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Labour Ministers, Caste and the Prism of Law, 1942-52

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The decade spanning 1942-52 is the only decade in Indian politics when the Labour portfolio of the Government of India was consecutively held by politicians from Dalit background. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was the Labour Member of the Governor General's Executive Council from 1942 to 1946 and Jagjivan Ram served as Labour Minister from 1946 till 1952. Despite the fact that they both shared similar social origins (Ambedkar was born into the Mahar caste and Ram into the Chamar Caste) and shared an interest in the mobilization of Dalits and laboring classes, they differed radically in their political outlooks. Ambedkar joined the Viceroy's Executive Council as Labour Member when the Quit India Movement was launched and his idea of nationalism was severely critical of that of the Congress. Unlike Ambedkar, Ram conducted his politics by remaining within the 'national mainstream' of the Congress and upholding certain forms of 'Hindu' thought.

In the context of exigencies of the World War II and subsequent transformations in the economy, Labour as a category gained political recognition in the discourse of the State. By 1942, the Labour Department was no longer an appendix either of the Commerce Department or the Industries Department. It was established and expanded as a separate department. The context of the World War II, growing industrial 'unrest', the Quit India movement, provincial autonomy, partition of British India, constitutional developments and shifts in the relation between India and Britain provided a backdrop for discussions in the Labour department particularly on legislation.

During this decade, more than 40 Central labour legislations in the form of Acts, Amendments to Acts and Ordinances and numerous provincial labour legislations were passed. Furthermore, the decade witnessed a concentration of not only national and regional level conferences and

committees on labour matters but also a massive expansion of the administrative apparatus of the Labour department which, one could say, cleared the path for state-initiated institutionalization of labour. The discourse on 'development' and the project of nation-making dominated the first Indian Cabinet when several important legislations concerning labour were enacted. Some of the key legislations include the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, the Factories Act, 1948, the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, the Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948, the Coal Mines Provident Fund and Bonus Scheme Act, 1948, the Plantations Labour Act, 1951, the Employees' Provident Funds Act, 1952, and the Indian Mines Act, 1952. Jagjivan Ram formulated a Five Year Labour Programme of legislative and administrative measures aimed at the removal of the principle deficiencies in Government's policies and measures, pointed out by the Royal Commission on Labour in 1931 and the Labour Investigation Committee in 1946. Under this Programme, he aimed at formulating a uniform coordinated labour policy for the country to promote industrial peace and social security and to ensure fair wages and satisfactory conditions of work which should cover workers engaged in organized industries as well as workers employed in agriculture, commercial undertakings and unorganized industries.

Ambedkar's induction as Labour Member in the Executive Council in 1942 inaugurated the modern Industrial relations system in India with strong state interventionism and tripartism as its base. He emphasised educating Dalit labourers and making them 'skilled', assuming that the process of being skilled would bring the caste imprisoned worker to a 'modern' sector. One could say that the fact remains, the 'modern' industry could reproduce caste in varied visible/invisible ways. Ambedkar did not undertake any programmes or campaigns for agricultural labourers as such since he wanted Dalits to cease being agricultural labourers, escape landlessness and enter industrial or white-collar employment or obtain land for cultivation. Ram, on the contrary, considered it a patriotic duty of agricultural labourers to feed the nation with their labour in the context of widespread famine in India. The discourse on maintenance of discipline and nationalism among the workers was a persistent theme in the writings and speeches of Ram as a Labour Minister.

The paper would also look into the politics of the two Labour Ministers in 1930s in their respective regions of Maharashtra and Bihar in order to understand how they developed their arguments over time about caste and labour. Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party (ILP) founded in 1936 tried to forge an alliance between factory and caste based labour processes

based on the imaginary that labour was an overarching and therefore more inclusive category which cut across these spheres, and gender, urban and rural divisions as well. The Trade Union wing of the ILP collaborated with the Communists in protest against the 1938 Bombay Industrial Relations Act. In 1938, the ILP took a leading role in the movement against the *Khoti* system in Maharashtra. The ILP was set up precisely to highlight the double oppression of the Dalits (as Caste group and as workers) and was against the 'Brahminical' and Capitalist system. In the early career of his life, Jagjivan Ram organized the poor and oppressed landless labour of Bihar and founded Bihar *Khet Mazdoor Sabha*. In 1935, he founded the All India Depressed Classes League. He had to face serious opposition from Congress Socialists and Left leaning leaders like Jaya Prakash Narayan and Swami Sahjanand Saraswati. He organized the rural labour movement in Bihar after being elected to Bihar Legislative Assembly in 1937.

The paper would engage with the following questions: How does one read the extraordinary attention by the state to labour matters in this crucial decade? Did the discourse on law in the Labour Department reference the language of caste during this decade given the fact that Ambedkar and Ram mobilized Dalits and labouring classes during 1930s as part of their politics? Was the Labour Department a site to test their caste-challenge? To what extent the politics of caste, which both these figures espoused at regional and national levels figure in the discourse of labour rights and protections at the national level? In doing so, the paper would critically look at the frames within which Ambedkar and Ram, as Ministers, discussed labour legislation and state intervention in the Legislative Assembly, at the platforms of Tripartite Conference of the representatives of the Central and Provincial Governments and of the employers' and workers' organizations, Standing Labour Committee and Labour Ministers' Conference. What were the outcomes of these frames? And, does it relate to their conceptions of the role of labour before they became Ministers? The key question my paper will engage with is : Did the grammar of caste inflect the discussion on legislation in the Labour Department during this period by transgressing the boundaries between the 'economic' and 'social'? And if so, in what specific ways?
