

Curves of Change - The Unfinished Curve of Political Renewal

I was scrolling aimlessly through my phone one quiet afternoon, my eyes caught on a horoscope notification.

“You are about to enter the second innings of your life. A shift is coming, one that will define your next success. Will you recognize it before it’s too late?”

This was one of the many that float in the digital space, everyday. But somehow, it felt specific. Perhaps because, at that moment, I had been closely following the unfolding story of *Bharat Jodo Yatra* (*A March to Unite India*), a political movement led by Rahul Gandhi¹ across the length of India. Rahul Gandhi, heir of India’s most storied political family, was walking thousands of kilometers on foot, from Kanyakumari in the south to Kashmir in the north, in an attempt to reshape not just his public image but perhaps the very foundation of his troubled party, the Indian National Congress. The Congress described the Bharat Jodo Yatra as a movement to unite India against “hatred, fear, and inflation. It also aimed to raise a voice against economic issues like job losses, rising unemployment, and growing inequality. I had not seen anything remotely like this in my lifetime. No political leader I’d known had walked with such openness, meeting people, sharing meals, embracing the cold, all without barriers. To me, it felt like a quiet revolution. The world was watching too. Hollywood actor John Cusack tweeted in support, calling it an act of solidarity against rising authoritarianism. International media, from Al Jazeera to TRT World, covered the Yatra as an attempt to heal growing divisions and reclaim a national narrative of justice and inclusion.

Before this march, the Congress party stood battered and bruised, on the brink of political irrelevance. Since 2014, it has suffered one defeat after another, most notably at the hands of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s BJP². Between 2014 and 2022, it lost 40 out of 45 state³ elections, a collapse that was both numerical and emotional.

At the center of this downfall was Rahul Gandhi himself. His presence in politics was often seen as inconsistent, the way he spoke or expressed himself didn’t always connect with people. Many felt that instead of leading with a clear new vision, he was still figuring out his place in a role that came more from family with deep historical legacy than personal choice. In contrast, Narendra Modi’s humble beginnings and strong grassroots rise created a sharp contrast, one that helped fuel the Modi wave across India.

¹ *Bharat Jodo Yatra: Congress’s Mass Contact Initiative*,” Indian National Congress, accessed May 2025, <https://www.bharatjodoyatra.in>.

² *The Bharatiya Janata Party is a political party in India.*

³ *Results compiled from the Election Commission of India and various credible election analysis reports covering state assembly polls from 2014 to 2022.*

So, in September 2022, with a simple backpack and a staggering goal, Rahul Gandhi began walking. Over 3,500 kilometers, through villages and cities, he spoke to farmers, hugged children, shared food with ordinary families, and listened to stories from people who no longer felt heard.

Bharat Jodo Yatra - Moments from the Walk



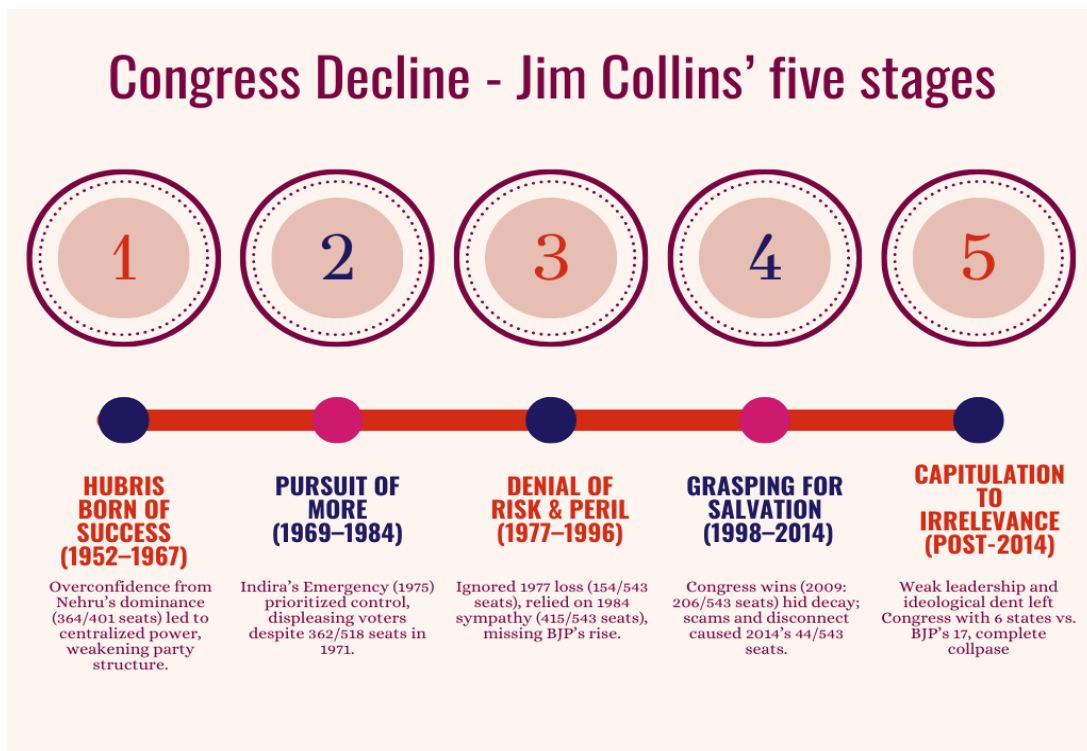
Image 1. Collage of visuals from the Bharat Jodo Yatra showing Rahul Gandhi walking, engaging with citizens, and braving winter in Kashmir. Sourced from India Today, Hindustan Times, Business Today, and Deccan Herald. Full links of all images at the last page.

It was, indisputably, the first significant movement from the Congress party in years. For a brief moment, the Yatra received national attention, brought emotional visibility to Rahul Gandhi, and reminded people of the party's once-powerful ideals. It struck me then, this wasn't just a walk. This was Rahul Gandhi's attempt at a Second Curve, as Charles Handy described it.

In this essay, I have attempted to examine whether Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra truly represents a Second Curve for the Indian National Congress, or whether it remains an unfinished attempt at revival through Charles Handy's Second Curve framework and Peter Drucker's principles on reinvention, leadership, and organizational function. I also will assess how the concept of the Second Curve in itself needs upgrading in this ever evolving world.

The Decline

For decades, the Congress party was the natural party of governance, its history deeply intertwined with the story of independent India. But by 2010, this legacy had become more of a weight than a strength. Congress still was living the past, and it no longer resonated with a generation seeking something more urgent, more future-facing. It had become a nostalgic symbol, still powerful, but largely distanced from the needs and ambitions of a new India. Charles Handy, in *The Second Curve*⁴, puts it bluntly: “History can be the enemy of innovation.” When institutions fall in love with their past, they stop investing in the future. And perhaps that is exactly what happened with the Congress party. As success sustained them for years, it also blinded them to the subtle signs of change. Handy warns that success often puts “blinkers on us.” It underpins the belief that things are fine, and discourages doubt. In this book, Handy touches upon Jim Collins’ idea of the five stages of institutional decline. While Collins originally framed it for businesses, I’ve tried to connect those stages to how the Congress Party declined from 1952 to 2014.



⁴ Handy, Charles. *The Second Curve: Thoughts on Reinventing Society*, 2015.

Peter Drucker also offers another sobering diagnosis. In *The Future of Industrial Man*⁵ Drucker outlines **three conditions for any institution to remain viable**: social status and dignity, a clear function, and legitimate power. By 2014, Congress had lost all three.

- **Social Status and Dignity**: Once synonymous with leadership, the party had come to represent entitlement and elitist mindset. It failed to connect with the evolving aspirations of a young & growing urban voter base. The cultural authority it once held now felt dated.
- **Function**: Congress's ideological drift became a key weakness. Congress failed to offer a well-structured alternative to BJP's mixed narrative of nationalism and public welfare measures. Was it socialist? Centrist? Reformist? Even loyal supporters weren't sure.
- **Legitimate Social Power**: The party's internal structure, defined by dynastic control and a "high command culture, disempowered state units and local leaders. In Drucker's terms, this top-down approach was not in alignment with a modern, decentralized, knowledge-based political landscape.

Both Handy and Drucker would likely agree: Congress missed its moment to launch its Second curve when it needed to. The Second Curve should have begun before the decline was visible, when there was still strength, clarity, and credibility. Congress delayed, believing its peak would last. And by the time the fall came, it was no longer a gentle dip, it was a collapse.

A True Second Curve

Charles Handy famously argued that a true second curve should begin *before* the first one starts to decline. However, he did not deny the possibility of a delayed start, only warned that it would make the climb steeper, requiring not just change, but transformation. The Yatra did begin later than ideal, it still embodied the essence of both Handy's and Drucker's philosophies in many meaningful ways.

First, Handy stated that second curves require *imagination, intuition and courage*, not just rational planning. Rahul Gandhi's decision to walk thousands of kilometers, without any electoral guarantee, was not a calculated move, but a symbolic act of courage into the unknown.

Second, Handy cautioned against the obsession with constant growth, calling it a recipe for perpetual dissatisfaction. He advocated for "*growing different, not just bigger.*" Gandhi chose to 'grow different', by opting for no mass rallies, no populist spectacle, but to grow differently through listening, walking, and becoming more accessible. As Handy writes, "*directions of change often come from outside of parliamentary systems and not from within it.*" The Yatra, in that sense, was not a political campaign in the conventional sense, but an act of political

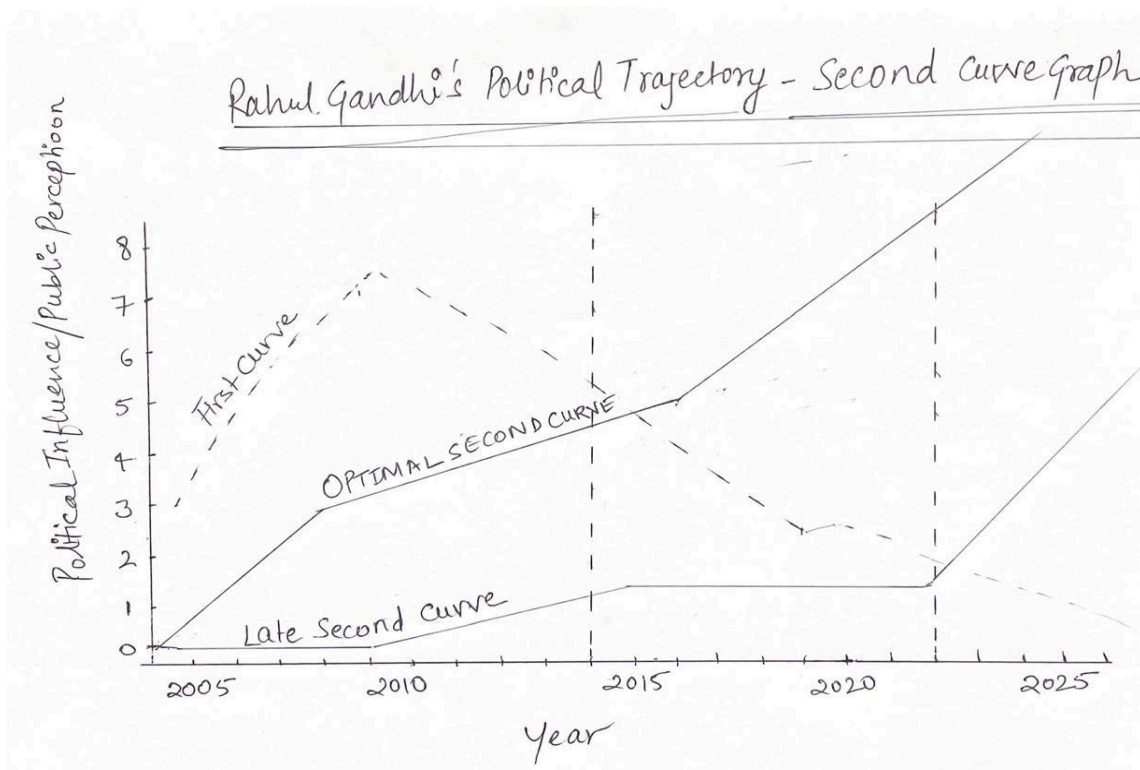
⁵ Drucker, Peter. 1942. *The Future of Industrial Man*.

imagination from the outside, outside Parliament, outside immediate electoral gains. That's what made it different.

Third, Handy noted that true second curves don't just change *systems*, but *relationships*. The Yatra was instrumental in rehumanizing Gandhi's image, he was walking alongside people, sharing meals, hugging children; it was aiming to repair relationships, not just political structures.

Fourth, Peter Drucker too urged leaders to shift focus from *achievement to contribution*. The Yatra wasn't about instant political return, Rahul Gandhi chose to make his contribution to unity and emotional reconnection, not chase immediate political wins

Fifth, both Handy and Drucker believed that modern leadership must shift from *control to trust*. By stepping away from the stage and into the crowd, Gandhi reflected this trust-based leadership, signaling a move towards a more accessible, less hierarchical style of politics.



Author's own work

Peter Drucker, in *The Age of Discontinuity* (1970), foresaw a future where the shelf life of strategies would shrink rapidly, and disruptions would become the norm. In a conversation with A.G. Lafley (2004), he laid out four possible choices to disruption or change: resist it, ignore it,

react to it, or influence its course. “*The fourth choice*,” Drucker said, “*is to be proactive and try to influence the course of the change so it will make a positive impact... to lead change.*”⁶ Bharat Jodo Yatra was perhaps not an ideal Second Curve, but it is a crucial Fourth Choice, a deliberate effort to lead change, rather than passively watch Congress disintegrate. As Drucker noted, disruption is now the “recurring subscription cost” of survival. And in that context, the Yatra was not an answer, but a signal that Congress had resumed asking the right questions.

To truly turn the Bharat Jodo Yatra into a Second Curve, not just for Rahul Gandhi, but for the Congress party, the leadership style must shift. As Charles Handy illustrated the leadership style through the concept of a Doughnut, *it has a hole in the middle, the center of which is fixed, the rest is open space for creativity, initiative, and judgment.*” The problem with Congress has long been that the entire doughnut is treated as the center, controlled tightly from the top, leaving little room for initiative. He stressed that leaders “treat insiders as outsiders, as independent contractors”, not in opposition to the center, but acting responsibly within a clear purpose. The Yatra may have stirred emotional connection, but unless Rahul Gandhi moves from central command to doughnut leadership, it will remain symbolic. This aligns closely with Drucker’s call for moving away from hierarchical, command and control structures towards flatter, more collaborative networks.⁷

In the book *The Second Curve*, Charles Handy challenges leaders to go beyond short-term tweaks and instead ask the big questions: *What kind of society do we want to create?* Too often, he argues, political leaders dodge this responsibility, offering safe, poll-tested slogans instead of bold, uncomfortable visions. To sustain real transformation, the party must develop and communicate a crystal clear and a bold vision for India’s future. Handy stressed that “*Political leaders need to stay up front of what his or her vision of society is, one that goes beyond the quasi-platitudes of prosperity and fairness.*”⁸ This is significant. Bharat Jodo Yatra created space for dialogue, but Rahul Gandhi must now clearly articulate what kind of India he sees, not just what he’s against. For Rahul Gandhi, this may mean going beyond symbolic politics to building enduring systems of political education, reforming internal party systems, grassroots leadership, and articulating a future-facing vision for India. But even with all that, one may ask: does starting a Second Curve guarantee success right away?

A Second Curve is not about quick wins, it’s about taking a bold step without knowing the result. The *Bharat Jodo Yatra* itself began late as discussed above. Therefore, imminent immediate results would be not just unrealistic, but a misreading of what a true Second Curve requires. This makes Congress’s 2024 election performance important, not as a win, but as a signal. From a

⁶ Drucker, Peter F. *A Thoughtful Conversation*. Interview by A.G. Lafley. Transcription Documents, Part 2. November 2004. Claremont Colleges Digital Library. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/dac/id/7749/rec/1>.

⁷ Drucker, Peter F. *Managing in the Next Society*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002

⁸ Handy, Charles. *The Second Curve: Thoughts on Reinventing Society*, Chapter 17

humiliating 52/543 seats in 2019 to a modest but meaningful 99/543 in 2024. The party won in key heartland Indian States like Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana where it was wiped out earlier. Rahul Gandhi won from both Wayanad in the South and Rae Bareilly in the North, which reaffirmed his identity and reclaimed his bastion.⁹ The Party however did not still return to power, but it re-entered the political conversation in the form of strong opposition too¹⁰. That's not a victory, but it's a positive start, maybe the climb has started. He didn't ask for votes. He didn't chase headlines. He didn't do big rallies. Instead, he chose to walk thousands of kilometers, meet ordinary people, understand the diversity of the nation, and listen. That's not normal politics, that's what Charles Handy called the Marshmallow Test of leadership. The *Marshmallow Test* is a famous experiment where children are given a choice: one marshmallow now, or two if they wait. Those who waited often did better later in life. Handy used this to explain how good leaders **delay rewards**, they don't wait for immediate success, but rather **build trust for the future**. Rahul Gandhi's Yatra was a real-life Marshmallow Test. He gave up short-term gains, no campaign, no quick popularity, and invested in something deeper: public trust and emotional connection. That kind of leadership is not about the next election; it's about the next generation. As he walked, he didn't just reconnect with voters, he reconnected with values. He pushed himself, and his party, to ask harder questions. The Bhagavad Gita says: "*You have the right to act, but not to the fruits of your action.*" And Peter Drucker said "*The long term is not just short terms added together.*" It's about vision, consistency, and work that lasts.

Across the world, movements like Jeremy Corbyn's in the UK¹¹, Bernie Sanders¹² in the U.S., and Podemos¹³ in Spain, may have failed to secure electoral victories, but they were instrumental in reshaping political discourse, creating friction, and bringing neglected issues to the forefront. In that same spirit, Bharat Jodo Yatra may not have been a flame, but it was a spark. And sparks matter, they show us where fire could still begin.

Curve Loops

As I rifle through Charles Handy's philosophy, an intriguing question kept surfacing: *Does today's political world even leave space for a classic Second Curve anymore?*

In Handy's time, the Second Curve was a courageous leap, where individuals, organizations, or societies would intentionally transgress from their current path toward a new, bolder trajectory

⁹ Indian National Congress. *Lok Sabha Elections 2024 Results*.

¹⁰ India Today. (2024, June 15). *Is Congress seeing a revival? Direct answer in direct fights*.

<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/congress-revival-direct-fights-with-bjp-lok-sabha-election-2024-rahul-gandhi-alliance-india-bloc-2553140-2024-06-15>

¹¹ Ewing, K.D. (2019). *Corbyn's Labour and the Constitution*.

¹² Schlozman, D. (2020). *When Movements Matter: The Rise of the Sanders Left*

¹³ Borge, R., & Santamarina, E. (2018). "The Rise and Challenges of Podemos in Spain," *South European Society and Politics*

before decline set in. But today, the speed of change, the volatility of public emotion, and the uncertainty of modern politics barely allow leaders to ride a “first curve” long enough to gracefully jump to a second. The nature of leadership has changed. So perhaps the model needs to evolve with it.

We may no longer be living in a world of ordinary Second Curves, but rather in an era of *Curve Loops*, shorter, sharper cycles of rise, dip, adapt, and reset. In this reality, leaders like Rahul Gandhi should not prepare for one big reinvention, but must continue to live through continuous micro-reinventions. Each election, each public statement, each political campaign becomes a mini-curve that must be anticipated, adapted to, and brilliantly leveraged. The Yatra may have marked the beginning of its second Curve, it's still not enough, because the next loop where digital strategy, internal party democracy, coalition building, should be already underway. The challenge is that there is no time to pause, reflect, or slowly build a second trajectory anymore. Reinvention must be immediate, overlapping, and constant.

Above is not to contradict Handy, but to update him. Just as Peter Drucker warned that *“the greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence, it is to act with yesterday’s logic,”* we must now rethink the logic of the Second Curve itself. So, the real question Rahul Gandhi, and any modern political leader, must ask is not, *“When do I jump to my Second Curve?”* but rather, *“Am I prepared to live inside a permanent cycle of Curve Loops?”* This is the era of recursive reinvention. Those who resist updating their frameworks will forever lag behind their next curves.

The Unfinished Journey

As a legal professional, I’ve spent years climbing my own first curve, from studying law to working in prestigious companies, independently drafting contracts & advising businesses, and helping resolve disputes. By most standards, I was on the “peak” of that curve. But over time, a quiet question began to grow louder in my mind: *Should I wait for the decline, or should I take my seat on the next curve before it begins?* It feels overwhelming and I know that sticking to the comfort zone of my first curve would eventually lead to stagnation. In a world shaped by AI, where knowledge is omnipresent and rapidly automated, and demanding new expectations of leadership, I am sure that our relevance will not be defined by what we know, but by whom we connect with, collaborate with and learn. The urge to do something more relevant, more connected, more meaningful in a new era. That’s where Rahul Gandhi’s journey and mine feel uncannily aligned. Just as Rahul Gandhi didn’t walk alone, neither can I build my next curve in isolation.

As Handy wisely says, “*If we are to ride new curves, we need our friends.*”¹⁴ . In this new world , where algorithms are evolving by the hour, maybe the most powerful thing we can do is to stay human together while taking this new leap. Whether it’s in politics or in my personal growth, transformation requires companionship, people who believe, walk beside you, challenge you, and expand your vision. Rahul Gandhi walked. I write. And in doing so, perhaps both of us are trying to stay honest to the same deeper call: to evolve not for the sake of success, but for the sake of relevance and renewal.

Word Limit - 2924 (Excluding footnotes / References/ Graphics)

¹⁴ Handy, C. (2015). *The second curve: Thoughts on reinventing society* (Chapter 16).

Image 1 Reference

1. India Today. (2022, September 13). *Rahul Gandhi's Selfies moment with kids during Bharat Jodo Yatra.* <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/rahul-gandhi-selfie-moment-with-kids-during-bharat-jodo-yatra-1999757-2022-09-13>
2. Hindustan Times. (2023, January 30). *Rahul Gandhi strikes a chord with Kashmiris, says understands their pain.* <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/bharat-jodo-yatra-closing-ceremony-rahul-gandhi-strikes-chord-with-kashmiris-says-understands-their-pain-101675108746468.html>
3. Business Today. (2023, November 7). *Bharat Jodo Yatra 2.0 likely between Dec-Feb 2024.* <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/politics/story/bharat-jodo-yatra-20-under-consideration-likely-between-december-and-february-2024-report-404878-2023-11-07>
4. Deccan Herald. (2022, September 14). *Bharat Jodo Yatra: Donning the challenger's mantle.* <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/bharat-jodo-yatra-donning-the-challengers-mantle-1147825.html>
5. Business Today. (2022, December 23). *Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra in Delhi: Cops Issue Advisory.* <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/politics/story/rahul-gandhis-bharat-jodo-yatra-in-delhi-tomorrow-traffic-cops-issue-advisory-357625-2022-12-23>
6. Hindustan Times (2022, December 31). *Counting Milestones: A day in the life of the Bharat Jodo Yatra.* <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/counting-milestones-a-day-in-the-life-of-the-bharat-jodo-yatra-101671215126272.html>