

What About Congress Jodo?

A procession is transient. Rahul's yatra won't repair the party's fractured organisation

Gilles Verniers



Rahul Gandhi's five-month, cross-country Bharat Jodo Yatra, says Congress, will carry the party's message to the nation as well as re-energise an ailing organisation.

True, after a string of electoral defeats, multiple high- and low-profile desertions and with a party leadership in the doldrums, Congress workers are in dire need of attention and motivation. But can the yatra help Congress regain the trust and credibility it has lost since 2014?

After more than eight years of BJP at the Centre, Congress is left with two CMs. It has the lowest number of MLAs it ever had (690 against 1,207 before 2014). The party has seen a severe erosion of its organisation on the ground, with many candidates, representatives and party workers deserting, to either join other parties or to leave active politics altogether.

- From 2014 elections (including by-elections), 64 Congress members contested on other party tickets (41 in 2014 and 23 in 2019).
- Over the same period, across all states, 553 Congress MLAs and 134 unsuccessful Congress candidates have left the party to try their luck under a different banner (233 of them won subsequently, including 107 on BJP tickets).
- And this data only considers individuals who previously contested on a Congress ticket. It does not include office bearers and party workers, for which there is no reliable information. It is unclear how the Bharat Jodo Yatra would help reverse this erosion. A procession by definition plays on symbols, ideas and emotions, while ground-level actors' decisions are guided more by pragmatism and calculations.

This divergence between symbolic politics and ground-level pragmatism is even more acute in states where Congress and BJP face each other.

- In the last two general elections, Congress and BJP candidates were directly pitted against each other in a little fewer than 200 seats (189 in



2014 and 190 in 2019).

- In 2014, BJP won 166 of 189 seats.
- In 2019, BJP won 175 of 190 seats.
- That is, when Congress candidates contest directly against BJP candidates, BJP wins nine times out of ten.

This extraordinary degree of BJP's dominance in these bipolar contests points to the difference in organisational strength between the two parties. While Congress's organisation has eroded, and in some places collapsed, BJP has built the most formidable party operation ever seen in India.

BJP workers canvass towns and villages. With the support of various Sangh Parivar organisations, they have developed a permanent ground presence, enabling the party to mobilise voters during and also between elections. This is reinforced by formidable digital and financial capacities.

This grounded approach contrasts with the idea of a yatra, which is transient by essence. Once the procession passes, the dust settles, leaving few resources behind other than motivation

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to continue the work.

The potential larger impact of the yatra will also be limited by BJP's better media play. Ahead of Gujarat elections, the party and the government will multiply announcements and perform their own symbolic gestures, a practice the PM has

mastered like no other living politician in India. Congress should know that five months is a long time to keep the media and the people interested and engaged.

This is not to say that symbols don't matter or have no role to play to re-energise a demoralised organisation. It is certainly a good place to start, particularly when Congress does not have adequate resources to compete against BJP's electoral machine. But the yatra cannot be the be-all and end-all of Congress's efforts.

Congress's recent campaign in UP counted essentially on the mobilisation effect of two symbols (gender inclusion and Priyanka Gandhi) and turned into a disaster, as these symbols were not backed by any ground presence.

Congress leaders and sympathisers should not place excessive hope in the capacity of the Bharat Jodo Yatra to 'transform Indian Politics', to use Jairam Ramesh's expression. After all, Mahatma Gandhi started his campaigns modestly, letting the movement grow steadily and the mobilisation speak for itself as he walked through villages and states.

There are other problems.

- While they walk across the country, Rahul Gandhi and other Congress leaders will have to attend to other pressing matters, the party's presidential election being one of them.
- These elections have been further delayed to October and Rahul remains uncertain about his own participation.
- The current frontrunner, Ashok Gehlot, has pitched for Rahul to re-assume the reins of the party.
- Will the Bharat Jodo Yatra end up being a long and costly popularity test for Congress's elusive leader?

India needs a vigorous opposition, which claims its share of the public space. The Bharat Jodo Yatra has the potential to enthuse Congress after a long phase of torpidity. But to succeed in that objective, it will also have to focus on settling its chain of command and on building durable tools of mobilisation.

The writer is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Co-Director, Trivedi Centre for Political Data at Ashoka University. Views are personal