

Memorial Lecture delivered by Shri Pranab Mukherjee, Hon'ble Finance Minister
on the occasion of Babu Jagjivan Ram's Birthday

(April 5, 2010)

Babu Jagjivan Ram was one of the most respected leaders of pre-and post-independent India. He was a great orator, a distinguished parliamentarian and an able administrator. He was a valiant fighter in India's freedom struggle and a great inspirer and organizer of the message against oppression.

Compared to the vast histories of nations, each of us individual occupies no more than a blink of time. Yet, in that brief time, some managed to leave their foot-prints on the nation's history that no amount of rain, sun, wars and turmoils can wipe out. Babu Jagjivan Ram was one such person and his foot prints on the early years of this nation building are part of nation's genetic code. They have played a vital role in seeing India's journey and will continue to have an impact on India's destiny long after the current generations are gone.

Jagjivan Ram's life story reads like a legend. He was the youngest minister in Jawaharlal Nehru's provisional government in 1946. He would remain a minister all the way till 1979 creating a record of unbroken innings in government. He played a vital role across the length and breadth of this nation. He was the Agriculture Minister during the Green Revolution. Wherever he went he left his imprint because of his remarkable efficiency and organizational skill. But, over and above all, he played a crucial role along with Gandhiji and Ambedkar in making us conscious of the vice of casteism and was a pioneer in helping us break away from the centuries old practice of untouchability.

He had learnt the pain of casteism first-hand since he was born into a family of untouchables in the village Chandwa in district Shahabad, now Bhojpur, in Bihar. His spirit of rebellion was evident early. While in Arrah town's school he was told that he could not drink water from the same pots meant for the Hindu students nor from the one meant for the Muslim students and was given a separate pot meant for untouchables. In protest, he broke the pot and the principal was forced to relent and the special pot was removed.

His remarkable intellectual powers were evident early. He learnt Bengali while in school simply because he wanted to read Bankim Chandra's Anand Mutt in the original language. When I think of all the disadvantages of caste discrimination that Babu Jagjivan Ram had to face and from which he emerged like "burnished gold" from the fire as Gandhiji described his arrival on the Indian political scene, it is impossible not to feel a special respect for this great son of India.

Jagjivan Ram went on to study in BHU and Calcutta University. It was in Calcutta, while he organized a Mazdoor Rally in the late 20s, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose spotted him and for

Jaggiwan Ram there was no looking back after that. He became an icon of the disadvantaged castes and sections in our society in India. He was a gift to India and each one of us Indians ought to be proud to have had such a leader during the critical founding years of this great nation. As Gandhiji noted in his journal *Harijan* on 17th April 1937 about Jagjivan Ram “this man of the suppressed classes has shown how one can be rich in poverty, high in lowliness and self respecting in the midst of insults and humiliation heaped upon them”.

Taking a cue from this observation, I have decided to use this occasion to speak on development that goes beyond castes, class and religion, development that reaches all corners of society. It is not always appreciated by contemporary Indians that one of the greatest achievements of Independent India is that this was the first time, it may be a millennium or two, that there was serious effort to put an end to the practice of caste and untouchability. No colonial government had made any serious effort to end this injustice of hundreds of years. It was one of the noblest and the boldest steps that was taken by the founding fathers when they abolished untouchability by writing this into the Constitution of this new nation of which Babuji was an integral part. They viewed independence not only as the freedom from British rule but a step to establish equality among Indians, be they of religion or caste. In the language of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, freedom means freedom from political slavery, freedom from economic bondage and freedom from cultural stagnation.

Even as I praise this bold step, I should warn you that the task is far from achieved. What India has done is take the first step. Our ultimate aim must be to achieve a society in which a person's caste, religion and gender makes no difference to the way the person is treated, the opportunity the person faces and the rights that are conferred upon the person.

The fact that we want economic development to take us to the ultimate state must not make us believe that we are already there. I believe that we are still at a phase where we have to use affirmative action to include, in the nation's main-stream, segments of the population that are marginalized. I hope that a time will come when we will not need such deliberate action. Only then and then only we can say that the ultimate aim of inclusive growth has been achieved. But, for now, we still have a long distance to cover and all Indians must be prepared for a long drawn struggle to achieve that.

In India, certain social groups such as SCs, STs, OBCs and minority have historically been disadvantaged and vulnerable. Indian society had a rigid occupation based hierarchical caste system in which the relative place of a caste in the social hierarchy was determined largely by its traditional occupation. In particular, some groups came to be regarded not merely as low caste but as untouchable. The practice of untouchability resulted in great injustice to the members of the concerned caste because they were discriminated against in every respect and

denied ownership of productive assets like land as well as basic rights like education and equality which resulted in the perpetuation of their extreme socio-economic deprivation.

The 1931 census for the first time systematically categorized certain castes as depressed class. Thereafter, the Government of India Act, 1935 for the first time provided for notification of socially disadvantaged castes as Scheduled Castes and a list of such castes were accordingly notified by the Government of India Scheduled Order 1936. The elections to provincial assemblies in British administered states held in 1937 under the above act provided seats reserved exclusively for the scheduled caste candidates.

The Constitution of India, as I have already mentioned, abolished untouchability. In addition, it provided several special safeguards for the scheduled castes so as to ensure that they are able to attain equality with the other social groups in the shortest possible time. The safeguards enabled reservations in elections to Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly and reservations in government jobs. Our constitution contains various provisions for the development of such marginalized groups. The Constitution of India guarantees protection from social injustice and all forms of exploitations under Article 46 of The Directive Principles. It guarantees equality before law - Article 14 - and enjoins among the States not to discriminate against any citizen on grounds of caste – Article 15 (Clause 1). Untouchability is illegal and its practice in any form is forbidden by Article 17. The Constitution mandates that no citizen shall on grounds only of caste or race be subjected to any disability and restrictions under Article 15(2). It empowers the State to make provisions for reservations in educational institutions and in appointments proposed in favour of scheduled castes. Reservation of seats for scheduled castes in the Lok Sabha is provided under Article 330 and in the State Assembly under Article 332 and in the local self government under Articles 243 (d) and 340 (d).

In addition to the above, the Parliament has enacted Untouchability Offences Act, 1955 re-named as Protection of the Civil Rights Act, 1976. To check and deter the atrocities against the SC, The Scheduled Castes and The Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989 has also been enacted. The Planning Commission was set up in March 1950 by a resolution of the Government of India which defined the scope of its work in terms of *inter-alia* formulating a development plan for the most effective and balanced utilization of the country's resources and to identify the factors which tend to retard the economic development and determine the conditions, in view of the current social and political situation, that should be established for the successful execution of the Plan.

Accordingly, the First Plan itself had several important programmes in the field of social services which included increased provisions for the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled areas and for Scheduled Castes and other Backward Classes.

The Scheduled Castes constitute 16.3% of India's population. In the past, they have been socially ostracized, economically exploited and denied human dignity. Socio-economic development and protection of the Scheduled Castes from discrimination and exploitation has been the high priority from the very start of the planning process. People belonging to scheduled caste community are spread all over the country with 80% of them living in the rural areas. They constitute more than 1/5th of the population of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and West Bengal. Punjab has the highest proportion of scheduled castes to the state population. More than half of the scheduled caste population is concentrated in 5 states - Uttar Pradesh 35.1 million, West Bengal 18.4 million, Tamil Nadu 11.8 million, Andhra 12.3 million and Bihar 13 million.

The government's strategy for development of the scheduled castes incorporates the educational and economic development, protective measures and reservations. In fact, educational as well as protective and reservation measures can be seen as pathway to economic development. Educational development is sought to be promoted through incentives in the form of abolition of tuition fee, free supply of books, mid-day meals, scholarships etc. Special attention to the retention of the SC students in schools and quality of the teaching for them, post-matric scholarships for SC students for pursuing the higher education in various courses enabling SC students to access top class educational institutions including those in the private sector and encouraging SC students to prepare for various competitive examinations including scheme for coaching SC students. Economic development strategy includes social programmes of employment to address the problems of the unemployment amongst the SC. Priority to SCs in the employment guarantee scheme is also important.

National Finance and Development Corporation for SCs and Safai Karmachari and state level SCBCs are providing credit to SC for entrepreneurial activity. Protective measures include the effective implementation of Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989. The 11th Five Year Plan which was approved by the National Development Council on 19th December, 2007 provides a comprehensive strategy for inclusive development building on the growing strength of the economy while addressing the weaknesses that have been seen during the recent years of growth.

Inclusive growth demands that all social groups have equal access to the services provided by the state and equal opportunity for upward economy and social mobility. It is also necessary to ensure that there is no discrimination against any section of our society.

It is also apt that the earlier centrally sponsored scheme of Hostel for SC Boys and Girls was revised and renamed as Babu Jagjivan Ram Chhatravas Yojna with effect from 1.1.2008 as a tribute to this great son of our country on his birth day. The object of the scheme is to provide

residential accommodation facilities to SC boys and girls studying in middle schools, higher secondary schools, colleges and universities.

We have tried to build up the forces of high growth and inclusiveness so that not only that India come to acquire a seat among the greatest nations of the world but each and every Indian can rightly claim his share of that achievement. Many years ago poet Rabindranath Tagore, making a forecast in one of his beautiful poems, pointed out that if society is still not aware of their responsibility of taking the other half with them they should not forget the other half will drag them down and there will be no way of moving up. I think it is still relevant today.

But, for a large and complex nation such as ours, each state is by definition a small state. A lot more needs to be done before we can, in a true sense, claim to live in a society with economic development beyond class and caste as envisioned by Babu Jagjivan Ram. Let us all work together in accomplishing his vision. Perhaps, that will be the best tribute to this great son of India.

Thank you,

(Transcribed from recording)