

## The Grand Beginning: A Daughter's Tribute to her Father

Meira Kumar

*MEIRA KUMAR (b.1945), the only daughter of Late Babu Jagjivan Ram, began her career as a bureaucrat, but later joined politics. She has been elected member of the parliament several times. She has also served as a Cabinet Minister in the centre in different capacities. Like her father, she has passionate concern for the upliftment of the down-trodden and the untouchables both as cabinet minister and as members of several social and cultural societies. Kumar edits Pavan Prasad, a monthly magazine, on sociological and literary issues. She also writes poems in Hindi. In the present essay, taken from Jagjivan Babu: Ahead of his Times, she fondly remembers the days she spent in the company of her father and recounts the events which shaped Babu Jagjivan Ram into a Crusader for social justice.*



## The Grand Beginning: A Daughter's Tribute to her Father

1 It is not easy for a daughter to write dispassionately about her father because the bonds are too close, the sentiments too deep and the images get blurred. Ever since I remember, I saw him as a national figure, a performer at centre stage, bathed in limelight. He was called upon to meet the most difficult challenges facing the nation in his times and he met them all with devastating success. Equipped with remarkable grit, intellectual rigour and a strong commitment to moral and quintessentially human values, Babuji remained the longest in that rarefied atmosphere at the top where even the best survives only briefly. As a growing child therefore, I was naturally overawed by the aura of supermanship that always surrounded him.

- 2 I loved him as my father. While the world was curious about his work, his influence and the power he wielded, I was only concerned about his person, his childhood, his youth, his struggles and his dreams. As a little girl, I loved to listen to the tales of his childhood pranks which grandmother narrated as bed-time stories. She narrated them in a style so picturesque that I see them before my eyes as paintings coloured in great detail by a very fine brush. Whenever, Barka Baba, my father's elder brother, twenty-four years his senior, came to Delhi, I would shower him with questions about Babuji's childhood. I have treasured every word that grandmother and Barka Baba spoke about Babuji and have used them painstakingly to reconstruct his early life.
- 3 The earliest scene, then, is set in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century against the backdrop of Chandwa, a small, backward village in Bihar in a country reeling under the shame of being a British colony. Babuji was born here on 5 April, 1908 amidst poverty and untouchability. For thousands of years Indian society had treated the untouchables with utter scorn and contempt. The repression and exploitation had crippled their very psyche so that they could not entertain the idea of protesting against the unjust social system. They were the disinherited ones, a casualty of history, too feeble and with wounded souls to fight back.
- 4 But Babuji was different. He was made of sterner stuff. It was against his grain to accept injustice. As life began to unfold and he felt the trauma of his circumstances, he took the reins of destiny into his own hands and strode ahead unstoppable - to a new dawn. I can visualise him as an ill-clad, dusty little boy out to conquer the world.
- 5 Babuji was admitted to the village school at the age of six. It was Basant Panchami day and after offering prayers to Goddess Saraswati, he was sent to school, attired in a new yellow dhoti and velvet cap, a piece of jaggery in his mouth for good luck and a slate tucked under his arm.
- 6 My grandfather Sant Shobhi Ram had set great hopes in him – the youngest of his eight children. Grandfather was tall, handsome and very upright. As a young man, he had resigned from his job in the British Army, to protest against their unjust conduct. Thereafter, he worked in the Calcutta Medical College, but retired prematurely to settle down to a quiet, ascetic life in Chandwa. The produce of his land somehow sustained the family. As the priest of the Shiva-Narayani Sect, most of his time was spent in praying and writing the holy book "Anayas" in his beautiful, long hand to distribute among his disciples. He died young, when my father was only six. His last words to my father were "I have taught English to your elder brother but I have not even taught Hindi to you. May you scale great heights in life?" It was then that my grandmother Vasanti Devi, a lady of rare wisdom and courage, made a silent vow to

her departing husband that she would spare no effort to give the best education to her young sōn.

7 The village school was his temple of learning. There were new books to read and there was so much to learn. He had just learnt to spell his long name but one of his friends invariably spelt it wrong in order to tease him. Once the teasing led to a heated argument followed by fist cuffs. The friend went crying to Panditji, who not only scolded Babuji, but also thrashed him without giving him a chance to explain. This was his first encounter with injustice. Furious at the treatment meted out to him, he took a long stick and climbed atop a mango tree instead of going home for lunch. When grandmother made inquiries, she was told that he was very angry and threatened to beat anyone who dared to go near the tree. When further inquiries revealed that he was beaten for no faults of his, she headed for Panditji's house. She told Panditji's wife in no uncertain terms that her husband was not only guilty of gross injustice to her little son, but was also responsible for beating him and keeping him without food. She made these charges in a manner so forceful and so appealing that she won instant support from the Panditani who joined her in her mission against injustice. The two accosted Panditji who was already suffering from pangs of remorse. The child he had wrongly punished was the brightest he had seen in his long, teaching career and he had the intuition that the little boy would do him proud one day. He apologized to grandmother and the Panditani, who were still in a belligerent mood, and then proceeded to the mango tree to beckon his favourite student. Babuji politely came down, but declared his refusal to study in Panditji's school. Panditji was finally able to pacify him, but the little crusader had won his first battle.



Babu Jagjivan Ram

8 The incident, which left a lasting impact on him, occurred when he was around seven. It was rainy season and the tiny rivulet Gangi, which crisscrossed the eastern side of the village, had swelled. One hot afternoon Babuji and his friend went for a swim after school. The current was too powerful for the young swimmers. Being closer to the shore, the friend managed to come out, Babuji could not. Overcome by fierce mid-stream current he was fast drifting away when a woman spotted him. She had a long stick for driving her pigs. She rushed and extended the stick to rescue him. He saw the stick, outstretched his arm, held it tight and using all his might came out. It all happened in a flash, but it kindled a light within him forever. By accident, he had chanced upon the Moolmantra, the basic philosophy of his life, which he never allowed

himself to forget. That the elderly lady thereafter was accorded the same respect, which was reserved for his mother, is another matter. What is significant is that the incident became a reference point in his life, one to which he referred again and again for sustenance, especially in trying moments.

- 9 Perched on his knees as a little girl, or sitting by his side when I grew up, I often heard him talk of it. The elderly lady was, no doubt, a help, he would explain, but what really mattered was that he had the presence of mind to hold on to the stick and the strength within him to pull himself out.
- 10 After finishing middle school, Babuji joined the high school in Arrah town. Although his reputation as a topper had already preceded him, it was eclipsed by the social prejudices prevalent at the time- prejudices that unfortunately exist even today. The most unusual reception awaited him upon his arrival at the school. To the school verandah which hitherto had accommodated two earthen pitchers, the Hindu and the Muslim pitcher, was added a third one – the untouchable pitcher. At the sight of this, his innocent face quivered in anguish and his young frame froze with incapacitating humiliation. He bent, picked up a stone and, as if in a trance, hurled it at the pitcher with all the force at his command. The next day the broken pitcher was replaced by a new one. Once again he aimed a stone, shattering it, as if he shattered not the pitcher but what lay behind it, that age-old practice of inhuman discrimination which heaped untold hurt and insults on the likes of him. The breaking of the untouchable pitcher remained a mystery for the headmaster and the others in the school. But with every new pitcher meeting the same fate, the exasperated headmaster gave in and what followed can only be termed revolutionary by all standards in the Bihar of 1920s. The school veranda thereafter had only one earthen pitcher for every one.
- 11 At the age of ten when most of his classmates were content with the monotonous and uneventful life of that sleepy little village, Babuji was possessed by a strong urge to know what was happening outside its narrow confines. Reading the newspaper was one way, but the village provided no such opportunity. So, every morning without fail he would walk considerable distance to the Arrah railway station just to read a newspaper. While in the high school, he regularly spent two hours in the town library. Gandhiji's "Young India" and Bankim Chandra's "Anand Math" were of special interest. He specially learnt Bengali to read "Anand Math" in original.
- 12 The coming of the monsoon was always welcome in Chandawa, but that year it spelt disaster. Days of continuous and heavy downpour brought unprecedented floods. Babuji's humble mud-house caved in. Barka Baba was in Calcutta on work. Babuji, then in his teens, spent the whole day moving the household goods and the stock of food-grains to the tiny hillock nearby where he and grandmother took shelter along with the other villagers. Alone he had to make innumerable trips to and fro, carrying

heavy items on his frail shoulders. By sunset when he had managed to retrieve almost everything, it suddenly occurred to grandmother that some silver coins, her savings of years buried in the kitchen wall had been left behind. Scared to send her son at that hour to dig out the coins she went herself. Babuji naturally followed. But they could not go far. The water level had risen erasing every trace of their home as also of the earthen pot which contained their modest savings. Bewildered and helpless, they returned. The water receded in a few days and the house was rebuilt. But the experience, as Babuji so often recalled had toughened him beyond his age...

- 13 Of the myriad colours in the kaleidoscope of Babuji's childhood, I have brought into focus just a few. It is not that the others do not deserve to be highlighted, but taken together, they all serve to point to the informing principle of his life, to instil courage, to fight for the oppressed and to take charge of one's destiny.

### Let's Think and Do

1. 'Morning shows the day.' How does this apply to Babu Jagjivan Ram?
2. Attempt a sketch on the childhood of your parents/grandparents
3. Describe Jagjivan Ram as a crusader against injustice. Narrate two incidents that show Jagjivan Ram as a crusader against injustice.
4. How did Babu Jagjivan Ram chance upon the 'Moolmantra' (basic philosophy) of his life? Narrate the incident in your own words.
5. Narrate an incident that shows that adversity toughened Babuji beyond his age.
6. Organise a speech contest on 'untouchability is an evil'.
7. Do a project work on the 'Life and achievements of Babu Jagjivan Ram.

