

Rahul Gandhi's labours of Hercules have just begun

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Gandhi has to prove his mettle by declaring 'The Congress is dead, Long live the new Congress'. All it demands is an exorcism of sycophancy & hypocrisy that ruined Cong



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Rahul Gandhi during the launch of 'Bharat Jodo Yatra', in Kanyakumari (L) and Gandhi speaks at a public meeting amid heavy snowfall as he concludes the 'Bharat Jodo Yatra' march in Srinagar. Credit: PTI Photos

Tribal groups often emphasise the importance of initiation rites. These are rites of passage which become rituals of status, identity, and a process by which one internalises the norms and rhythms of an institution. In a conventional sense, an initiation rite is a test of maturity, of competence which confers a certain halo and status on a person.

Rahul Gandhi was born into the Congress. He felt he had inherited it. Birth right and initiation rites offer a different perspective to the organisation. Gandhi eventually understood the difference between inheritance and performance — a difference between a test of competence and a sense of ownership. He rediscovered the Congress as a party in his own bumbling way. As a wag put it, he had to pull himself together before he could pull together the Congress, enact a Rahul Jodo before he performed a Bharat Jodo.

The political walk he inaugurated was initially more like a boy-scout's idea, a children's crusade. Few took it seriously till it transformed itself into a political pilgrimage, from a jaunt to an attempt to grasp the crisis of the Congress. Gandhi moved from being a child of politics to a seasoned politician. He realised he must re-invent himself to re-invent the Congress.

One must look at the semiotics of pictures. Before he looked like a tentative adolescent waiting to be interviewed. Today, he exudes a gravitas. The beard helps him, but he is a seasoned politician behind it. He is a sensitive listener whom the Congress must be ready to listen to.

But one must go on against a pre-mature promissory note. Gandhi's walk is step one. More steps need to follow, each a test of his judgement and maturity. The language he speaks has already changed. He is no longer a wimp, a side-show. As a leader, he now commands attention, as his critique of businessman Gautam Adani in the Lok Sabha revealed.

Now that he has reinvented himself, he must reinvent the Congress, not through family diktats and directives, but as a part of an institutional team. He has to prove his mettle by declaring 'The Congress is dead, Long live the new Congress'. All it demands now is an exorcism of the sycophancy and hypocrisy that ruined the party. As the Congress salutes its heritage, it should move to the future. Only a new future can sustain the Congress presence.

Gandhi needs keywords to mark the intended change. At one time, words such as secularism, socialism, planning, and minority politics were essential parts of the Congress way of life. One needs new life-giving concepts to sustain a heritage while wooing the future. The Congress needs to absorb the tribal, the Dalit, and the feminist imaginations, as social and political critiques rather than as a mere election strategy. It is to invent a new social, a lived vision before it defends an election strategy.

A new set of thought experiments is necessary. Gandhi must realise that his labours of Hercules have just begun. The Congress is a party in need of ethical and legal repair. In projecting itself, it needs to revitalise the margins, not reify the minority. More, it must make the North-East and Kashmir a part of plural India, and not just an agenda of state security. After the recent earthquakes, it must rework ecology and Anthropocene invoking both Swadeshi and Swaraj. It must absorb dissenters and not freeze them as urban naxals.

Institutionally like the historical Congress, it needs an array of exemplars. The Congress still has outstanding individuals, but these must become sources of institutional inspiration. It needs thinkers and builders who are more than loyalists. Loyalists in today's language have little of the normative in them. They are petty tacticians.

Tacitly, Gandhi must create a new handbook for the Congress, and rework of issues of livelihood. He must revitalise institutions, restore the declining integrity of universities. In identifying and restoring plurality, he must invite dissenting opinions. The Congress must become a conversation of debates, an adda exploring difference.

Finally, he must realise he is a prelude, a rehearsal to a more robust organisation. After inventing it, he must create space for a new leadership. The Congress cannot be a family legacy, but a new way of politics which bequeaths to India a new sense of values. Only by rewriting itself can it make the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) redundant. It must sustain hope and rebuild an imagination that the future will appreciate.

You the reader can dismiss Rahul Gandhi as a children's crusade. He sometimes looks as if he lacks the intelligence and capacity to change. But politics is full of surprises and the Congress as a party might create a world which surprises itself. Rahul Gandhi can be the sign and symptom of such a beginning. One must wait and see playing astrologist and futurist at one's own risk.

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(Disclaimer: The views expressed above are the author's own. They do not necessarily reflect the views of DH.)