

The new Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra has a dream.

Coalition of the bottom of the pyramid

Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra by Congress is political in a deeper sense. It's not alliance-making or social engineering.

Yogendra Yadav



You cannot defeat BJP-RSS just with politics. It has to be politics plus ideology.” This is what Rahul Gandhi told a closed-door gathering of people’s movement activists organized by Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. He was inviting them to join the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra that flagged off from Manipur on 14 January.

This pretty much responds to the questions that have been asked of this yatra: Why go for a yatra instead of a straight-forward election campaign? Why talk about nyay (justice) when everyone is talking about Ram Mandir? Why spend so much time in the Northeast, which has so few parliamentary seats at stake? The simple answer is: You cannot defeat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) without taking on its ideological hegemony, its stranglehold over the political narrative. That is what the Nyay yatra aims to achieve.

Beyond politicking

Rahul Gandhi’s statement also addresses the other oft-debated question: Is this yatra political? Well, in a shallow sense, it is not. It is not about political manoeuvring, alliance-making or social engineering. However, ‘politicking’ is not what politics is all about. In a deeper sense, politics is about changing settled equations of power, and challenging prevailing notions of what is considered normal, desirable and doable. This is why ideas, good or bad, lay the ground on which the narrow games of everyday politics are played. In normal times, political actors take this turf

for granted and try to win the game. But when you hit a dead end, when politicking routinely fails you, that is the time for a fundamental reset. In this profound sense, the nyay yatra is political, as any such initiative should be.

No doubt, there can be two opinions about the timing of the yatra. Many say, with good reasons, that it should have been held earlier. That would have allowed the message to spread in time for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Others say that it should have been announced before the results of the assembly elections. That would have dispelled the avoidable impression that it was a reaction to the electoral setback. As for the route to be covered during the yatra and the mode of the journey, there are as many opinions as you are willing to hear.

There could be more serious questions as well. Would presenting it as Rahul Gandhi's yatra (even though he would be the first to deny it) play into the BJP's design to turn the upcoming election into a presidential-style personality race, which could work to the ruling party's advantage? The Opposition would clearly benefit by positioning it as Modi vs Mudda. But would the present yatra facilitate that? Also, now that the INDIA coalition is in place, would a Congress-only yatra be the best approach at this stage? Wouldn't a collective yatra inspire more confidence? Shouldn't the Congress make greater efforts to involve its INDIA partners more than it has so far?

These are all valid questions. In the messy world of politics, no plan of action has perfect answers to every valid question. What clicks is presumed to be the right answer, so we must wait for the future to evaluate the strategy and tactics of this yatra.

At this stage, we can assess its basic rationale. Here is what it looks like.

The BJP's rise to power, and its continuing electoral dominance, is a function of its cultural-ideological hegemony. No doubt, its organisational strength, money power, misuse of state machinery, virtual monopoly over the media, and the carefully crafted Narendra Modi cult is necessary for its electoral success. Yet, all these factors are not sufficient to explain the level of success the BJP enjoys today. The bottom line is that the party has won a communication battle. It has successfully shifted the entire ideological spectrum to the Right. What seemed outrageous a decade ago is now very routine. The middle-of-the-road position that prevailed until yesterday can now be dubbed as Left extremism. This is what enables the BJP to set the agenda and win elections despite monumental misgovernance and brazen acts of immorality.

Battle of ideologies

If this reading is not entirely off the mark, then it follows that the best of electoral politics alone cannot defeat the BJP. A good organisational machine, smart alliances, attractive poll promises, the selection of the best possible candidates, and a vigorous campaign can help the Opposition increase its votes and seats, winning an occasional election. However, these factors alone cannot reverse the BJP's hegemony. The Opposition needs to win back the battle of ideas and re-enchanted

the constitutional ideals in a new language for the new generation. They need to reclaim the legacy of nationalism and prove that we are the true inheritors of the best in our civilisation's heritage. Those who wish to reclaim our republic must redefine and recapture the ideological spectrum.

Here, 'ideology' does not refer to any of the ready-made ideological packages that we have inherited in the form of various isms. Our Constitution was shaped by liberalism, socialism, secularism and even Gandhism. We don't need to go back to any of these in their 20th-century version or adopt the mixture used by our Constitution makers. Most of these ideological frameworks are dated, even though they all contain something deeply valuable. The realities of the 21st century demand that we come up with an ideological package suited to our needs and our context. That is a long-term challenge. Right now, the ideological battle we face requires us to spell out concrete and specific details of an alternative vision.

That is what the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra seeks to do. Nyay is not an ism by itself but an appropriate umbrella concept sanctified by the Constitution. It covers various counter-hegemonic struggles. All movements do not necessarily use this expression to articulate their demands, but upon reflection, much of what they ask for can be understood through this rubric. Nyay need not be limited to just caste-based reservation. In this new version, Nyay can provide the ideological glue that unites a new social coalition at the bottom of the pyramid. It all depends on how the yatra translates this abstract concept into concrete promises and guarantees for marginalised social groups—poor, women, farmers, workers, Dalits, Adivasis and the OBCs.

We do not yet know how much this yatra will succeed in this mission. The exceptionally positive reception in Manipur and Nagaland has already vindicated the courageous and risky decision of the Congress to begin the yatra in the trouble-torn states of the Northeast. But it is too soon to generalise this limited and unique experience. The real test begins now, as the yatra enters the BJP-ruled Assam. We do not know how the yatra will fare in the Hindi heartland, the core of the BJP's electoral dominance. And we cannot anticipate how the I.N.D.I.A partners will respond. But we do know that this ideological battle was long overdue. We do know that various movements, organisations and citizens have been waiting for this. We do know that we are not short of cultural and intellectual resources to take on politics of lies and hate. The Congress happens to be the first mainstream party to take up this challenge, but we do know that many others would join this battle to save the soul of India.

That's why I am in this yatra, with my colleagues in the Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. That's why you should also be there.