

Bharat Jodo Yatra in Srinagar: The walk ends, a journey begins

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"With the Yatra, the Congress has undoubtedly connected with a diverse mass of the population. However, its potential to bring substantive changes in the social and political crises of the current times remains to be seen," writes Rahul Gandhi.

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The Bharat Jodo Yatra (BJY) led by Rahul Gandhi arrived in Srinagar on Sunday after passing through 12 states and two Union Territories over 150 days. At 12 noon, the Congress leader hoisted the Tricolour at the Lal Chowk. The Yatra was undertaken with the aim to unite India against the politics of hate and prejudice. It also flagged concerns such as livelihood questions, unemployment problems and growing inequality.

India has a history of long walks and cycle rallies by various political leaders for social, political, and economic transformations. Commentators have likened the BJY to past events and termed it a defining moment of contemporary politics. Indeed, the Yatra demonstrates a significant shift in Rahul Gandhi's leadership skills and ability to reach out to a cross-section of the masses. He has succeeded in shedding the image portrayed by the current ruling establishment that marked him as an immature politician or a privileged prince, disconnected from ground realities. With the Yatra, the Congress has

undoubtedly connected with a diverse mass of the population. However, its potential to bring substantive changes in the social and political crises of the current times remains to be seen.

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The Yatra began in September 2022 from Kanyakumari in the south. Despite apprehensions, the Yatra received considerable support from the general public and non-**BJP** opposition parties. The response was spectacular in Haryana, where I observed the Yatra. In each rally, Rahul Gandhi highlighted that the Yatra aimed to counter the BJP's "hate politics" and deliver the message of secular unity and the need for social justice. Rahul Gandhi raised issues of economic slowdown and reprimanded the BJP government for its "support to the big capitalists such as Adani and Ambani". He claimed that because of this "biased attitude" the common masses had to bear the financial burden of ever-increasing inflation. The Yatra has brought the Congress party and Rahul Gandhi to the centre of public discourse. While most of the national media only provided lip service to the Yatra, there has been a growing whisper amongst common people about its magnitude and impact.

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The Yatra has redefined Rahul Gandhi as a new mass leader. Rahul declared that he has killed the old Rahul Gandhi and has emerged as a new person. It was but natural that the BJP showed deep anxieties and fear about the reconstituted and improvised Rahul Gandhi 2.0 image. In most BJP-ruled states, there were attempts to dilute the impact of the Yatra. The propaganda against the yatra has mainly revolved around Rahul Gandhi's t-shirt, which has acquired a symbolic value. In Haryana, I heard a few people whispering that Rahul Gandhi was wearing an expensive t-shirt with a protective "thermocool" layer inside, safeguarding him from the extreme cold. On the positive side, other opinions suggested that Rahul Gandhi had acquired "divine powers", which is why he could wear a thin layer of clothing and survive in extreme cold. Congress supporters took this opportunity to compare the simple, inexpensive t-shirt with Prime Minister Modi's expensive suit.



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The Yatra involved walking more than 25 kilometres every day. During these everyday walks, Rahul Gandhi met around 400-500 delegates plus the local level stakeholders during tea, lunch, and dinner breaks. In addition, he addressed rallies and press conferences. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Rahul Gandhi's politics, one must admit that the entire exercise is an extraordinarily laborious task. However, Rahul Gandhi has termed his walk a normal act, which the peasants and labourers do regularly. Such statements have built an emotional connection with migrant labourers who walked thousands of kilometres to reach their villages at the height of the pandemic.

Uniting a diverse Indian society deeply divided along caste, religion, region, and ethnicity is an important initiative. However, it is equally crucial that the Yatra is not merely an abstract call for unification against the ruling regime. Instead, the call for unity must invite socially marginalised groups such as Dalits, OBCs and Muslims to see their stake in this great initiative. By substantively addressing social concerns, economic redistribution, and political claims of diverse sections, the unity project can reach a logical end.

Babasaheb Ambedkar highlighted this problem more than 70 years ago in his famous Constituent Assembly speech on November 26, 1949. He spoke emphatically about equality in the political sphere and inequalities in the social and economic spheres. Ambedkar had warned that if these social and economic inequalities are not addressed, they might create problems for the political structure of this country.

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The Yatra is a positive attempt to build a grand political momentum and the issues highlighted by Rahul Gandhi are indeed crucial. However, long-term policy and political frameworks are required to carry forward the message of unity, harmony, and social justice in the aftermath of the Yatra. The BJP is a Machiavellian political force that exploits social and communal divisions for its political progress. But we cannot ignore that the hatred and conflict between Hindus and Muslims or the social tension between Dalits, upper castes and OBCs have a long history. It is rooted in the everyday economy, society, and political practices. Dalits and Muslims experience discrimination in the job market and in obtaining new housing, and government agencies hardly protect their social and economic rights. Both these groups are also vulnerable to prejudices, discrimination, and physical violence. Therefore, in addition to a popular call to stop hate politics, a substantive programme is required to reduce the prejudice that persists in society. Unless the Yatra offers a suitable roadmap for justice, this grand initiative will fall short of meeting its goal of unifying Indian citizens.

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