

Opinion: Decoding the alternative political vision offered by the Bharat Jodo Yatra

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The Bharat Jodo Yatra at Yamuna Vihar in East Delhi on January 3. | PTI

The Congress's Bharat Jodo Yatra seeks to move Indian politics away from being a game of election numbers and nudge it into a more nuanced, deliberative space – a space that aims to recapture core values of citizenship such as social solidarity, collective identity and a sense of plural collegiality.

The 3,500-km yatra from Kanyakumari to Jammu and Kashmir may be regarded as both a pilgrimage and an invitation to participants to reinvent themselves as they encounter people who are unlike them. If democracy demands a politics of theatre, as sociologist Shiv Visvanathan notes, then the yatra seems to be the spectacle designed to enthrall the nation. However, what remains to be seen is what kind of actions it will spark and what collective memories it will catalyse.

It is clear that India is in dire need of an alternative politics that will inject meaning into our shared existence. The Constitutional standards of liberty, equality and fraternity are increasingly being subverted by majoritarian politics. The ideal of the secular is being hollowed out. Majoritarianism has created a political framework that seeks to exclude ethical considerations.

What role do minorities play in Indian democracy? How can we safeguard their interests in the absence of proper political representation in the state machinery? Will religious minorities survive the continuous onslaught on their identities? Is there a way out of this

mess? The yatra led by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi seems to be pushing India to ask these questions.

The yatra has so far drawn a wide variety of ideas into its fold. It has drawn participants from many walks of life – retired bureaucrats and government functionaries, civil society activists, media personnel, army veterans, politicians, and, above all, enthusiastic ordinary Indians. It has featured multiple life-forms in motion – all bubbling up with joy and blooming.

Despite the deliberate attempt by mainstream media houses and many political elites to claim that it is just another random event, Gandhi's mohabbat ki dukaan, or shop of love, has captivated India.

If the purpose of the yatra was to boost Rahul Gandhi's image, that aim seems to have been served. Whether the Congress can capitalise on this goodwill for the 2024 national elections remains to be seen.

But the Bharat Jodo Yatra has a greater imagination – to retrieve the soul of the nation, as one leader argued. Hence, the march must open vistas for minority participation in the public discourse and the plural traditions that define our nationhood.

The yatra has provided Indians reasons to rethink their traditions of sociality in constitutional terms, away from the mere questions of who governs us. It has also reminded us that politics does not end with the elections: it lives in the hearts and minds of citizens, who engage in the everyday politics of nationhood.

As the new year begins, it is high time that we give space to an alternative politics – the politics of the citizenry. We must ensure that the politics of the electorate must live, but not at the cost of the politics of the citizenry. This is the only way India's marginalised communities will find the courage to reassert their constitutional right to participate fully in the process of shaping our nationhood.

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