

# Six reasons why Bharat Jodo Yatra isn't simply a routine political 'tamasha'

Yogendra Yadav

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As in football, so in politics: Ball possession matters. So much so that even the troubles in Rajasthan couldn't derail the positivity of the Bharat Jodo Yatra.

It took a photograph for the public to notice the undercurrent triggered by the Bharat Jodo Yatra. The image of Rahul Gandhi braving a downpour and addressing the public, with thousands of people using plastic chairs for cover, listening to him intently, has done more to capture the message of this yatra than a thousand news items. The yatra may not have gone viral yet, but this image has.

This indicates a subtle shift in the public response to this campaign. The Bharat Jodo Yatra had a rather low-key beginning. When we started from Kanyakumari on 7 September, we were met with ignorance, cynicism, and apprehensions. I remember a senior journalist calling to check whether this was indeed a padayatra. No one quite knew what this yatra was all about. 'Will these Congress leaders actually walk? Is Rahul Gandhi going to join the yatra occasionally? Or is he actually walking all the way?' 'Won't a Congress yatra become a road show at best and tamasha at worst?' I remember visiting some close family friends the day before setting out for the yatra. They were visibly apprehensive. "Yogendra ji, you are risking your reputation. We know you're not joining the Congress, but isn't any association with this party a kiss of death?" they asked.

## **'Something positive' is a start**

Something has changed in the first month of the Bharat Jodo Yatra. It would be premature to call it a shift in the national mood. But there is no doubt that the yatra has triggered "something positive", an expression I've heard repeatedly. Here are six reasons why the Bharat Jodo Yatra has turned out to be not just a routine political tamasha.

First of all, it's not just a reactive campaign, but something positive and proactive. It's after a very long time that the principle national opposition has proactively initiated something on the ground, that it has attempted to set the agenda, that someone has forced the Bharatiya Janata Party to be reactive. It is not entirely a coincidence that within the first month of the yatra, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has gone out of its way to engage with Muslim intellectuals and articulate concerns about unemployment, poverty, and inequality – just the issues that have been raised during this yatra. As in football, so in politics: Ball possession matters. So much so that even the Congress' troubles in Rajasthan could not derail or erase the positivity of the Bharat Jodo Yatra beyond a couple of days.

Second, it's not just any yatra — it is a padayatra. Walking on foot is a political action with deep cultural resonance. A padayatra involves suffering and has a grammar of affirming

its convictions. Whether it is Kanwar Yatra, Amarnath Yatra, Narmada Yatra, or one of the hundreds of social and political yatra India witnesses, a yatra bridges the divide between the walker and the witness.

The virtual public becomes a vicarious participant. Above all, a padayatra is a subterranean form of communication: It speaks by doing.

Third, it's not just virtual resistance. It involves feet on the ground, a physical show of strength. Since the legitimacy of the BJP-RSS establishment rests on its claim to public endorsement, therefore, any act of resistance has to be a show of strength on the ground. Since every critic is made to look lonely, an expression of solidarity needs a crowd. Thousands of people marching together on the street is a powerful counter-argument. When the sansad is rendered silent, you need to create noise on the sadak.

Fourth, it's not just mobilised crowds; this yatra has evoked genuine public response. There is no doubt that a significant and overwhelming proportion of the participants have been mobilised by the Congress party and its leaders, including ticket aspirants. But walking across three states on the Bharat Jodo Yatra, I have witnessed all hues and tones of the rainbow of smiles. It would be hard to decode the mind behind each smile, but it is clear to me that the yatra has generated hope. Beyond those who joined physically to connect with or support the yatra, there is a wider circle of appreciation and support. That is why the BJP's IT cell's multiple attempts to tarnish the yatra have fallen flat.

Fifth, it's not just about secularism. The Bharat Jodo Yatra has spread its message about multiple forms of unity that are needed today and managed to foreground the most pressing issues of the economy. Rahul Gandhi's daily speech is typically about the need for unity across multiple divisions of caste, language, and religion. His critique of the Narendra Modi government brings it up but is never limited to its politics of hate against Muslims. He has consistently, and aggressively, raised the issues of unemployment, inflation, demonetisation, Goods and Services Tax (GST), and general misgovernance. His is one of the few attempts by any mainstream political leader to take on crony capitalism. The yatra is evolving its own message without falling into the traps waiting for it.

And finally, it's not just the Congress. The Bharat Jodo Yatra is supported by several people's movements and organisations, public intellectuals as well as prominent citizens who have had little truck with the Congress in the past. (The author has been actively associated with this coordination.) People who do not ordinarily take political positions or are not known to support the Congress party have come out openly this time. This must not be mistaken for an affiliation with the Congress or loyalty to its leadership. This vindicates the spirit of 'Bharat Jodo' and affirms the ethical impulse of this yatra.

On Tuesday, I met the same family friends who warned me about staking my reputation. They were relaxed this time. "Kuchh to ho raha hai", their smiles spoke louder than their words. "Yes," I agreed, "As long as we don't mistake an undercurrent for a wave. Picture abhi baki hai."