

## **Bharat Jodo Yatra is over. Time to build on synergy of ground energy & politics**

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**Yogendra Yadav**

What after the Bharat Jodo Yatra? This pertinent question has become all the more pressing due to the favourable constellation of stars that has greeted this yatra's conclusion.

Four unforeseen and unexpected developments have coincided to open an unusual window of post-yatra opportunity. The Bharat Jodo Yatra concluded on a high note in Srinagar with an outpouring of popular affection, unprecedented for a national leader in the Kashmir Valley. Rahul Gandhi cemented his position as a leader of substance with his concluding speech. This coincided with Hindenburg Research's report and the Adani meltdown that has foregrounded the reality of corporate corruption and cronyism, which was one of the key messages of the yatra.

If the BBC documentary India: The Modi Question had reminded everyone of the ugly reality of politics of hate, the clumsy attempts to ban it and then the income tax raids on BBC offices in Delhi and Mumbai have left little scope for imagination, both within and outside the country, about the unfreedom of press in India. This is what Rahul Gandhi spoke about through the yatra. Finally, the bumper success of Pathaan in the face of politically sponsored boycott campaigns is not just a personal vindication of Shah Rukh Khan and the endorsement of the film's "non-majoritarian patriotism"; it must also be read as a cultural signal that people are getting tired of toxic politics.

### **Consolidating the gains of yatra**

The principal responsibility to take this forward lies with the Indian National Congress and Rahul Gandhi, the organiser and prime mover of this historic yatra. The Congress had already announced a grassroots connect programme, the 'Haath se Haath Jodo' campaign, that began on 26 January, even before the yatra concluded. The success of the yatra has given rise to higher expectations, and everyone is looking forward to more high-voltage public campaigns. We should expect some answers from the Congress plenary, its general body meeting, scheduled in Raipur from 24 to 26 February.

At the same time, the burden of Bharat Jodo is not limited to any one party or leader. If the point of the yatra was to awaken the nation to its own civilisational heritage of unity in diversity, every Indian must carry this mission forward. In particular, the hundreds of peoples' organisations, movements and groups and thousands of politically unaffiliated citizens that joined this yatra at different points share this responsibility. They have responded to this challenge and the opportunity with alacrity.

On 6 February, a week after the conclusion of the yatra, all such 'civil society' participants came together at a National Convention in Delhi called at short notice to respond to the new energy. As a member of the team that organised this convention, I cannot pretend to be a neutral reporter. But believe me, against 250 delegates mainly from neighbouring states that we expected and planned for, the convention had more than 500, including delegations from Assam and Tamil Nadu. After a long time, I encountered this energy and positivity in any gathering of those who seek to resist the current dispensation.

Rahul Gandhi joined the convention for a freewheeling discussion with the participants. His reminder that the Congress party originated as a movement and was, as such, a part of the civil society, comforted participants. Reiterating his offer of partnership between Congress and movement groups and people's organisations, an offer he made through the yatra, Rahul Gandhi assured everyone that he himself had half a foot inside the 'civil society'. A panel of political party representatives from the Congress, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Rashtriya Lok Dal, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist), and Telangana Jana Samithi (endorsed in absentia by the Nationalist Congress Party and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) joined the convention, underlining the message of a bridge between political parties and people's organisations in defence of constitutional democracy.

## **Bharat Jodo Yatra is now a movement**

The convention unanimously decided to convert the yatra into a movement—a Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan —“that can reclaim our republic, renew our Constitutional values, rescue our democratic institutions and rekindle the spirit of our freedom struggle.” Mission BJA has begun with a seven-year roadmap (up to the 80th anniversary of Republic Day) and a concrete plan of action for the next 15 months. The resolution passed in the convention makes its short-term objective very clear: “Making a difference in the next Lok Sabha elections by working closely with political parties that offer effective resistance to the politics and ideology of BJP-RSS, without getting into the intra-opposition differences.”

The concrete action plan has two major components: Communication and fieldwork. The communication work aims to set up a “Truth Army”, an idea that has been floated and discussed earlier too. The objective here is to identify and counter misinformation and hatred, refute the pre-existing narratives and proactively promote an alternative narrative in local idioms and languages. Someone has to counter the infamous IT Cell without resorting to its dirty tricks.

This would be supplemented by work on the ground through a “Targeted Constituency Campaign” to provide active ground-level support to those political parties and candidates that can defeat the BJP and its allies. The fact is that much of the BJP's famous election machine is not its own but from the various official and unofficial affiliates of the RSS family. Most opposition parties do not enjoy support from such a penumbra during the elections. This is where people's movements and organisations can step in, provided they can align their work with the electoral effort of the main opposition party on the ground.

## **A bridge between movements and parties**

Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan promises to be the much-awaited bridge between political parties and grassroots movements. This is not the first time that “non-party political formations”, as these people’s organisations were called by political theorists Rajni Kothari, D.L. Sheth and Harsh Sethi, have taken a stand in electoral politics. But this may be the first attempt of its kind to launch a full-fledged operation in coordination with political parties.

Before the start of the Bharat Jodo Yatra, I had written about the need for such a bridge: “Movements offer depth; parties provide scale. Movements bring issues, parties mediate and aggregate these into an agenda. Movements bring raw energy; parties channelise these into effective outcomes.” I had made a plea for a special purpose vehicle for this “non-partisan politics of resistance”, fully committed to defending our republic against the current onslaught but not tied to the partisan interest of any one opposition party.

The unexpected success of the Bharat Jodo Yatra has opened a historic opportunity to defeat authoritarian and bigoted politics, defend the republic and redefine the relationship between politics of parties and movements. Now it is time for action.