

OPINION POLITICS

Can the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra Act as a Catalyst for Deeper Transformation in Our Democracy?

By foregrounding economic, social, and political justice, the Yatra leaders are suggesting that their aspirations go beyond immediate electoral gains to achieve something more remarkable, possible only through a long-term goal.

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Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra: Rahul Gandhi with coal workers in Godhar Kali Basti in Dhanbad on February 4, 2024.
Photo: X (Twitter)/@RahulGandhi



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POLITICS 8 HOURS AGO

Far away from the buzz of the Ram Mandir spectacle in Ayodhya, another event has been making news. Starting January 14, the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra (BJNY) with Rahul Gandhi at its helm, is traversing India from east to west (complementing his south-north yatra last year). A

journey of 6,713 km, undertaken mostly by bus will traverse 16 states, with its message of *nyay* (justice) for all.

The events in Ayodhya symbolise the consolidation of authoritarian, communal, masculine power in New Delhi. Can the BJNY be a counter, by promoting a vision of *nyay* that includes deeper notions and grounded notions of democracy? This question goes well beyond the immediate impact it may have on the upcoming elections, not only because of the BJP's mind-bending communication and financial clout but because we *need to go beyond the notion that democracy is about elections and political parties*.

The BJNY has three objectives: economic justice (a job for every Indian youth, and ending inequality); social justice (participation of marginalised Indians in decision-making, unity and harmony); and political justice (promoting Ambedkar's vision, the constitutional values of dignity and respect for all Indians).

In the current Indian context, these are crucial objectives. There is a serious crisis of livelihoods (according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, **unemployment** has grown from 5.5% in the early 2000s to 9% in 2023), growing religious-ethnic hatred and conflict, brazen state attacks on democratic rights of peaceful dissent, infiltration or muzzling of independent institutions created to check misuse of power and money (constitutional bodies, media, universities), open crony capitalism aided by weakening of labour and environmental laws, ecological collapse and climate crisis impacting tens of millions of people, and disgusting state support to toxic

masculinity and patriarchy (the **Bilkis Bano** case being one of many examples).

Also read: Why There's More to the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra Than Winning Elections

It is symbolically just that the BJNY commenced in Manipur, given its ongoing ethnic conflict and its shocking neglect by the Union government. The Yatra appears to have touched a chord in north-east India, providing opportunities for those troubled by human rights and ecological violations to air their issues. Hopefully, it can continue to create such spaces of dialogue and hear people's voices across its entire route to Mumbai.

But if indeed the BJNY has to catalyse deeper transformation, it has to go beyond considerations of immediate electoral gains and think instead of long-term goals of strengthening grounded democracy. Its leadership seems to be signalling this. But for this to happen meaningfully, it needs to connect to and support the myriad people's actions of change scattered around the country. There are thousands of initiatives to create dignified livelihoods in agriculture, crafts, forestry and fisheries, small manufacturing, community-led tourism, open source technologies, eco-friendly construction, and much else. There are inspiring examples of regenerating and protecting India's ecological base, respecting nature and wildlife while using this base for enhancing livelihoods.



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi as part of Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Assam. Photo: X (Twitter)/@rahulgandhi.

There are successful struggles to achieve gender equality, gain respect for sexual minorities, secure access to those with disabilities, strengthen community health based on both traditional and modern medical systems, and create learning spaces that are enjoyable, creative, and enabling youth to enter into responsible adulthood rather than aspire to rat-race jobs that only sustain capitalist profits and state power. All of these signify that democracy is much less about taking over power in New Delhi, and much more about enabling the voices of the most marginalised in all decisions affecting their lives.

In a recently released **‘People’s Manifesto for a Just, Equitable, and Sustainable India’**, 85 national movements and organisations have spelt out an agenda that builds on such grounded initiatives. It lays out actions – practical and policy level – that could take India towards the goals

that the BJNY has listed, as also the goals of ecological and cultural justice.

Frankly, I have little hope of any political party picking up such a long-term vision, much less trying to achieve it even if it comes to power. When in government, the Congress promoted fundamentally contradictory policies. On one hand, the economic 'reforms' in 1991 hastened India's slide down the pathway of ecological collapse and institutionalised worker insecurity (sustaining or exacerbating over 90% of the workforce remaining unorganised or informal). On the other, in a few years of enlightened policy-making in the early 2000s, it brought in a series of rights-based legislations.

In the 1990s it had brought in progressive constitutional amendments towards rural and urban self-governance, but its own governments did little to implement them. Its record in maintaining India's unique vision of secularism, respecting all religions and faiths equally, is also mixed (who can forget the anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination?). The BJP's unique contribution is that it is abandoning all the progressive elements of the Congress heritage while intensifying the regressive ones (and bringing in some of its own, to boot).

If some of BJNY's leaders are thinking beyond neoliberal economics and short-term electoral gains, they can still contribute to long-term positive transformation, including through progressive policies where they are in government. But for this, they need to forge a continuing, respectful relationship with mass movements and community initiatives of the kind described above. They need to adopt and help achieve the slogan emanating from

Adivasi villages in Gadchiroli (Maharashtra): “We elect the government in Delhi, but in our village, we *are* the government”. Or the message of Dalit women farmers of Zaheerabad (Telangana): “Seeds and land are ours, food is our sovereign right, not for profit-making by corporations and governments”. Or what young weavers in Kachchh are saying: “We already *make in India*, why do you need multinational corporations to come, they only displace us?”

The BJNY anthem says “*Ham pahunchenge har ghar tak, Nyay ka haque milne tak* (we will reach every house, till the right to justice is achieved)”. Achieving this needs fundamental transformations in politics towards true people-based swaraj, economics that centre life in all its forms, and a society where everyone can flourish without discrimination. Political parties bent on winning elections and staying in power are not cut out to achieve these, nor is a democracy centred around hostile elections and the power of elected representatives. But politicians with a deeper vision of swaraj, entailing visions and strategies well beyond a five-year electoral cycle, can help communities on the ground achieve them.

Before he was assassinated, Gandhiji had urged the Congress Party cadre to spread out across the country to enable grounded swaraj, rather than crave only for ruling from New Delhi. If this is the vision BJNY can promote, it may be able to contribute to *nyay* in its holistic sense. We can only hope for this, for there is little else in current party politics in India that seems remotely close to it.

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