

All the criticism against Bharat Jodo Yatra shows it has arrived in the national mind

Bharat Jodo Yatra has blunted Modi's biggest weapon. Now the Congress must sharpen the message and widen its reach.

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The Bharat Jodo Yatra has finally arrived. Its entry into the national capital coincided with its arrival in the national consciousness, thanks to the belated and grudging recognition by a large section of the mainstream media. And it has arrived on the political landscape too, aided by the Narendra Modi government's ham-handed and disingenuous use of the Covid threat to stop the *yatra*.

When you arrive, you face scrutiny. It is a mark of its success that the *yatra* has invited critical commentary from some of the leading minds of India. So far, it has had live streamings, official narratives, travelogues by some of the *yatris* and fellow travellers, ground reports, and occasional reflective pieces. Some of the recent articles take the debate to a different level, beyond discussions about Rahul Gandhi's T-shirt, *yatri* containers, and *yatra* route. The debate has now shifted to the heart of the matter: Its impact on

national political life, specifically its ability to offer a political and ideological counter to the hegemonic power that is out to dismantle our republic. Reclaiming the republic is the central challenge of our times; the Bharat Jodo Yatra must be judged against this challenge.

See criticism as the yatra's lighthouses

Let me focus on the two recent articles by professors Suhas Palshikar and Pratap Bhanu Mehta in *The Indian Express*, not just because they are among the leading political commentators, but also because they offer the first serious criticism of the Bharat Jodo Yatra from a vantage point deeply sympathetic to its cause. Palshikar frames the context: "Today's challenge is about reasserting the constitutional project, reimagining the Indian self, and redefining the contours of democracy." It is fair to say that the success of the *yatra* should be measured against the enormity of this challenge.

Neither of them is satisfied with what the *yatra* has achieved so far. While acknowledging that it is "a novel attempt to create a new political space" and an "important gesture on politics of hate", Pratap Mehta says it cannot be called the "politics of hope" yet. Palshikar indicts the *yatra* for underperforming on both its central objectives, namely, "the rejuvenation of the party" and "rediscovery of our democratic national self".

A *yatri* might be tempted to quarrel with these assessments. One could say that the critics do not fully appreciate the conditions in which the *yatra* was

launched or that the range of possibilities they imagine is much wider than what was available to the *yatra*. One could also argue that its effects would be visible much after it is over, something acknowledged by Mehta himself. But this kind of counter-argument is pointless. After all, the *yatra* has not reached its destination. Indeed, its destination must go beyond Srinagar — to the mind and heart of every Indian. These mid-term assessments must be seen as guides to action, as lighthouses. A *yatri* would do well to heed Palshikar’s call to expand the “geographical, political, and intellectual scope” of the *yatra*. Or address Mehta’s three tests — creating a new ideological vision, gaining political momentum, and becoming the fulcrum of opposition unity.

These critical appraisals help us reach a grounded sense of what the Bharat Jodo Yatra has achieved so far on two main fronts — ideological and political — and what it needs to focus on when it resumes in the new year.

Sharpen the message, widen its reach

The ideological challenge that the Bharat Jodo Yatra has taken on is its toughest test. This is the main reason why many peoples’ movements and organisations like ours have rallied behind this *yatra*. Any success here would benefit the entire opposition, not just the Congress. The *yatra*’s main achievement is that it has challenged, head on, the ideological hegemony of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh-Bharatiya Janata Party dyad. In an ideological climate in which even its opponents are copying the BJP’s ‘Hindutva’, the Bharat Jodo Yatra has

recalled constitutional values and shown a resolve to stand for secularism. It is after a long time that a political leader has taken to the public platform to castigate crony capitalism. The *yatra*'s message is not limited to what is spoken from the stage or at press conferences. It communicates without speaking. Its pilgrimage-like character, invocation of *tapasya*, and the solidarity it creates have managed to dent the ideological hegemony of the BJP. It has re-enchanted words like love and unity and foregrounded the India of the farmers, workers, and the poor. It has made it possible to speak against hatred. This is no mean achievement.

A lot more needs to be done to achieve a narrative shift at the national level. Very often, the message is less visible than the messenger. Some of that was necessary because discrediting the messenger was the BJP's principal ploy for drowning the message. But the Bharat Jodo Yatra must now find ways to sharpen the message and widen its reach. The problem is not so much that there is 'equivocation' about what the *yatra* is — something Pratap Mehta alludes to — but that the multiplicity of messages woven around it can leave its message somewhat diffused. The *yatra* could do by finding a way to take the message to most parts of the country despite a virtual media blackout.

On the other, more directly political front too, the *yatra* has achieved something rare: It has brought feet on the ground. In the last instance, a republic survives if and when the public comes out on the streets to defend it. The Bharat Jodo Yatra has shown a glimpse of it.

Modi's biggest weapon blunted

What about the electoral impact and future of the Congress party? For 'civil society' *yatris*, that may not be the central imperative, but no citizen of India can remain indifferent to the fate of the Congress. At this moment in history, the fate of the country is linked to the fate of the Congress. In this respect, the *yatra* has already done something remarkable. Congress sympathisers and loyal voters have found reasons to repose faith in the party. Its workers and small-time position holders now have something positive to do and look forward to. The party has developed confidence in its own leadership. Rahul Gandhi exudes self-confidence. All this is internal to the Congress *parivar* and clearly insufficient to change the electoral fortunes of the party. But this was a much-awaited and necessary first step.

Outside the Congress, too, the Bharat Jodo Yatra has made an impact. In the anti-BJP but non-Congress camp, it has made many new friends. Hundreds of peoples' movements and organisations have participated in the *yatra* and are beginning to coalesce around the Congress. Rahul Gandhi has been particularly effective in winning them over. As for the general public, the one big difference the *yatra* has made is Rahul Gandhi's personal image. The *pappu* sticker has come off. Modi's biggest weapon is blunted. That should help not just the Congress, but the entire opposition as well.

That is, of course, just the beginning. A successful *yatra* is no guarantee of electoral success. The first stop will have to be the non-National Democratic

Alliance parties. While we don't need an electoral *mahagathbandhan* of the entire opposition, there is a crying need for a unity of purpose. The challenge of convincing and converting the swing voter is still far away.

The Bharat Jodo Yatra has managed to drill a hole in the wall of lies and hatred that face our republic. It has let in a ray of hope and some fresh air. But the real work will begin after the yatra. As Suhas Palshikar alerts us, the Bharat Jodo Yatra must not remain an event. It must become a movement.