Jagjivan Ram bypassed abstract philosophical debates on equality and focused directly on the legislative machinery of the state.

Driving the Minimum Wages Act of 1948 through a hesitant, elite-dominated parliament was his primary breakthrough. In rural

India, wages were never determined by market forces, worker skills, or fair negotiations. They were dictated by the brute social power of landowners over a captive, landless workforce. This landmark piece of legislation altered the legal landscape by forcing the state to mandate wage floors across specific, scheduled employments, most notably within the agricultural sector. The statute directly stripped landholders of their absolute right to set arbitrary compensation. He reinforced this protective legal framework by executing the Factories Act of 1948, which completely overhauled workspace regulations, mandated critical safety procedures, and introduced strict limits on working hours.

The actual drafting of these statutes required intense committee work. He insisted on adding specific clauses that targeted unregulated smaller workshops. These workshops were the exact places where Dalit child labour and leather workers were concentrated. He introduced mandatory provisions for ventilation, clean drinking water, and lighting on factory floors. He also designed a system of state labour inspectors to check compliance. These inspectors had the legal authority to enter industrial premises without warning. He wanted to make sure that corporate owners could not hide exploitative practices behind private property rights.

Evaluating the immediate impact of these laws requires an honest assessment of mid-century administrative limitations. Statutory protection and effective enforcement remained two very different realities in the Indian countryside, where upper-caste administrative cadres frequently resisted implementing regulations meant to benefit Dalit workers. Employers paying below the legally mandated minimum wage often faced no immediate consequences, and early coverage remained uneven. Yet, the real significance of this legislative victory lay in the creation of a formal legal mechanism through which exploitation could be structurally challenged. For the first time, an untouchable worker could appeal to a state authority to contest local wage theft, fundamentally changing the field of power in which rural discrimination operated.

The legal burden of proof shifted because of these acts. Previously, a worker had no standing to question an employer. The new laws forced companies to maintain formal payroll records. These records had to list the exact hours worked and the exact amounts paid. This administrative change was a huge blow to arbitrary management. Local landlords could no longer settle accounts purely through oral threats. A paper trail now existed. This record-keeping requirement gave local labour unions a clear tool to launch formal legal complaints. He built the baseline infrastructure for all future working-class resistance.

### **The Strategic Opening of 1935**

Perfecting this pragmatic focus on material gains was the result of organizational strategies he developed more than a decade prior to independence. In 1935, at the age of twenty-seven, he established the All-India Depressed Classes League. The timing was highly strategic, calculated to exploit a major institutional shift in the colonial state. Outgrowing the patterns of the 1919 framework, the colonial administration passed the Government of India Act of 1935, which ushered in provincial autonomy and expanded the electorate significantly. More importantly, it established legislative assemblies where the Depressed Classes secured representation through reserved seats under joint electorates, a direct structural consequence of the 1932 Poona Pact.

Recognizing that an institutional door had been kicked open, Jagjivan Ram knew that without organized political capacity, this legislative opening would be completely useless to his community. The League bypassed high-minded theories of spiritual reform or internal Sanskritization, focusing instead on the tangible miseries of the Dalit population in Bihar. It launched disciplined campaigns around leather processing workers, championed the rights of urban sanitation labourers, and fought aggressively for the expansion of educational access for Scheduled Caste children facing segregation. Building a political constituency capable of delivering electoral results allowed the League to become his launchpad for a successful election to the Bihar Legislative Assembly in 1936. This victory proved that structural leverage was built by turning a marginalized community into a disciplined voting bloc.

The League functioned like a modern machinery. He set up regional offices in almost every district of Bihar. These offices did not just hold political rallies. They ran night schools for illiterate workers and gave legal advice to tenants facing eviction. He spent months traveling by train and bullock cart to recruit young volunteers from rural areas. He taught these volunteers how to register new voters and how to monitor polling booths.

The real issue was that upper-caste landowners used physical intimidation to stop Dalits from voting. He countered this by organizing large groups of voters to march to the polling stations together for protection. This collective action changed the local balance of power. The League created an active network of polling agents who understood the new electoral rules perfectly. They knew how to challenge invalid ballots and how to protect the integrity of the vote count. This meticulous attention to organizational detail turned an abstract constitutional opportunity into a real political weapon.

### **The Divergence from Ambedkar's Independent Politics**

Operating on this theory of change put him in direct, unacknowledged tension with B. R. Ambedkar's parallel organizational efforts. In that same year, 1936, Ambedkar formed the Independent Labour Party, working toward the same objective of breaking the alliance of upper-caste social power and economic exploitation. Both leaders agreed that Dalit political power required an organized response, but they pursued opposing paths. Ambedkar argued that the Congress party was structurally incapable of serving subaltern interests, viewing it as an instrument tightly controlled by upper-caste landlords and capitalists. Consequently, he advocated for absolute institutional separatism, urging Dalits to build independent political organs to contest power from the outside.

Jagjivan Ram considered this strategy a recipe for permanent marginalization. He argued that within a majoritarian electoral framework, a small, isolated minority party would find itself permanently outvoted and shut out of governance. He chose to take his Depressed Classes League directly into the Congress apparatus, operating as an organized pressure group within the larger national movement. His calculus was built on political realism. The Congress was poised to inherit the colonial state machine, and having an insider with executive portfolio authority would yield more immediate, concrete benefits than a principled opposition from the outside. While Ambedkar's independent parties struggled to maintain national electoral footprints, Jagjivan Ram used his

proximity to power to weave Dalit material interests into the foundational labour laws of the nation.

The mathematical reality of the first-past-the-post voting system guided his choices. In this electoral system, an independent minority candidate usually splits the vote, which inadvertently allows the dominant conservative candidate to win. He saw this pattern ruin early independent Dalit campaigns. By joining the Congress, he made sure that Dalit candidates had the full financial and organizational backing of the largest political machine in Asia. He used this position to force internal concessions.

The strategy focused on committee rooms rather than floor speeches. Inside the party caucus, he could threaten to withhold the Dalit vote if specific labor amendments were not accepted. This gave him immediate leverage over the leadership. He chose to trade public purity for the power to appoint sympathetic bureaucrats and allocate state budgets. He believed that holding a ministry gave him a direct hand in shaping the daily life of the state. This pragmatic insider model gave him the resources to protect his constituency in ways that an external opposition party simply could not match.

### Material Inclusion and the Post-Colonial State

Analysing this legislative legacy through modern theories of state-led transformation clarifies the viability of incremental reform. The core issue is whether a deeply stratified society can be altered through regular administrative channels without a total revolutionary rupture. Jagjivan Ram's early ministerial record offers a powerful argument for the affirmative case. Running the Ministry of Labor, and later managing the massive Indian Railways network, allowed him to turn regular state departments into active tools for social redistribution.

He used his executive authority to aggressively enforce hiring quotas within the public sector, which was the single largest employer in the nation. Securing these positions created a stable, urban Dalit middle class that could educate its children and escape the traps of rural agrarian dependency. This slow, grinding battle against bureaucratic resistance was not a flashy transformation, but it produced permanent institutional foundations. By anchoring subaltern advancement to concrete labour laws, minimum wage protection, and public sector employment, he constructed a physical and material shield that survived long after his tenure ended.

Looking closely at the state apparatus reveals that administrative departments are never neutral spaces. They naturally reflect the biases of the classes that populate them. Because the upper-caste elite filled the senior ranks of the civil services, they constantly tried to delay or dilute welfare schemes. He fought this systemic resistance by using the precise mechanics of budgeting and portfolio control. He regularly demanded detailed, written audits of public sector employment roles to verify compliance with reservation percentages. This bureaucratic scrutiny made it incredibly difficult for hostile administrators to quietly bypass legal quotas. He turned the dull, routine tasks of administrative oversight into a continuous campaign for material redistribution.

This strategy targeted the economic roots of dependency rather than just its social symptoms. He understood that a landless labourer who relies entirely on a local landlord for survival cannot exercise true political freedom. By using state-owned enterprises like the railways to offer secure,

pension-paying jobs, he gave thousands of families an immediate escape route from rural bondage. This material insulation completely shifted the local power dynamics. When a family no longer relies on the village elite for their daily bread, the traditional structures of intimidation lose their power. The generation that entered public service under his tenure gained the financial security needed to fund higher education and build independent community institutions. This long-term downstream effect demonstrates how insider policy custody can steadily widen the boundaries of full political citizenship.

The post-colonial state became an active battleground for subaltern resources through this method. He proved that executive power could be used to divert capital and employment directly to communities that had been legally locked out of the economy for centuries. He did not wait for a sweeping social revolution to alter the minds of the upper classes. Instead, he altered their material environment by passing laws and shifting state budgets. His record shows that incremental administrative action can achieve deep structural shifts if guided by a clear, realistic understanding of economic leverage.

### Conclusion

Evaluating Babu Jagjivan Ram's early career provides an alternate framework for subaltern liberation, showing that statutory mechanics can be just as potent as ideological critiques. His strategic founding of the All-India Depressed Classes League in 1935 and his mastery of the Ministry of Labor in 1948 proved that concrete material gains could be won by working inside the dominant political system. Choosing the insider path required constant compromise, but it gave him the power to draft and enforce laws that protected millions of landless and industrial workers from absolute exploitation. The findings of this paper indicate that his pragmatic strategy created permanent economic foundations for Dalit advancement, turning the machinery of the post-colonial state into a defensive shield. His legacy proves that while external moral critiques define the goals of social justice, it is the patient, insider work of legislative drafting and administrative enforcement that makes those goals real for the working class.

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