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Signals and Reflections from the Bharat Jodo Yatra- The Aftermath

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The Rahul Gandhi-led *Bharat Jodo Yatra (BJY)* was a unique initiative of the Congress (INC) with the aim ‘to unite India, to come together and strengthen our nation’. It passed through 12 States covering a distance of 3570 Km in about 150 days all the way from Kanyakumari on 7 September 2022, with its culmination with the hoisting of the national flag in Srinagar on 30 Jan 2023, the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination. The BJY team of about 200 was a perfect blend of youth and seniors, representing diverse demographic segments from across the country joined by many members and leaders of the INC, representatives of civil society/ social organisations, leaders from other political parties (including certain allies of the INC in different States) as well as common citizens who generally do not take any active interest in ‘politics’. Certain signals captured by the author and reflections gathered from multiple sources from the final stages of the *yatra* have been included here.

Certain Highlights

According to the organisers, ‘the aim of the Yatra was to unite India; to come together and strengthen our nation’. This was not a *yatra* embarked upon with any political ambition or motive, but to connect with people across the country, highlight the ill-conceived policies of the Union Government, and enable people to raise their voices against any economic, social, and political issues affecting the nation. The *Yatra* was an attempt to protect and preserve the constitution and its values.

Volunteers were drawn from 25 States/ UTs with the majority from Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh. Representation from the North-Eastern States was confined to volunteers from Assam and Manipur with no representation from Goa. However, the workers and leaders of the INC from all the States and UTs joined during its 150 days journey.

Minor Aberrations

By keeping the hopes to draw political mileage for the INC while keeping the tone and tenor of ‘street-smart politics’ at the lowest, the organisers of *Bharat Jodo Yatra* indicated that the prime message they wished to highlight was the importance of working together. Though the prime message was kept intact for most of the journey period, there were some minor aberrations noted. One such instance was the comment made on VD Savarkar when the *Yatra* entered the State of Maharashtra. As the intent of the *yatra* was ‘*Jodo*’, the comment about Savarkar left a bad taste even by several politically neutral persons. It was an avoidable comment considering the prime message announced by the organisers on the first day of the journey was to keep everyone together. Probably, the apprehension that the *Yatra* was not taken seriously by the media after it crossed Kerala and Karnataka, may have been the trigger behind the remarks on Savarkar. Although it drew more news value to the *yatra* such remarks also generated some smoke, sound, and fury. In addition, it generated some element of disharmony and mistrust, among the allies of *Maha Vikas Aghadi*, the political dispensation which ruled from November 2019 to June 2022.

Certain Signals and Reflections

Keeping aside all these aspects, one may not ignore a few signals and reflections of the *Yatra* when it completed its century and moved towards the final stretches before hoisting the national flag at Srinagar. Though the emphasis was made by the organisers to highlight the ‘ill-conceived policies and fear generated by the ruling party’ with a thrust on the issues of farmers,

youth, women, etc., the signals sent by the organisers about the importance of unity, peace, and harmony in the country could not be wished away. The *Yatra* attracted persons like Farooq Abdulla, Yogendra Yadav, Medha Patkar, Kamal Hassan, etc. who did not even share Congress' ideology.

Quite surprisingly, the *Yatra* received an invitation from Satyendra Das, the Chief Priest of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. The Chief Priest wrote to Rahul Gandhi on New Year's Eve, congratulating him for undertaking the *Pada Yatra*. Champat Rai, General Secretary of Ram Temple Trust and Senior Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader also expressed appreciation for the efforts of Rahul Gandhi by embarking on the journey. Rai said "A 50-year-old young man is walking in this chilling weather to know India. What else we can do if not appreciate his efforts" (The Hindu, 5 Jan 2023). It is also significant to note that no leader of the *Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh* (RSS) or any other organisation criticised the *Bharat Jodo Yatra*.

End Note

Bharat Jodo Yatra is an important 'learning journey' for Rahul Gandhi to manifest its rank and file in the Indian Congress in particular and the citizens of India in general that he is a leader with a 'New Vision'. No doubt, such a journey through the length and breadth of the country will result in a lot of learnings from the grassroots. Bereft of its outcomes, such a *Yatra* has an inherent potential for all the *padayatris* to self-introspect, understand the grassroots realities, connect with the voters, and make the citizens feel that they are very important in defining, drawing, and shaping the destiny and future of the country. However, what political mileage it will bring to Congress as well as its allies in the general Elections 2024 is yet to be ascertained.

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