

Bharat Jodo Yatra isn't just about Rahul Gandhi. It's a walking classroom on public policy

If there is talk about India's problems, can *pudiyawalas* offering one-shot solutions be far behind? Bharat Jodo Yatra would have remained colourless without them.

Yogendra Yadav

I call them “*pudiyawale*”. For they remind me of those healers who sit inside a tent and offer cure for everything under the sun. All you need to do is take a *pudiya* (a tiny parcel or sachet of wrapped paper) of ‘magical’ medicinal powder on an empty stomach or with warm milk. Just one dose and all will be well, they assure you. “*Bas ek pudiya!*” Our humble *pudiya* would one day displace silver bullets (How can bullets solve anything? Why silver for heavens’ sake?) in the Oxford English dictionary.

India's public life is full of these one-shot *pudiya* solutions to all the ills of the nation. Poverty? Enforce a two-child norm. Casteism? Make it illegal to carry surnames. Democracy doesn't work? Shift to proportional representation. Leaders are unresponsive? Retire all politicians at 60. Corruption? Bring in an all-powerful Lokpal. Moral degeneration? Make moral education compulsory.

Earlier, I used to argue with them. I would try to spell ‘complexity’ for them. Or point out that all these medicines can have side effects, often worse than the disease they seek to cure. But now I have given up. In a nation full of intractable problems and lack of solutions or even good ideas about solutions, why deny the victims their palliative fantasies? I fantasise myself: what if all this free advice could be monetised? If all of them could convert these proposals into fancy PowerPoint presentations and charge consultancy in dollars? Our GDP will shoot up for sure.

Every week I get an email or a WhatsApp containing this *pudiya*. Electoral and educational reforms continue to top the charts. Generally, they request me to broadcast it on TV, or convince Parliament to pass a law or ask Prashant Bhushan to file a PIL. Some secret *pudiyawalas* wouldn't write down their magical formula, unless I agree to a one-on-one meeting. Harmless fun? Wait till you read the last story.

Yatra as *dard ka rishta*

These days my share of *pudiyas* has gone up. Bharat Jodo Yatra is not just a walk. There is a lot of talk that accompanies this walk. It is a mark of the success of the Yatra that it has started attracting everyone with any kind of problem or grievance. Some of them get an opportunity to present their issues to the Yatra leaders.

During the day break, a delegation gets to hold a formal interaction with Rahul Gandhi, present one set of issues, and hand over a memorandum. These could be Adivasis waiting for the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, farmers who have suffered crop loss due to unseasonal rains, small businesses affected by GST, Muslim minorities at the receiving end of hate crimes, women facing discrimination, youth without jobs, and workers in the unorganised sector, from beedi workers to Ola/Uber drivers.

Then there are less structured walking interactions where smaller groups walk with Rahul Gandhi for a few minutes and present their issues. Scuttling of the OBC quota in NEET admissions, demand for sub-classification of the SC quota, rights of the transgender community, delayed payment to MNREGA workers, and non-payment of salary to ASHA workers are the kinds of issues that have come up during these interactions.

Those who don't get a chance for a scheduled interaction often stand by the road to draw attention to their demands: restoration of the old pension scheme, an extra chance for Civil Services aspirants, demand for a universal pension, and electricity board employees who want the Electricity (Amendment) Bill to be scrapped. I must say everyone who joined these interactions has been impressed with Rahul Gandhi's intense curiosity, his sharp questions, and his unfailing courtesy and humanity.

The Bharat Jodo Yatra has become a confluence of all forms of disquiet, a walking classroom on public policy, and a floating lighthouse of hope. As Urdu poetry would tell you, *dard ka rishta* (bond of pain) is deeper than any other bond.

If there is a deliberation on the problems facing India, can *pudiyawalas* be far behind? The Yatra would have remained colourless without them.

A poisonous *pudiya*

The 'drugs' that do not manage to reach Rahul Gandhi come my way, waiting for a patient ear. We should carry out a full caste census and allot government jobs to each caste as per their share in population. Farmers' income will go up ten times if they adopt this technology. These days there are many software *pudiyas*. All corruption would disappear if the government could install this software. There would be no inflation if companies were to pay customers for their personal data. And so on.

This Yatra has seen more than usual share of political *pudiyas*. Everyone has a magic remedy for ousting the Narendra Modi government. Everyone has a prescription for how Rahul Gandhi

should look, talk, and walk. It is my lot to receive these *pudiyas* and promise to pass them on, if I get a chance.

That brings me to my last story. This was in Pune, towards the end of 2014. An unknown group of chartered accountants and engineers, an economic advisory body, had approached me with a *pudiya* for all the ills of India: “an effective and guaranteed solution to the problem of black money generation, price rise and inflation, corruption, fiscal deficit, unemployment, ransom, and terrorism”, no less. I was not impressed and had dodged their request for a personal meeting. But I could not say no when I reached Pune for some other work. We agreed to meet at the University guest house for 20 minutes.

The proposal of this group, ArthaKranti Sansthan, was radical. Scrap all taxes and replace them with a single tax on every banking transaction. That would require elimination of all cash transactions. And that can be achieved if we recall and scrap all high-denomination notes of Rs 100 and upwards. I was alarmed at what appeared to be a lunatic proposal. I said a banking transaction tax would drive economic activity into the black market. I questioned how scrapping of high denomination currency would affect black money, as it would find its way back in the banking system. They had answers to everything, but I was not convinced.

Since the discussion was going nowhere, I asked them to get any serious monetary economist to endorse their proposal before we could hold another round of discussion. Before they left, they mentioned that they had a very fruitful meeting with Narendra Modi, who heard them for two hours instead of the nine minutes initially agreed to.

Narendra Modi was already the PM. I was stunned. The rest, as they say, is history.