

Has Bharat Jodo Yatra lowered communal tempers or is it naive optimism? My take

I ask this question with some trepidation. But wherever the message of the yatra has reached, it has led to a de-escalation of local communal tensions.

Yogendra Yadav

Has the Bharat Jodo Yatra lowered communal tempers? I ask this question with some trepidation. I have been a data person for a long time. I have asked for hard evidence for any cause-effect claim. And this question does not admit hard evidence. At least not in such a short time span. Yet it is worth asking, for it relates to something really big. If it is true that *yatra* has indeed diluted communal tensions, even in the smallest measure, then this could be the biggest reason to support and celebrate it. This is about the creative potential of politics in an era when politics itself is seen and presented as ‘evil’.

So, let me state it carefully. I am just posing a question, not offering a final answer. As they say in social science, it is a hypothesis that is to be tested. Also, I am not speaking about organised or pre-mediated acts of communalism such as riots, violence, and hate crimes. These acts are committed, if not designed and executed, by motivated groups who are part of the politics of hate that this *yatra* seeks to oppose.

I do not expect a sudden change in their heart, and that too by the Bharat Jodo Yatra. I am interested in the everyday communal tension that exists below the radar — unspoken hostility and mistrust, innuendos, insults, neighbourhood disputes. I am interested in whether the *yatra* has reduced ordinary people’s participation in communal bigotry. This is not limited to the areas the *yatra* covered.

My hypothesis is that wherever the message of the *yatra* has reached, it has led to a de-escalation of local communal tensions.

Mild to strong affirmations

I was first alerted to this hypothesis by my co-*yatri* Pushprag from Ekta Parishad. This was the end of November, and we had completed the *yatra* in a big village (or was it a small town?) in Madhya Pradesh. He came back and reported a conversation he had with the local villagers — a few Muslim families who had heard of the *yatra* much before it reached their habitation. They said that ever since the *yatra* started making news, communal tension in their village had gone down. One said: “*Sukoon sa mahsoos ho raha hai* (It feels sort of peaceful).” He said that he had heard similar stories in other places.

I wasn't sure. We activists tend to be gullible when it comes to good news. When I mentioned this to a friend, he said he had heard the same from a high police official in one of the states that the *yatra* had crossed. Intelligence reports had shown a decline in communal incidents in the state. But he also advised me not to write about it immediately, as it might trigger a counter from those who benefit from the politics of hate. Indeed, my friends from Karnataka have reported a spike in hate campaign after the success of the *yatra* in the state. Since then I have checked with a number of friends in different localities with different governments. The responses have ranged from mild to strong affirmations of my hypothesis. True, hate crimes have not gone down in any dramatic manner. Nor have the media-driven campaigns of poisonous propaganda. But as I said, I do not expect the producers of hate to be dissuaded. I am interested in exploring the impact of the *yatra* on the ordinary consumers of hate.

So, let me submit this hypothesis to some future social scientists. Meanwhile, I wait for the next round of nationwide opinion polls to see if they report any slight shift in communal attitudes. Or for some case study that traces the impact of the *yatra* beyond elections.

Love in the time of hate

A good hypothesis must not stop at suggesting a relationship between two variables. It should also give a reason why we expect such a relationship. Here is my take. The Bharat Jodo Yatra seems to have diluted communal bigotry not because it has created an active force to take on communalism. The areas that it has traversed are too small to register a national impact. Even in those areas, the *yatra* has not yet created a volunteer force that could effectively intervene in any conflict. All we have is the message of the *yatra*, general and diffused as it is. Even then, the very invocation of “*jodo*” serves to recall and reintegrate the message of unity. Rahul Gandhi’s forthright position against the politics of hate, a refreshing change from the equivocation or strategic silence by most mainstream political leaders of the opposition, has suddenly made it acceptable to speak about love. Statements like “*Main nafrat ke bazaar mein mohabbat ki dukaan kholne aaya hoon* (I have to come to open a counter of love in the bazaar of hatred)” have a longer shelf life than we imagine.

If hate is contagious, so is love.

I kept thinking about it as the *yatra* crossed northeast Delhi. From Jaffrabad metro station to Shiv Vihar, we passed through those areas that witnessed communal carnage in 2020. We were greeted by people on both sides of the road, from both sides of the communal divide. I could hear *Sare Jahan se Accha* in the background: “*Mazhab nahi sikhaata apas me bair rakhna* (Religion doesn’t teach you hatred). I was not the only one moved to tears. Muslims were

more visible and excited, but there was a substantial presence of the local Hindus as well. Political observers were quick to predict a return of the Muslim voter to the Congress, if only it could find a way to secure a significant chunk of non-Muslim votes. But I was trying to read their faces for something else. Was it their strength of numbers in this area or the presence of the *yatra* that Muslims did not appear frightened or anxious? Or was I imagining this?

I kept recalling the famous line from Faiz Ahmad Faiz: “*Khoon ke dhabbe dhulenge kitni barsaton ke baad* (Bloodstains may wash away but not before many seasons have passed)”. Can bloodstains be washed away without even the semblance of justice? Can blood be cleansed by mere words? But if bloodstains originate in hate, which originates in words, why can't the reversal begin with words? Or is it just naïve optimism? Be that as it may, I want to savour the moment before someone refutes my hypothesis.