

## Book Review-1

**Anil Kumar Sarkar, *Portfolio Activist: Babu Jagjivan Ram's Pursuit of Social Justice*, New Delhi, Manohar, 2026, pp. 248, ISBN: 978-93-6080-142-7, Rs. 1495/-**

"History remembers the radicals; it often forgets the reformers."

With this implicit challenge to canonical memory, Anil Kumar Sarkar's *Portfolio Activist: Babu Jagjivan Ram's Pursuit of Social Justice* re-enters the neglected corridors of post-colonial Indian political history to reclaim one of its most overlooked figures – Babu Jagjivan Ram, the indefatigable Dalit leader who navigated power from within rather than outside the system. Published by Manohar (New Delhi) in 2025, the book represents an important effort to reconceptualise political biography as a methodology of social historiography, where the life of a single individual reflects both the moral and structural dilemmas of India's democracy itself.

Sarkar has intended to write what he calls a critical biography, steering away from both hagiography and vilification. The book's title, 'Portfolio Activist', itself embodies an intellectual provocation: how can a man entrenched in the state's bureaucratic machinery also be an activist for justice? Sarkar's answer lies in reframing Jagjivan Ram not as an anomaly but as a product of deliberate political pragmatism; a leader who used his ministerial portfolios as arenas of activism for labour, caste equity and democratic reform. The book comprises of eight chapters, beginning with an introduction that situates political biography within global historiography. Sarkar invokes Patrick K. O' Brien and Lewis J. Edinger to argue that biographical writing, often dismissed as anecdotal or didactic, can serve as a prism for understanding political systems and ideological negotiations. In doing so, he justifies the biographical method as both a historical and interpretive enterprise. This methodological self-consciousness gives the book its academic gravity, distinguishing it from earlier commemorative or sentimental writings on Jagjivan Ram. One of Sarkar's most compelling contributions emerges in Chapter Two, "The Broken Thread: Jagjivan Ram between Dalit and Bahujan Politics." Here, he confronts the central paradox of Jagjivan Ram's life: his simultaneous proximity to the Congress establishment and his enduring identification with the oppressed castes. He interprets this tension not as betrayal but as a distinct political strategy: a negotiated agency within structures of constraint. By juxtaposing Jagjivan Ram's cautious Gandhian social philosophy with Ambedkar's radical constitutionalism and Kanshi Ram's militant mobilization, the author reconstructs the genealogy of Dalit politics as an evolving dialectic between integration and resistance. The use of historiographical sources, ranging from G.S. Ghurye's sociology and Sumit Guha's colonial anthropology to Ishita Banerjee-Dube's cultural history of caste, enriches this chapter. His argument that

British colonial codification of caste solidified rather than created its rigidity provides an incisive backdrop to understanding how figures like Jagjivan Ram inherited a world where social hierarchy was naturalized both by Brahmanical theology and imperial governance. Against this backdrop, Jagjivan Ram's brand of gradualist reform appears less as submission and more as an ethical choice within the bounds of political realism. Subsequent chapters trace Jagjivan Ram's evolution through the corridors of power – from his early years as the founder of the All India Depressed Classes League to his stewardship of key ministries such as Labour, Agriculture, and Defence. Sarkar describes him as a “portfolio activist,” whose administrative reforms, whether in industrial labour rights or agrarian productivity, were underpinned by a larger moral vision of social equity. Particularly notable is the section on the Labour Ministry, which the author calls the “Ministry of Arbitration” – a revealing metaphor for Jagjivan's attempt to balance industrial modernisation with workers' dignity during the early decades of the Republic. The chapter titled “The Repentant Politician” engages candidly with the moral ambiguities of Jagjivan Ram's career – his tactful loyalty to Indira Gandhi during the Emergency, his eventual defection to the Janata Party and his unsuccessful bid for the prime ministership. Sarkar interprets these shifts as emblematic of the pragmatic oscillations inherent in democratic politics. By reading political opportunism as a historically contingent strategy rather than a moral failure, Sarkar situates Jagjivan Ram as a statesman whose adaptability was inseparable from his social mission.

One of the book's virtues is its meticulous engagement with prior scholarship. The author has surveyed a formidable corpus, ranging from S.R. Bakshi's *The Harijan Leader* and K.L. Chanchreek's *A Nation Builder* to Indrani Jagjivan Ram's *Milestones*, and had used them not as sources of adulation but as reference points in a larger historiographical dialogue. His attention to both primary and secondary materials, including speeches, memoirs, and commemorative volumes, grants the book a documentary richness that many political biographies lack. At the heart of the book lies Jagjivan Ram's sustained engagement with the idea of social justice, which he treats as both a philosophical doctrine and a lived political ethic. Drawing on John Rawls's notion of fairness, Edmund Cahn's critique of injustice and Gandhi's moral anthropology, Sarkar interprets Jagjivan Ram's politics as a hybrid of realism and idealism, as a synthesis of ethical Hinduism and constitutional socialism. Jagjivan Ram's speeches and writings, especially his 1980 treatise *Caste Challenge in India*, are revisited as primary texts articulating a vision of democracy grounded in fraternity rather than identity. Sarkar's comparative analysis of these philosophical lineages is among the book's strongest aspects. He convincingly argues that Jagjivan Ram's thought anticipated many of the debates in contemporary social theory, particularly those concerning recognition versus redistribution. By emphasizing the role of social cognition and moral consciousness in dismantling caste hierarchies, Jagjivan Ram envisioned a form of justice deeper than mere affirmative action: a cognitive revolution in

social behaviour.

What makes the book strikingly relevant to our contemporary moment is its insistence on the ethics of negotiation in an age of polarisation. In twenty-first-century India, where Dalit politics is increasingly fragmented between symbolic assertion and electoral opportunism, this book's portrayal of Jagjivan Ram offers a historically grounded counterpoint – a reminder that reform from within the state apparatus can coexist with subaltern aspiration. The book thus opens a new line of inquiry into the possibilities of institutional activism, urging a reassessment of how representation operates in a democracy marked by both populist excess and structural inequality. Furthermore, Sarkar's reflections resonate with present discussions over the dilution of affirmative action and the crisis of leadership within marginalized communities. By recovering a figure who combined administrative authority with ethical restraint, *Portfolio Activist* suggests a model of political integrity that transcends ideological binaries. In an era when public service is often reduced to spectacle and moral posturing, Jagjivan Ram's life emerges as an enduring lesson in political sincerity, humility and the art of reconciling power with purpose. The book thereby bridges history and policy, reclaiming Dalit politics as a discourse not merely of protest but of constructive governance.

Anil Kumar Sarkar's *Portfolio Activist* stands as a substantial and necessary intervention in modern Indian political historiography. Its strength lies in its dual achievement: resurrecting Jagjivan Ram from historical neglect and reimagining the biography as a vehicle of structural analysis. The book's intellectual ambition, theoretical grounding, and moral sincerity makes it an essential addition to the study of Dalit politics, postcolonial statecraft, and the philosophy of social justice. To borrow Sarkar's own metaphor, Jagjivan Ram's life was a "broken thread" in the tapestry of Indian democracy – fragile, complex but indispensable. *Portfolio Activist* ties that thread back into the larger weave of India's unfinished quest for equality. The book succeeds most profoundly in repositioning Jagjivan Ram within the *longue durée* of Dalit and national politics. By refusing to read him solely through the Ambedkarite lens, the author has opened up new interpretive space to consider alternative models of Dalit leadership, particularly those forged not in opposition but in negotiation with power. His portrayal of Jagjivan Ram as a realist reformer restores moral complexity to a figure too often simplified by both nationalist and subaltern historiographies. In doing so, Sarkar also makes an implicit critique of the historiographical economy of remembrance. Figures like Ambedkar have been rightfully canonized, yet in that process, those who pursued less dramatic but equally transformative forms of activism have been eclipsed. *Portfolio Activist* thus becomes not only a biography but also a meta-historical reflection on who gets remembered, how and why.

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