Babu Jagjivan Ram’s life story reads like a modern day epic. Emerging from the backwoods of caste-plagued Bihar, where opportunities were limited and discrimination was severe, this determined crusader scaled heights of success unrivaled by any other leader in modern Indian history. He was an inspiring freedom fighter, a skilled parliamentarian, a visionary Union Minister and Deputy Prime Minister and an enduring voice for millions of marginalized Indians. His Long and eventful innings in national service spanned over half a century, from the beginning of the freedom movement to the decades after independence, when India stood on the threshold of global leadership. His stature and accomplishments earned him the reverence of all Indians: they endearing called him Babuji or father.

Babuji’s idealism and emphasis on justice and equality made him not only one of the tallest leaders of the freedom movement, but also helped lay the foundations of India’s modern and progressive polity.

Babuji’s flair for political mobilization and management was recognized as early as his student days. He was seen as a leader acutely aware of the prevailing social inequalities and capable of playing a significant role in the country’s development and transformation.

These innate leadership skills not only articulated the aspirations of disfranchised communities, the so-called untouchables, but also gave direction to underground movements in Bihar that were active in the 1940’s. And after India’s independence, these qualities formed the basis on which the legend of Babuji was raised.
Babu Jagjivan Ram was born on April 5, 1908 an Chandwa, a small village on the outskirts of Arrah town in Shahabad District, now a part of Bhojpur in Bihar. He was the youngest among the three sons and five daughters of Vasanti Devi and Sant Shobhi Ram. His father served in the British Army; but while on a posting in Peshawar, he resigned and came back to Chandwa to begin life as an agriculturalist. Shobhi Ram, however, soon realized that he possessed needs that went beyond those of a quiet cultivator—the need for spiritual gratification. He became a mahant of the Shiv Narayani sect, a broad–based religious group that admitted all castes and eschewed the rituals of mainstream worship. Shobhi Ram was also an expert calligraphist and used this talent to write and illustrate Shiv Narayani Compendiums for distribution among sect followers.

In January 1914, at the age of six, Babuji was sent to study at the elementary school in Chandwa. He had barely started his education, when his father passed away, leaving the children in the care of their mother. But Basanti Devi was not a woman who could be weakened by misfortunes. Resources may have been scarce but her spirit was resilient, she was determined that young Jagjivan should continue his education.

Babuji did not let her down. He proved to be an outstanding student with a near photographic memory. He easily passed his upper primary examination in 1919 at the age of 11, an achievement that Babuji later attributed not only to the commitment of his mother, but also the help and support of the village school master, Pandit Kapil Muni Tiwari.

In January 1920, Babuji joined the Middle School in Arrah, where the medium of instruction was English. But such academic challenges made him more determined to excel. The Basics of the language were mastered in barely a few months. So intense was his perseverance, that every morning he would walk a considerable distance to Arrah railway
station just to read the daily newspaper, statesman. And when he was advised to avail of the grant for the untouchable’ students, he refused, confident in his ability to earn a general category scholarship based entirely on academic merit. Needless to say, he won his scholarship year after year.

Babuji passed his matriculation exams with distinction, scoring hundred per cent in Sanskrit and mathematics. By the time he had finished high school, he had earned a reputation for excellence that went beyond the boundaries of his institution.

Books had a special place in Babuji’s life, as they opened up for him a world of knowledge and ideas. During his student years, the library became a favourite haunt, a private space for comprehension and analysis. He read extensively in Urdu, Bhojpuri, English, Hindi, Bengali and Sanskrit. Infact, he learnt Bengali just to read Bankim Chandra’s Classic, Anand Math, a novel that would inspire his participation in the anti-colonial struggle. Even in his later years, Babuji’s library was filled with books and journals on all subjects and from all corners of the world.

It was when he joined the Arrah Town School in 1992 that Babuji had the bitter experience of bigotry and caste prejudice. The school has separate pitches of drinking water for Hindu and Muslim boys but when he drank from the ‘Hindu Pitcher’ the other boys refused to use it. The school Principal had another pitcher placed for lower caste boys. Outraged at the insult, Babuji repeatedly broke the pitcher till the school authorities finally stopped the practice of segregation.

The Indian caste System is singularly, an age-old order of discrimination, in which certain caste are labeled as ‘impure’ and condemned to perform tasks like scavenging, working with leather or burning the dead, occupations considered beneath the dignity of the upper
castes. These ‘untouchable’ castes are also traditionally excluded from all the forms of knowledge and scholarship. Babuji’s achievements are all the more remarkable because he refused to be victimized by the dictates of tradition and fought to overcome social tyranny. His courage as student won him many admirers among his peers.

In 1925, Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya visited Arrah; and Babuji was asked to give the welcome address. So impressed was Pandit Malviya with the young boy’s erudition and confidence that he invited him to join the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) for higher education.

Around the same time, the Christian Mission at Chandwa also offered to fund his education, first in Lucknow and then later in America, if he converted to Christianity.

Many Suggested to Bubuji that this was an opportunity that should not be forsaken. But Vasanti Devi did not think conversion was the answer to escape the ills of the caste system. The Challenge lay in attempting to reform the Hindu caste structure while still being a part of it. It was, thus, decided the Babuji would go to BHU for further studies.

BHU proved to be the beginning of another battle against caste intolerance. The staff of the student’s mess refused to wash his plates. But such was his influence among the students that they all stood up in his support and decided to wash their own plates after eating. Babuji was moved by their support but felt that his presence should not inconvenience the rest of the students. He then took the decision to move out of the student’s hostel.

After completing his inter science examination from BHU, he joined Calcutta University as a B.Sc. Student and passed with distinction. But academic heroism was only one aspect of his versatile personality. Within
six months of coming to Calcutta, he organized a mazdoor (worker) rally at Wellington Square that was attended by more than 35,000 people. The success of the gathering drew the attention of revolutionaries like Subhash Chandra Bose, Chandrashekhar Azad and Manmanth Nath Gupta. It was also during this time the Babuji came across Marxist writings and socialist literature. He read the Das Kapital and the Communist Manifesto and was profoundly influenced by their vision of a classless society.

While in School, Babuji had dreamt of being a scientist, but as he grew older, he became sensitized to the socio-political reality of his times. Soon, the aspirations of the country and its people began to find expression in his personal goals. Adolescent ambitions could easily be obscured for the sake of nationalist objective. Bubuji’s battle would now be fought on two fronts—for freedom against colonial rule, and for securing the rights of the ostracized. The archaic institution of caste was incompatible with the ideals of freedom democracy and equality. The Political Philosophy of Mahatama Gandhi would greatly impact this vision.

In 1934, when a devastating earthquake struck north Bihar, Babuji rushed to the affected areas to organize relief work. It was while overseeing rescue efforts that he first met Mahatma Gandhi. As a young student, Babuji had spent many hours in the Arrah town library reading Ganhiji’s young India. During his interaction with the Mahatma, he realized that Gandhiji’s Commitment, much like his own, lay in not just fighting for his country’s political future, but also towards social reform. Like Babuji Gandhiji’s imagined India was one without caste, Class or religious discrimination.

During his college days in Calcutta, Babuji organized a number of Ravidas Sammelans and also initiated celebrations for Guru Ravidas Jayanti in different parts of the city. Ravidas was a 15th Century mystic of
the ‘untouchable’ cobbler caste whole devotional verses integrated him to the wider Bhakti movement and who later became emblematic of the struggle against caste prejudice. Keeping in mind Ravidas’ Cultic Position among the lower castes, Babuji founded the Akhil Bharaitya Ravidas Mahasabha in Calcutta in 1914. This was following by the setting up of the Khetihar mazdoor Sabha and the All India Depressed Classes League. The organizations aimed at incorporating ‘untouchable’ castes in the freedom movement and direct them as an effective force for social and political change. He rallied all dalit (or so-called untouchable) leaders to unite under a common platform to demand political representation for the underprivileged.

On June 1, 1935, Babuji married Indrani Devi, the daughter of Dr. Birbal, a renowned medical doctor and social reformer from Kanpur. Dr. Birbal had been awarded the Victoria Medal by Viceroy Lord Lansdowne for his services in the Chin-Lushai was of 1889-90. Indrani Devi was herself a freedom fighter and educationist, and stood by Babuji all through his years of struggle. They had a son, Suresh, and a daughter, Meira.

In the years after marriage Babuji immersed himself in the freedom struggle and simultaneously concentrated on social reform and political representation for dalits. On October 19, 1935, he appeared before the Hammond Committee in Ranchi to Demand their electoral rights.

In 1936, at the young age of 28, Babuji began his career in formal politics as a nominated member of the Bihar Legislative Council. In 1937, he stood as a candidate of the All India Depressed Classes League and was elected unopposed to the Bihar Legislative Assembly from East-Central Shahabad. Fourteen other Candidates of the League were also elected unopposed. As news of his resounding electoral victory reached New Delhi, the Congress party invited him to join forces with it.
The British blueprint for Bihar was a tad devious; they hoped to establish a puppet government for which Babuji’s support was essential. The inducement came in the form of money and ministerial berths. But Bubuji refused to even consider the proposal. Had he accepted this offer, it would have perhaps set a precedent in other provinces that would have serious undermined anti-colonialism. National leaders came out praising his patriotism and integrity. Gandhiji appreciated him with the words; “Jagjivan Ram has emerged as pure as gold in this trail by fire”

After the failed British Attempt of proxy rule, a Congress government was formed and Babuji was appointed Parliament Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, Co-operative Industry and Village Development.

In 1938, he resigned along with Cabinet on the issue of the Andaman prisoners and the British Government’s decision to involve India in World War II.

Inspired by Gandhiji’s model of Civil disobedience, Babuji courted arrest on December 10, 1940 by giving a notice to the District Collector. He was arrested in Arrah and was sent to Hazaribagh Jail where he came in contact with many other political prisoners. The discussions in jail further deepened his resolve to fight colonialism. After his release, Babuji went to Wardha and stayed at Gandhiji’s Celebrated Ashram, Where, during morning walks with the Mahatma, he shared his vision of a strong, independent and tolerant India.

In 1942, the Indian National Congress launched the Quit India Movement after passing the historic Quit India Resolution. Many Senior congress leaders were summarily arrested, but Babuji managed to give the authorities the slip and reach Patna to organize underground resistance. As the movement gained momentum, the pressure to apprehend Babuji became relentless. He was finally tracked and arrested from his house in Patna on August 19, 1942.
For the Government, the respite was short-lived. After his release on October 5, 1943, Babuji was back to organizing rallies, meetings and giving speeches that openly condemned the British rule.

Under the proposal of the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946, Babuji won Central Elections unopposed from the constituency of East-Central Shahabad (rural). The Same year he deposed before the Cabinet Mission in Simla Asia representative of the depressed classes, defending their cause and their importance as stakeholders in independent India. He thus managed to neutralize any attempt by the British to cause further rift among the communities in India.

On August 30, 1946, Babuji was the only dalit among 12 national leaders invited by Viceroy Lord Wavell to become part of the Interim Government. The interim Government was formed on September 2, 1946 with Babuji holding the Labour portfolio.

As Labour Minister, Babuji had gone to Geneva to attend the International Labour Conference. On the way back his plane crashed in the desert of Basra in Iraq, on July 16, 1947, barely a month before India’s independence. Though he providentially escaped the crash with only a leg injury, it was one of Babuji’s biggest regrets that he could not attend the Independence Day celebrations as he was still in hospital.

Babuji resumed administrative work well before his recovery; there was the enormous task of nation-building and the drafting of a new constitution. And as one of the leading members of the constituent Assembly, he had to ensure that social justice became an important ideal of the Indian State.
Babuji’s Administrative genius was instrumental in laying the foundations of a progressive welfare system. This was period in development when the people were dependent upon government assistance and schemes to create assets and promote industry and commerce. As minister holding key portfolios, he was able to guide the nation through a time of financial insecurity.

Beginning with the Interim Government in 1946, Babuji was Cabinet Minister for more than three decades, except for a brief period between 1963, and 1966 when he relinquished his position under the ‘Kamaraj Plan’ In fact, Babuji holds the distinction of being the longest serving minister in the history of the Indian Parliament. The Portfolios held by him included Labour, Railway, Transport and Communications, Food and Agriculture and Defense.

Under Babuji’s directives, Development-oriented programmes and services were prioritized. His understanding of India’s complex bureaucracy came in handy since they were class responsible for policy implementation. Through tact, discipline and sheer administrative brilliance, Babuji not only acquired a legendary status among civil servants, but also inspired them to perform beyond their abilities. Veteran bureaucrats, especially those who worked under Babuji, Still marvel at his talent and skill in governance.

Babuji was the Labour Minister Between 1946 and 1962, a portfolio he held again in 1966-1967. Besides Labour, he headed the ministries of Communications (1952-56). Railways (1956-1962), Transport and Communication (1962-63), Food and Agriculture (1967-1970), Defense Party Government headed by Morarji Desai was formed in 1977, Babuji joined it as a cabinet minister holding the Defence portfolio. He also was the Deputy Prime Minister of India from 24 January 1979 to 28 July 1979.
The responsibility of the Labour portfolio was laid on the shoulders of the Babuji first in 1946. and Later during 1966-67. The Post-war 1940s was a time when labour welfare was receiving much attention around the world with growing awareness of the need to create humane conditions and ensure progressive wages and rights. In the wreckage left behind by colonialism lay widespread poverty and unemployment and Babuji realized that unless these were successfully addressed. It would be difficult to resolve labour problems. Economic development had to work in tandem with enlightened labour laws.

A number of measures providing both social dignity and financial Security for the worker were immediately introduced during his tenure. These Included the Minimum Wages Act, the Coal Mines Provident Fund and Bonus Scheme, the Coal Mines Labour Welfare Fund and the Vast network of Employees’ State insurance Corporation.

In 1947, He piloted the enactment of the industrial Disputes Act, a landmark-legislation for the settlement of industrial disputes. The Act was further modified with the industrial Disputes (Appellate Tribunal)Act, 1950. In November 1947, he introduced the Dock Workers (Regulation and Employment) Bill in the legislative Assembly. The November of 1947 saw the enactment of another social security measure, the workmen’s state insurance Bill in 1948, The Factories Act was introduced which, inter-alia, prohibited the employment of women and children in dangerous wages, weekly holidays, leave with pay and safety of workers. Another major legislation was the Indian Trade Union (Amendment) Act, 1946, seeking to strengthen the Indian Trade Union Act of 1929 which had so far been ineffective.

Babuji also laid down the basis of a social security network in India, passing two important acts. The employees State Insurance Act, 1948, and the Provident Fund Act, 1952,
These Legislations undoubtedly championed the cause of the working classes. But at the same time, Babuji constantly reminded them of their great responsibility in shaping modern India. While addressing a convocation at the Banaras Hindu University he said;

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

He further emphasized the importance of reconciliation before conflict: “I am myself a firm believer in the efficacy of negotiations, conciliation, and adjudication. It is only when all these avenues have exhausted that the last weapons in the armoury of labour may be wielded, and that too only for economic reasons. A strike, as political weapon, is doomed to failure and will be resisted with all the energy and resources at disposal of the government.”

In June 1947, Babuji led the Indian delegation to the international Labour Organization (ILO) conference in Geneva. He also had the honour of becoming the first Asian Chairman at the conference of the ILO held in 1950.

In this second tenure as the Labour Minister in 1966, he introduced the Contract Labour Bill aimed at the abolition of contract labour from certain categories of trade unions and for regulating working conditions where total abolition was not-possible. He also appointed the National Commission on Labour, Headed by Shri Gajendra Gadkar, to review the changes in the labour environment since Independence and to report on existing conditions. The Report to the Government in 1969, provided information on working practices and useful recommendations for improvement.
Babuji was Minister of Communication from May 1952 to December 1956. He also headed both the Ministry of Communication and Ministry of Transport from April 1962 to August 1963. Nationalization of air transport was one of the most significant developments during his term, He piloted the Air Corporation Bill, 1953 in the teeth of great opposition and ensured its eventual enactment. The Air Corporation Act provided for the reorganization and development of the civil aviation sector and resulted in the Birth of Air India and Indian Airlines as national air carries.

There was also a tremendous expansion of aviation infrastructure during his tenure. At his behest, a number of aerodromes were built and auxiliary facilities were augmented. Equal importance was given to the improvement of the existing aerodromes and completion of ongoing Projects. Babuji also did not agree to the demand of handing over this Department to the Defence Ministry, Which regarded the sector as a back-up network or a second line of defence. Which replying to the Demands for Grants of the Ministry of Communications, he said.

"If civil aviation is to be treated as a second line of defence, the very argument justifies that it should be separate from the Defence Ministry and should be allowed the fullest scope for development for times of emergency."

In the field of communications, Babuji took key initiatives to implement radical schemes. It was his decision that every village with a population of 2,000 should 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 avail of postal facilities.

It was also decided that every tehsil should have a telegraph office, Further, telephone exchanges were opened in all districts and public call offices established at sub-divisional towns, such foresight dramatically improved the communication network of the country.
Realizing the potential of the shipping sector, Babuji focused on the expansion of its fleet so that it would cover all important trade routes of the world. Existing ports like Cochin, Visakhapatnam, Kandla, Tuticorin and Mangalore were developed while modernisation works were undertaken through the Calcutta and Haldia Dock Projects. These initiatives resulted in substantial increase in the total cargo shipment, international trade and the strengthening of foreign exchange reserves.

The Indian road network was given equal importance. The number of national highways and the total length of roads registered significant growth. A Transport Development Council was established to recommend motor vehicle taxation, schemes for establishment of National Road Safety Council and transport of goods by road and development of inland water transport were implemented.

In December 1956, Babuji was entrusted with the charge of railways, the lifeline of India, at a period when it was under tremendous strain, Prime Minister Nehru believed Babuji was the man who could ensure adequate growth to accommodate increasing passenger and freight traffic. A visionary and unorthodox approach ensured that the railway system achieved unprecedented growth, becoming fourth largest in the world and the largest in Asia. Additions including 650 kilometers of bros gauge line, 610 kilometers of meter gauge line and doubling of approximately 1,500 kilometers of existing single line.

Special attention was given to modernization, tighter management, improvement of passenger amenities and self-sufficiency in production of carriages, machines and commodities. Remarkably, the expansion was achieved without raising the fares in any of the five Railway Budgets presented by Babuji in Parliament.
The welfare of the railway workers was not ignored either. He most significant step was the introduction of a pension scheme, similar to one applicable to the Central Government employees. Several staff training schools were also opened and the exiting ones were expanded prospects. Always conscious of the agenda of social justice, Babuji authorized reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribe employees in departmental promotions. These were strictly implemented.

Babuji was Minister of Food and Agriculture from March 1967 to June 1970 and then from October 1974 to February 1977. It was in the late 1960s that the country had come under severe food shortage following two years of drought. Babuji’s strategy of revival focused on agricultural growth, food production and an efficient Public Distribution System (PDS).

On the eve of his tenure, India was largely dependent on food grain imports and was struggling to devise innovative tactics to increase production; Babuji was convinced that agriculture should from the back bone of the economy. Agriculture success would, thus, people growth in all other sectors. For this, self-sufficiency in food grain was essential and needed to be achieved as quickly as possible. By now, success had become and unerring habit with Babuji. In fact, his mere association with any project foretold its triumph. His ability always went a step further than his ambition, however grand it may be. Babuji’s agricultural policies and reoriented programmes went on to achieve record food production. The days of food dependency were buried in the past.

The measure were multiple and comprehensive. They included the cultivation of high-yielding varieties, judicious use of fertilizers and pesticides, improved irrigation and water management practices, expansion of agricultural credit, development of marketing and storage and the resolution of interstate water disputes.
More urgent and direct measures were also speedily applied. Since the country was still recovering from the devastating droughts of 1965 and 1966, large scale feeding programmes were organized for food grains from fair price shops was maintained with a view to safeguarding the interests of the consumers. Efforts were made to maximize domestic procurement of food grains and to supplement the domestic supplies through imports. In 1970, when he switched over to the Defence Ministry, the nightmare of food scarcity was all but forgotten.

Babuji also realized public Distribution system was an effective mechanism to manage the supply chain of food grains. For meeting the requirements of the Public Distribution System, increased emphasis was laid on domestic procurement and the country’s dependence on imports was progressively reduced, Public distribution of food grains was made an essential feature of food management in the country.

Another important contribution was in the filed of land reforms. Following the Chief Ministers’ Conference in 1976, considerable progress was made in redistribution and management of land. Attention was also given to animal husbandry draying and inland fisheries, improving forest cover, building buffer stocks and ensuring attractive prices for farmers.

In 1975, during his second term as the Food Minister, there was worldwide shortage in food grains. But India successfully surmounted the crises through effective guidelines such as the de-hoarding campaign expansion and streaming of the PDS and increased food grain production. In fact, the approach to food security under the leadership of Babuji became the basis for India’s future policies in this area.

Babuji took over reins of this ministry in June 1970, when the threat of war was knocking at India’s eastern and western fronts, then known as East and west Pakistan. But by December 1971, history was
dramatically created and geography compelling redrawn. In an operation involving both strategy and strength, Pakistan was defeated and the new nation of Bangladesh was born. Given that India had not emerged victorious in any of its previous wars, Babuji faced the uphill task of preparing the armed forces and determine their tactical deployment. But as an inspirational commander and master strategist, he proved to be more that a match for desperate opponents. He not only motivated the armed forces to the Indian people that the war would not be fought on their country’s soil.

In the build-up to the war, he visited the outposts, where the battalions were stationed. He also briefed civilians in various parts of the country about the emerging situation. In October 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Babuji visited many army division and units in the Punjab and border areas in other States. Lt. Gen. K.P. Candeth, the Commander of the Army’s Western Command during the 1971 War, has recounted their visit in the following words.

“Shri Jagjivan Ram went down well with the soldiers. He is a wonderful speaker, who can carry his audience with him and he never makes the mistake of talking down to them but manages to convey the impression that he is one of them... I had to brief him on the operational situation and war plans and was struck by his incisiveness and quick grasp of the root of a problem. My admiration grew during the initial reverses we had... He used to ring me, normally in the morning and in his slow drawl, ask me how it was going and if could cope with the situation. And being told that there was no cause to worry and that I could deal with it, he wished me good luck and hung up. He never seemed excited, bothered or flurried and his phlegmatic temperament did much to inspire confidence.”
The internal situation in erstwhile East Pakistan spilled over to India with hundreds of thousands of refugees crossing over to the Indian states of Bengal and Assam. Babuji considered the refugee influx to be a humanitarian problem and emphatically stated; "Which civilized country least of all, one with the tradition like ours, could seal off borders and allow innocent civilians to face the bullets."

Babuji's image as a 'warrior with a humans face' is still warmly remembered by military veterans. Apart from successfully guiding India through war, he also took steps for the rehabilitation of the families of the soldiers who had died in action or sustained grievous injuries. There was a new scheme of family paension for widows of the deceased officers and "sheltered" appointments for the disabled jawans and officers. The provision of "War Injury Pay" was made for those, who could not be accommodated in service. Several other welfare measures like free land and employment to war widows, medical treatment for families at military hospitals and education for children of servicemen and ex-servicemen disabled in the 1947-48, 1962 and 1965 wars.

Regarding the welfare of the servicemen Babuji once said, "The members of our armed forces have proved to the world that in the final analysis, it is the man behind the machine who brought his valour, dedication, determination and skill which brought success. It is his conduct and his regard for human values, which earned us a good name from our friends in Bangladesh and from foreign observers."

To sharpen India’s war preparedness, Babuji also great value to research and development. While replying as Defence Minister to a discussion on the working of the Ministry of Defence in Rajya Sabha in 1972, Babuji said:
“It is gratifying, when my Ministry receives universal support from both Houses for strengthening our armed forces, for modernizing the Army, Navy and the Air Force. We are producing some of the arms and military hardware that we require. But to think that we have become self-reliant in sophisticated weapons is far from the truth. It will take time. And in this connection, it will be my effort to see that research and development are strengthened to the fullest extent, and that work is not permitted to suffer for want of requisite funds. And since I have got support of both Houses, I am sure it will be possible to provide those funds.”

Despite the war of 1971, Babuji was keen on improving bilateral ties with Pakistan and sustaining tension-free borders. On the Indo-Pak discourse he said: “In our view, there is no dispute between our two countries which cannot be settled by friendly negotiations among ourselves. It will now be our effort to forge, through bilateral negotiations, a new relationship with Pakistan, based not on conflict on cooperation, assuring the people of the two countries freedom from fear of recurring wars and an opportunity to devote full attention to economic and social progress.”

Babuji also contributed to the growth of India’s relations with other nations. It was during his tenure as the Defence Minister that the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, friendship and Cooperation was inked.

Since he joined the Indian National Congress in 1937 Babuji continued to play a significant role in its organizational structure and advancement. In the initial years he held important positions at the provincial level. By 1946 he had emerged as one of the luminaries of the national establishment. He was a member of the All India Congress Committee from 1940 to 1977. He was an integral part of the Central
Parliamentary Board and the All India Congress Committee from 1950 to 1977. Babuji’s political acumen was considered invaluable by the then Prime Minister, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru and later by his daughter Smt. Indira Gandhi. They both relied on Babuji’s understanding and Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, the grand old party became a casualty to factionalism and intense power brawls.

On one side was the party old guard including Moraji Desai, Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy and K. Kamraj, collectively known as the ‘Syndicate’ on the other were progressives such as Babuji, Indira Gandhi and Fakruddin Ali Ahmad. In 1969, the internal struggle came to such a head that the party split into Congress (O) and the Congress led by Babuji. The Bombay Session of the new Congress unanimously elected Babuji as the President, a Position once occupied by stalwarts such as Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Azad and Pandit Nehru. Babuji’s responsibility was the new party’s boon the weakness caused by the split were swiftly addresses and the overall party organization was strengthened. His hard work and decisiveness saw the Congress come back to Power with a thumping majority in March 1971.

In an abrupt deviation from democratic practices, Emergency was clamped on the country on June 25, 1975, suspending even the basic civil rights of the Constitution. However, on January 18, 1977, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi announced General Elections.

Throughout his life, Babuji was a firm believer of democratic values. Despite being a Congress veteran and a close confidant of Smt. Gandhi, Babuji did not hesitate to differ with her on matters of principle. He tried to persuade Smt. Gandhi to revoke the Emergency and restore normalcy. But after failing in his effort, he sent in his resignation. In his resignation letter on February 2, 1977 to Smt. Gandhi, Babuji wrote:
"A fear psychosis has overtaken the whole nation. People are living in a state of constant fear and are silently suffering. This is bad for any country, more so for a democracy. Therefore, it is necessary that the emergencies are ended, all extraordinary laws are made inoperative and freedom of the people restored, so that the entire nation can be resurged from the stage of impotence to which it has been reduced at present. It is difficult for me associate myself with such a dispensation any longer. I am Therefore, sending my resignation herewith from your Cabinet and request you for its immediate acceptance.

After resigning from Cabinet, he addressed the Press: “The motherland calls once again to gurd and preserve democracy, to protect human values, so that India and India alone becomes strong and prosperous.”

After quitting the Congress on February 2, 1977, nearly 40 years after he had joined it, Babuji fashioned a new party, the Congress for Democracy or CFD. The party became a unifying force for the Opposition gearing up for the Sixth General Election. After two years of Emergency, the people’s verdict came on expected lines: the multi-party alliance which included the CFD, secured a landslide victory. India’s parliamentary system was entering a new phase of coalition politics and Babuji became one of the key political actors to shape the nation’s trajectory. There was widespread belief and expectation that Babuji would be chosen to head the first non-Congress Government at the Centre. That was not be.

Babuji had returned victorious from his Lok Sabha seat in Sasaram in Bihar and on March 25, 1977 and joined the Janta Government as Defence Minister. Subsequently on May 1, 1977 he merged CFD with the Janta Party. On January 24, 1979, he assumed office as the Deputy Prime Minister of India. This was in addition to his portfolio of the Defence Ministry.
However, internal conflicts within the Janta Party resulted in it losing its majority in the Parliament. The Janta Government fell in July 1979. Most Members of the Lok Sabha wanted a Government led by Babu Jagjivan Ram and they rallied around him asking him to stake his claim. Assured of their support Babuji met President Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy, who asked him to submit a list of supporters. But even before he could submit his list, the President dissolved the House on July 28, 1979. The office of Prime Minister had eluded Babuji once again. Political betrayal and caste politics had got the better of competence and capability.

In the elections of January 1980 for the seventh Lok Sabha, Sasaram once again returned Babuji to Parliament. However, this time he sat in the Opposition, the first time ever in his long political career. The Congress had come back to power and the Janta Party had lost popular support and rapidly disintegrated. In March 1980 Babuji formed a new party, the Congress (J), and in the general election of December 1984, he once again returned victorious to the Lok Sabha. His electoral record since joining politics remained stunningly unblemished: he had been elected to all eight Lok Sabha constituted since independence.

Babuji’s mass base had been in evidence as early as the 1930s. Since his nomination as a member of the Bihar Legislative Council in 1936, followed by his election to the Bihar Legislative Assembly in 1937, which he won unopposed, and since the inception of the Indian Parliament till his death on July 6, 1986 he represented the constituency of Sasaram (earlier known as Shahbad), election after election. His uninterrupted career as a legislator and parliamentarian (from 1936 to 1986), spanning half a century is a world record.
Babuji was more than just a skilled parliamentarian and minister. He was a visionary, a creative thinker, a statesman, a man who overcame the disabilities of history to script his own inspirational narrative. As a Member of Parliament, he upheld the highest traditions of democracy, shaping public opinion and building consensus for change. Babuji was also known for celebrated handling of Parliament business. As a Union Minister, he introduced numerous Bills in the Lok Sabha and steered their passage in Parliament. Also, he was never evasive and made every effort to keep the Members satisfied with detailed and informative replies and statements.

Babuji was renowned for his dazzling oratory. His speeches in Parliament combined both wit and wisdom, making him one of the most compelling speakers of his age. He spoke both Hindi and English with the same unmatched ease and eloquence.

One of Babuji enduring qualities was that he was not the one to be easily provoked by Opposition’s bards. Armed with facts and figures, he faced the rival benches with a dignified confidence, a result of years of experience and understanding. And when the occasion demanded, he did not hesitate to display the more forceful side of his personality. One of his junior ministers, Shri. V.C.Shukla, remembers Babuji in the following words:

“A great quality of Shri Jagjivan Ram, one that instantly put him among the select few anywhere, is his imperturbability. He remains his unruffled, serene self, no matter what storm may be raging around. Many must no, doubt, have had the occasion to see the deft, confident manner in which he handles even the stormiest debates on the floor of Parliament. It comes out on such occasions that the unruffled unhurried, even amicable man is also capable of retorting hard land woe betake the member who sought to underestimate this capacity of Shri Jagjivan Ram.”
And Sardar Hukam Singh, a former Speaker Lok Sabha, remembers that Babuji’s sternness was often tempered with humour. “He would make out his case convincing and calmly, and give back with force and redoubled vigour without offending anybody. He is not a dry bore. One the other hand, he would utilize wit and introduce humour at suitable occasions.”

Dr L.M Singhvi, an eminent lawyer and Parliament, also impressed by Babuji’s Parliament flair: “I have had the privilege of seeing Shri Jagjivan Ram functioning on the floor of the Lok Sabha as well as in the Committees and other meeting. I have always had the feeling that in talent as well as tact, in skill as well as in effectiveness, in exposition and in eloquence and in elaborate replies as well as in casual repartee, Shri Jagjivan Ram is one of our best parliamentarians.”

Dr. Karan Singh, former Union Minister of Health and Family Planning recalled Babuji’s parliamentary days in the following words: “Over the last 10 years I have been in Parliament, I had occasions to witness at close quarters Babu Jagjivan Ramji’s performance in Parliament. Hia tremendous grasp over his portfolio in particular and over national affairs in general, his imperturbability, in the face of provocation and his effective delivery, both in English and Hindi, combined to make him one of our ablest parliamentarians.”

Babuji passed away in Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital in New Delhi on 6th July 1986 at the age of 78 after a period of illness. A a leader, who shared his political career with many generations of politicians and revolutionaries, from Mahatma Gandhi to Rajiv Gandhi, Babuji left an enduring imprint on the polity of India. A cross section of political leaders, the general public, members of the Press and the entire nation mourned the passing away of a national icon. A per his wishes, Babuji’s last rites
took place on 7th July, 1987 at his birthplace, Chandwa, near Arrah in Bihar and was attended by President Giani Zail Singh, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Cabinet ministers, leaders of all parties and thousands of his fans and followers. The funeral, on that rainy July Monday, symbolized the end of an era, representing perhaps the most important phase of India’s transition from colonialism to democracy and self-reliance. Babuji’s legacy, of commitment to public service, struggle against injustice, and maintaining of the highest standards of government will continue to inspire generations, who read about him. Babuji always said that nothing of true value ever came by change or good fortune; it had to be earned through struggle and sacrifice. His life was a powerful manifestation of that belief.