

Bharat Jodo Yatra has opened room for new imagination of India — ‘South-up’

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If we have to resist majoritarianism, we must turn to the three ideological pillars of Dravidian politics: Regionalism, rationalism, and social justice in new ways.

Have you ever seen a south-up map of the world? A south-up map changes your worldview, upside down, literally. You begin to notice the ‘down-under’ Australia, the centrality of Africa, and the significance of Latin America. It foregrounds the Global South and puts Europe and North America in its place. You realise what you should have always known: That the earth is round and that there is no ‘correct’ angle to visualise it; the north-up maps that we are all used to are no more than a point of view imposed on us by colonial powers.

Why don’t we have a south-up map of India? That is the question I asked myself on the first day of the Bharat Jodo Yatra. I was in Kanyakumari, standing at the Cape Camorin point, the southernmost tip of mainland India (not India, as the Nicobar Islands are further south). This is the Triveni Sangam, the point of confluence of three seas — the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. With the Vivekananda Rock Memorial and the imposing Thiruvalluvar Statue to my back, I looked towards Kashmir, where this yatra is headed, and realised: This is where India begins. Starting this yatra from Kanyakumari has opened the room for a new imagination of India.

Professor G. N. Devy has a name for this imagination: Dakshinayan. It is the name of the movement he started with many other writers in 2016. We were lucky that he had also come for the inauguration of the yatra and was there with us at the breakfast table that morning. Over idli sambhar and a good cup of my favourite South Indian filter coffee, he explained to us the concept and the story of Dakshinayan. You must hear from him the story of how his wife Surekha and he shifted their home from Vadodara in Gujarat to Dharwad in Karnataka to be with the wife of Professor M. M. Kalburgi after he was assassinated by Right-wing forces. Professor Devy was attracted to the dual significance of

Dakshinayan: Its southern orientation as opposed to the north orientation of 'uttarayan', and also as a political metaphor for the times when days are short and nights long.

Bharat Jodo Yatra is thus a Dakshinayan moment for India. Nights are long, days are short. The way forward is southward. We must orient ourselves toward the South. In this moment of a foundational challenge to our Republic, South India offers hope and ideological resources.

Why South India offers special lessons

South India is special today not just because it has remained relatively immune to the cultural onslaught of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its associates. Despite achieving a breakthrough in Karnataka in 1991, some recent gains in Telangana, and the deeper presence of the RSS in Kerala, the BJP version of nationalism has not achieved the kind of hegemony in South India that it enjoys in the north and the west. Much of that is due to the special party structure in Kerala and Tamil Nadu that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

The special lessons are not limited to governance. True, anyone who travels across the country would notice that everything – from governments to restaurants — functions a shade better at the southern side of the Vindhyas. An upcoming book titled *South vs. North: India's Great Divide* by Nilakantan R. S. brings out the contrast very powerfully. Even a cursory look at the economic, educational, and health statistics of India affirms the point made by the author — an average child in the Southern states will do well on parameters of health and prosperity. They, as a result, are likely to lead a life that's more impactful compared to their North Indian counterpart. If Kerala offers a model in literacy, Karnataka leads in literature, Tamil Nadu can teach us how to run welfare schemes, and Andhra Pradesh is a pioneer in organic agriculture. The rest of India has and can learn a lot from South India in governance.

A Dravidian moment for India

Despite South India's governance success, this was not on the top of my mind on the day Bharat Jodo Yatra began in Kanyakumari. My Dakshinayan was about ideological

movement. Standing in Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian movement and its ideological legacy were on my mind. In the 20th century, the movement was viewed as a problem or a challenge to the dominant Indian nationalism. Today, this peripheral political stream has the potential of redefining Indian nationalism and rescuing the Republic. If the current onslaught of majoritarian nationalism has to be resisted, we must turn to the three ideological pillars of Dravidian politics: Regionalism, rationalism, and social justice.

We cannot, of course, replicate the three ideas in their older formulations. The idea of regionalism has to be disentangled from the imagination of Tamil Eelam or notions of cultural supremacy. The idea of Tamil nationalism is thus a call for redefining the Union of India on truly federal lines as opposed to the unitary tendencies of the BJP-RSS camp. This imagination demands the Union to be designed not like a nation-state that seeks to homogenise all diversities but like a state-nation that recognises and respects deep social and cultural diversities.

Similarly, the quest for social justice has to be taken beyond simple-minded anti-Brahmin politics. A demand for an end to inequalities based on accident of birth cannot end up creating its mirror image. This has to be a demand for the annihilation of the caste system and other social inequalities, including gender. Finally, its rationalism need not be understood as anti-religious doctrine but a principled opposition to all forms of dogma, oppression, and violence sanctioned in the name of religion. This provides the foundations of a new secularism that we so desperately need.

Incidentally, the closest that I could find to the map of India that I was looking for was a South Asian map published by Himal Southasia — the first South Asian magazine — that has now ceased to circulate in the wider domain. Placing Sri Lanka at the top of South Asia, this map was called the ‘right-side-up map’ of South Asia. That is what we need to do to our vision of India: Turn it right-side-up. The beginning of Bharat Jodo Yatra in Kanyakumari offers this possibility.