



## Dr. Babu Jagjivan Ram's Vision for Agricultural Development and National Self-Sufficiency

**Nutakki Ashok Kumar**

Centre for Sri Babu Jagjivan Ram Chair, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh 522510, India

\* Corresponding Author: **Nutakki Ashok Kumar**

---

### Article Info

**P-ISSN:** 3051-3502

**E-ISSN:** 3051-3510

**Volume:** 01

**Issue:** 01

**January - June 2020**

**Received:** 08-02-2020

**Accepted:** 06-03-2020

**Published:** 14-04-2020

**Page No:** 33-36

### Abstract

This paper examines Babu Jagjivan Ram's work as Minister of Food and Agriculture between 1967 and 1970. It focuses on two connected concerns that shaped his time at the ministry. The first was the national problem of food shortages. The second was the question of whether the gains from new farming technology would reach the people at the bottom of rural society or remain concentrated among larger landowners. The paper looks at how he approached food grain production, agricultural credit, rural infrastructure, and the wages of landless workers. It argues that his tenure mattered not just for what it produced in terms of output numbers, but for the policy framework it left behind.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMER.2020.1.1.33-36>

**Keywords:** Jagjivan Ram, agricultural development, Green Revolution, food self-sufficiency, Dalit agricultural workers, land reform, rural welfare, Indian development policy

---

### Introduction

The food situation India faced in the mid-1960s was not just an economic problem. It was a matter of national dignity. In 1966, India imported ten million tonnes of grain. The United States was releasing shipments under the PL-480 food aid program in small batches, month by month. President Lyndon Johnson used this as leverage. India's food security depended on American goodwill, and everyone in the Indian government knew it (Guha, 2007). This was the situation Babu Jagjivan Ram inherited when he took charge of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture in 1967. New seed varieties developed abroad were beginning to show results in Indian fields. The question was not whether the technology existed. The question was whether the government could get it to enough farmers, fast enough, and whether the benefits would reach the people who needed them most.

Jagjivan Ram came to this role with a specific set of priorities. He had spent decades working on labour protections for Scheduled Caste workers. He understood that the rural poor of India were overwhelmingly Dalit. He knew that agricultural programs focused only on output would leave distribution questions unanswered. His challenge was to pursue both objectives at once. This paper examines how he tried, what he managed to accomplish, and where the structural limits of his position became visible.

### The Distributional Challenge

Agricultural technology does not distribute itself. A high-yielding seed sitting in a government warehouse does nothing for a farmer who cannot afford the fertilizer that seed requires. It does nothing for the person who cannot access a loan because they have no land to offer as collateral. Jagjivan Ram was aware of this gap from the beginning of his tenure. The credit system in Indian agriculture in the late 1960s was deeply unequal. Formal loans from banks and cooperative societies required collateral. Collateral meant land. Farmers without clear land titles, or with very small holdings, had no access to these institutions. They borrowed from moneylenders and landlords instead, often at interest rates above one hundred percent annually. For a small farmer borrowing to buy fertilizer, this meant that a productive input could become a debt trap (Shah, 2002).

Scheduled Caste farmers faced this problem more than any other group. Their historical exclusion from land ownership meant they had no collateral and no access to formal credit. A Dalit farmer in Bihar in this period was not just poor. He was structurally locked out of the institutions that could have helped him benefit from new farming methods (Thorat & Kumar, 2008). Jagjivan Ram pushed for expanding institutional credit to reach these excluded categories. He advocated for the cooperative banking framework to extend further into rural areas. He made the case within government that priority lending targets should be set for nationalized banks, directing a portion of lending toward small farmers and weaker sections of the population. The bank nationalization of 1969 was Indira Gandhi's decision, not his, but the evidence for why it was necessary, including documented failures of private banks to reach small farmers, was built in part by the work of his ministry (Frankel, 2005). The price support system had its own distributional tensions. Announcing a minimum support price for wheat before the planting season was meant to reduce farmer uncertainty and encourage investment in improved inputs. Farmers who produced a surplus for sale benefited directly. But landless agricultural labourers who bought food in the market were also affected by the price levels the support system helped maintain. The relationship between food price policy and the welfare of the rural poor is genuinely complicated, and the support price system did not resolve that complexity (Shah, 2002).

#### **Food Grain Production and the Green Revolution**

Indian wheat production stood at approximately eleven million tonnes in 1966. By 1968 it had reached seventeen million tonnes. It continued rising through the early 1970s. Rice production followed a similar path. By the early part of that decade, India had moved from acute import dependence to something approaching food self-sufficiency. Jagjivan Ram's ministry was a significant part of the institutional story behind that change (Frankel, 2005). The policy work behind this shift operated across several fronts at once. The National Seeds Corporation was expanded to ensure that certified high-yielding variety seeds reached farmers at accessible prices. Fertilizer supply infrastructure needed major investment to build domestic production capacity. The irrigation systems on which the new seed varieties depended required both new construction and better management of existing systems (Guha, 2007).

The new wheat varieties developed at the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre and the rice varieties from the International Rice Research Institute had already demonstrated their potential under Indian conditions. Swaminathan and his colleagues had shown what was possible in demonstration plots in Punjab and Haryana (Swaminathan, 2006). The task for the Agriculture Ministry was to scale that demonstration into a national supply program. This meant building institutional capacity that had not previously existed. The Food Corporation of India, established in 1965, needed operational development. Its procurement operations, through which the government bought grain from farmers at announced support prices and built buffer stocks for market stabilization, required physical storage infrastructure that was not yet in place. The expansion of storage facilities during Jagjivan Ram's tenure was not the most visible part of the food security program, but it was a necessary one (Guha, 2007).

The geographical pattern of Green Revolution gains is important to understand honestly. Punjab, Haryana, and parts of western Uttar Pradesh saw dramatic yield increases. These regions had better irrigation, stronger credit systems, and farmers with enough resources to purchase the input packages the new varieties needed. Bihar, where Jagjivan Ram had his deepest political roots and where Scheduled Caste agricultural labourers were most concentrated, benefited far less in the early phase. This was not primarily a result of ministry decisions. It reflected infrastructure and credit gaps that three years of ministerial tenure could not undo (Frankel, 2005).

#### **Rural Infrastructure and the Physical Conditions for Change**

Food production does not happen in an institutional vacuum. It happens on the basis of roads, irrigation, storage, and market access. A farmer who produces more grain but cannot get it to a market, or who must sell at whatever price a local trader decides to offer, does not benefit from increased output in proportion to what the yield figures suggest. Jagjivan Ram's advocacy for rural infrastructure investment was consistent throughout his tenure. He repeatedly made the case for increased spending on irrigation in the eastern states, where the technology of the Green Revolution was being blocked by the absence of controlled water supply. Eastern India's rivers flooded in the monsoon and dried up in summer. Without irrigation, the new seed varieties could not deliver their potential yields regardless of how good the seeds were. Road connectivity mattered for a different reason. A support price set in New Delhi is useless to a farmer in rural Bihar if the farmer cannot physically transport grain to a procurement centre. Poor roads meant that the benefits of government price support programs were heavily concentrated in regions with better transport infrastructure, which meant the regions that were already doing better (Frankel, 2005). The minimum support price system itself deserves attention as an institutional innovation. By announcing floor prices ahead of the planting season, the government gave farmers a degree of income certainty that encouraged investment in fertilizer, better seeds, and irrigation equipment.

#### **Agricultural Laborers and the Limits of Green Revolution Benefits**

The impact of the Green Revolution on Scheduled Caste agricultural labourers was different depending on where those labourers lived. In Punjab, the new high-yield farming required more intensive work at planting and harvest times. The demand for labour went up, and so did agricultural wages. Laborers in Punjab saw real improvements in their income during this period (Frankel, 2005). Bihar was a different story. The limited penetration of Green Revolution technology in the eastern states meant that the demand for agricultural labour did not increase in the same way. Laborers in Bihar continued to face the conditions that had defined their situation for generations: surplus labour, weak bargaining position against upper-caste landlords, wage rates that were nominally subject to minimum wage legislation but rarely enforced in practice, and no alternative employment to strengthen their hand in wage negotiations (Mendelsohn & Vicziary, 1998).

This regional divergence was the most difficult distributional problem Jagjivan Ram faced as Agriculture Minister. His response operated through several channels. He continued to

push for irrigation infrastructure investment in eastern India, trying to create the physical conditions under which technology could spread. He maintained advocacy within the cabinet for resources to enforce minimum wage provisions. His earlier legislative work, the Minimum Wages Act of 1948, provided the statutory framework for this enforcement. But a statute without enforcement machinery is limited in what it can achieve. The land reform question was where the political constraints on his position were most apparent. Effective land redistribution, the kind that would have given landless labourers access to the means of production, required state governments to implement ceiling legislation against organized resistance from landowning communities. In most states, Congress governments were not prepared to do this. The landowning communities whose interests would be damaged by real land reform were also an important part of the Congress's rural political base (Omvedt, 1994). Jagjivan Ram could advocate for stricter implementation of existing legislation. He could not compel state governments to act against their political interests. This is not a personal failure. It is the structural reality of working within a federal system where agricultural policy is a state subject and where the ruling party's political base included interests that were opposed to genuine redistribution.

### **Food Security as a Welfare Question, Not Just a Strategic One**

The connection between national food security and the welfare of Scheduled Caste communities is often missed in accounts of this period. These are usually treated as separate concerns: food security is a geopolitical objective about reducing import dependence, while Dalit welfare is a social justice objective about addressing caste discrimination. Jagjivan Ram understood them as the same problem viewed from different angles. A family of Dalit agricultural labourers in Bihar in 1967 did not have land, stored grain, or diversified income. When food grain prices rose, as they did sharply during the drought years of the mid-1960s, the purchasing power of agricultural wage income fell directly and immediately. National food security, the project of building sufficient domestic production to stabilize supply and moderate price swings, was therefore not just about reducing strategic vulnerability. It was directly relevant to the welfare of the families most exposed to food price instability (Thorat & Kumar, 2008).

This connection shaped how Jagjivan Ram argued for the food security program within government. He was not making a purely geopolitical case about strategic autonomy. He was making the case that food price stability was a welfare issue with direct consequences for the communities at the bottom of the agrarian hierarchy. Whether or not this framing changed specific policy outcomes is difficult to demonstrate directly, but it represented a different kind of case than the productivity-focused arguments that dominated most of the policy discourse around the Green Revolution.

### **Earlier Agricultural Work and Continuity of Concern**

The Agriculture Ministry was not Jagjivan Ram's first engagement with the conditions of rural workers. His work as Labour Minister from 1946 onward had a direct agricultural dimension. The Minimum Wages Act of 1948 applied to agricultural labour. The enforcement problems that plagued the Act in rural settings were problems he had been

trying to address for nearly two decades before he took charge of the agriculture portfolio. This continuity matters for understanding his approach to the Agriculture Ministry. He did not arrive in 1967 as a technocrat focused primarily on yield statistics. He arrived as someone who had spent years working on the question of what landless agricultural labourers could actually claim from the legal and institutional framework of the Indian state. The productivity concerns of the Green Revolution were real and urgent. They did not displace the distributional concerns he had been carrying throughout his career.

His advocacy for agricultural credit expansion also had roots in his earlier labour ministry work. The relationship between debt and labour exploitation in rural India was something he had encountered in its industrial form through the factory and mine labour contexts of his earlier ministerial work. The rural version, in which moneylender credit ties a small farmer or labourer to a creditor who then controls their labour decisions, was a structural parallel he was well positioned to recognize (Jaffrelot, 2003).

### **The Legacy: What Lasted and What Did Not**

Three years is a short time to change the structural conditions of Indian agriculture. Jagjivan Ram knew this. The significance of a ministerial tenure is often better measured by the institutions it builds and the policy directions it establishes than by the aggregate statistics it produces. The minimum support price system, which developed during his time at the Agriculture Ministry, outlasted his tenure and became a permanent feature of Indian agricultural policy. The Food Corporation of India's operational capacity, which his ministry helped build, became the institutional backbone of India's public distribution system. The seed supply infrastructure through the National Seeds Corporation remained a component of the state's role in agricultural input provision for decades (Guha, 2007).

The distributional legacy is harder to assess positively. The Green Revolution produced national food security while also increasing regional inequality in agricultural productivity. It produced large gains for medium and large farmers in well-endowed regions and smaller gains for small farmers and agricultural labourers in less-endowed regions. Bihar's agricultural transformation was slower and less complete than Punjab's. The gap between these regional outcomes reflected infrastructure and credit differentials that the Agriculture Ministry's advocacy addressed but could not eliminate in three years (Shah, 2002).

The broader policy legacy includes his contribution to building the case for priority sector lending requirements on nationalized banks. The documented failure of private banks to extend credit to small farmers and agricultural labourers, which his ministry's work helped to establish, contributed to the policy environment in which bank nationalization and priority lending targets were developed (Frankel, 2005).

His most lasting contribution to the thinking about agricultural policy was perhaps the insistence on connecting productivity objectives to distributional ones. Agricultural economists during this period were primarily focused on aggregate output and aggregate food security. Jagjivan Ram consistently kept the question of who would benefit in the room. This did not always produce the policy outcomes the question deserved. But it meant that the question was asked, and that is not nothing.

### Conclusion

Babu Jagjivan Ram's agriculture policy work was not a straightforward success story, and it would be dishonest to present it as one. India moved from food import dependence to near self-sufficiency during and shortly after his tenure. That was a real achievement. The institutional infrastructure he helped build, the support price system, the Food Corporation's operational development, the seed supply network, was a real contribution. The distributional failures of the Green Revolution period were also real. Agricultural labourers in Bihar and eastern India saw limited benefit from a transformation that dramatically improved conditions in Punjab and Haryana. Land reform remained unimplemented in most states. Minimum wage enforcement remained weak in the countryside. These were outcomes that his advocacy addressed but could not reverse.

What the record shows is a minister who understood both dimensions of the problem he faced and who pursued both objectives within the constraints of his position. The national food security objective and the welfare of Scheduled Caste agricultural communities were not separate concerns in his thinking. They were connected parts of the same problem. Whether the policy instruments available to him were adequate to solve both simultaneously is a different question, and the answer is probably no. But the framing itself, the insistence that agricultural development policy had to answer distributional questions as well as productivity questions, remains the right framing. Indian agricultural policy is still working through the implications of that question today.

### References

1. Das B, editor. Thus spoke Ambedkar: Vol. IV. Bheem Patrika Publications; 1997.
2. Frankel FR. India's political economy: the gradual revolution. 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 2005.
3. Guha R. India after Gandhi: the history of the world's largest democracy. New York: HarperCollins; 2007.
4. Jaffrelot C. India's silent revolution: the rise of the lower castes in north India. New York: Columbia University Press; 2003.
5. Kumar A. Jagjivan Ram: a political biography. New Delhi: Rupa Publications; 2013.
6. Mendelsohn O, Vicziany M. The untouchables: subordination, poverty and the state in modern India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1998.
7. Omvedt G. Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in colonial India. New Delhi: Sage Publications; 1994.
8. Ram J. Caste challenge in India. New Delhi: Vision Books; 1980.
9. Shah G. Dalit identity and politics. New Delhi: Sage Publications; 2002.
10. Swaminathan MS. An evergreen revolution. *Crop Sci.* 2006;46(5):2293-303.  
<https://doi.org/10.2135/cropsci2006.02.0074>
11. Thorat S, Kumar N, editors. B. R. Ambedkar: perspectives on social exclusion and inclusive policies. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2008.

### How to Cite This Article

Kumar NA. Dr. Babu Jagjivan Ram's vision for agricultural development and national self-sufficiency. *Int J Multidiscip Evol Res.* 2020;1(1):33-36.  
doi:10.54660/IJMER.2020.1.1.33-36.

### Creative Commons (CC) License

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.