

Rahul Gandhi Townhall: feature length special



*The Congress President Rahul Gandhi was on a short visit to London last week. This feature length special is a report of the town hall event organised by the National Indian Students and Alumni Union, and the LSE South Asia Centre, using a selection of **Salil Tripathi's** tweets and observations of the discussion.*

The townhall event, like Rahul Gandhi's conversation with the UK and European media, was unscripted and he wasn't told ahead what he might be asked. Dr Mukulika Banerjee, director of LSE's South Asia Centre, was polite and tough in her questions and to his credit, Gandhi took all questions, was willing to take more, and often paused before responding, indicating that he wanted to give a thoughtful response, not a glib sound-bite. Journalists in India have similarly sought unscripted interviews, or even a press conference, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is yet to oblige.

Sanam Arora, the National Indian Students and Alumni Union head, says they are non-partisan and asks for balanced conversations where people listen.

Rahul Gandhi begins by apologising for being late. He says that the conversation in India is acrimonious and that whilst disagreements are okay, (it is) not necessary to hate people. As youngsters, you will meet those you disagree with he says, addressing the students in the audience. The starting point is to look at words from their perspective. You find that perspectives you disagree with are valuable and exist because of (the) circumstances the other person is undergoing and there's always scope for conversation. He adds that you see foundations of potential conflict worldwide. India has a role to play with its ideas of non-violence, compassion, and complexity.

Gandhi expresses his desire to reach out to a wider public, acknowledging that his view alone should not drive what 1.3 billion people think, he adds that his job is to enable the farmer to realise his vision; not for him to tell the farmer what to do.

He continues, adding that there is a full grown crisis of jobs (in India) and the government is not accepting it. India's job generation is low. The jobs will not come from big companies, but from small and medium enterprises, by revitalising farms, (to build) low cost homes, he adds. India has to accept that there is a (jobs) problem. (To succeed, it has to) push democracy further, making sure women come into decision-making. (I see my role as) an enabler and service provider. India has the energy, and we have to enable it, he concludes.

Dr Banerjee asks Gandhi if he would implement the [Swaminathan](#) report. Gandhi's initial response suggests he may not know the details, but later it becomes clearer that he does. The Indian farmer needs Minimum Support Price and assistance during floods. He also needs support during drought. Productivity has to be improved. How we inject technology to support the farmer – that's the question, Gandhi states, before philosophically adding If the intention (on the part of the government) is right, (then) the person understands. (We need to ask) is Indian agriculture building India or is it a drain? The current government, he says, thinks (that) if farmers can't grow food, we will buy from elsewhere.

Dr Banerjee turns the conversation to secularism. Gandhi says, somewhat unexpectedly, that there are two big transformations taking place in the world – internal migration in China and in India. Whilst China is Communist and (orders people to) does what it wants, Gandhi adds that India is democratic and more organic; What India has achieved is because all Indians are part of it. All of India has sacrificed. We can't now start excluding people – minorities or Dalits or women. There shouldn't be any Indian who feels his voice isn't heard. We've come far. Nobody should feel excluded he concludes.



Rahul Gandhi with LSE's Mukulika Banerjee, Director of the South Asia Centre, Sheikh Zayed Theatre, LSE New Academic Building. Photo credit: LSE/Maria Moore, 2018. All rights reserved.

Following a question about the 2019 parliamentary elections, Gandhi says that it will be the BJP versus the entire opposition. Everyone in the opposition and some alliance partners of BJP feel that there is a systematic attack on (India's) institutions and (an) encroachment on the idea of India. He points out the statement of the four supreme court judges, the threats to the media. He says there is a feeling that institutions need to be defended, and the RSS will be on the other side of the debate.

He continues, saying that what the Congress has been saying is an old idea; it is not a new idea. It is the same with RSS. These ideas have been in combat for a thousand years (in India). The RSS centralises; the Congress decentralises. We have the idea embedded deep (in our thinking). Non-violence is deep inside us, (not in them). He adds that non-violence and the idea of India are a huge strength of Congress but his party's weakness is that the Congress doesn't express it effectively; BJP is clear. There's no confusion. RSS has spent time working on it. Gandhi did that for us [by 'us' it is possible Gandhi is referring to Congress]. But Congress hasn't kept pace.

Whilst in these remarks Gandhi does credit the generation that fought for freedom, meaning his great-grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, and other stalwarts – it also means that he believes that those who followed – most certainly including his grandmother Indira Gandhi and his father Rajiv Gandhi, and as party president, his mother Sonia Gandhi – somehow let the ball drop. There is merit to that argument, and if Rahul Gandhi indeed believes that, it is a major admission on his part. Gandhi continues, saying that when a strong person beats the weak, you want to reach out and help the weak. That's (the spirit of) Congress. Over time the Congress has closed, it needs to now expand and open. And be precise where it stands.

Whilst this is an admirable admission of failure, what went wrong? To what extent is it the current leadership that is to be blamed for this failure? What made the other idea more seductive and what will Congress do to challenge it? Gandhi isn't clear, (or wants to hold his cards close to his chest). He talks of a difference among generations. He mentions Ashok Gehlot and Sachin Pilot as two generations of leaders in Rajasthan. But who would he choose between the two (if they have different visions)? He refers to Mohandas Gandhi's idea of trusteeship, implying he is the party's trustee. He says wants to bridge these gaps.

Dr Banerjee asks him about 1984 (the massacre of Sikhs after Indira Gandhi's assassination, in which many Congress leaders were involved). Earlier in the day Gandhi is reported to have said that Congress wasn't involved. In this instance, he replies that Manmohan Singh spoke for the entire party when he apologised to the nation. He adds that he is a victim of violence. He said he gets disturbed with anyone being hurt. He condemns violence 100% and wants punishment against anyone who has committed it [the audience applauds].

Measuring his words, Gandhi says I've seen people I loved being killed. I saw the person who killed my father being killed. When I saw Prabhakaran lying dead and humiliated, I felt sorry for him. I saw my father in his place. And I saw his children in my place. Most people don't understand violence, I do.

Dr Banerjee then asks how Congress will deal with the communal context of violence under his stewardship, given the party's own complicity with violence in the past. Gandhi repeats that the essence of Congress's ideology is non-violence.

How would the Prime Minister be chosen in 2019 Gandhi is asked. He says that Congress and others are defending an onslaught on the Indian constitution. The opposition parties and the Congress are defending the nature of the Indian state. Our first priority is to defeat BJP and stop divisions and poison spreading through the country, he says. (To achieve that) they have to remove the BJP first, only then they will think of other issues He says some parties are not aligned anymore with the BJP and the Congress will work with them.

A student from Warwick University asks him why he is focusing on agriculture and not technology. Gandhi says he isn't excluding technology. India has to take in the entire structure. It isn't either/or. Agriculture is interwoven with other sectors, he says The fastest growth in India has been in rural areas and that happened because of MNREGA and loan waivers, which fired up the economy. So large companies began selling products in rural areas. It is all connected. Every sector has a role to play. Congress is focusing on agriculture because it is struggling and weak.

A PhD student from LSE asks him how he can make sense of dynastic politics. Gandhi says he does come from a political family. That has helped people identify him. But he has fought three elections and won them. He has taken punches. So the term 'dynasty' isn't precise, he says. He reminds the questioner that he is an elected parliamentarian. I take punches and I react and I know the type of things that are to be done. So what you bring to table, you have to look at it in entirety. You've to judge me after listening to me, he asserts.

One LSE student asks about growing intolerance. Does it mean Jinnah (and his successful campaign to partition India) was right? Gandhi says no; there are more Muslims in India, and India embraces more diversities than does Pakistan. But he said he understands why the issues are being raised now. He says the negotiation India has done with its people is better than what Pakistan has done. The original idea of India will win, he says to much applause.

Another questioner asks him if the Chief Election Commissioner and the governor of the Reserve Bank of India should be appointed by parliament. He asks the student if he is proud of the debates in parliament. Why is the quality of debate so low? India has experienced politicians but the level of conversation is so poor. Why? Why did we have great debates in the 50s and 60s?

Someone shouts and says that that was because at that time there was no opposition. Gandhi responds, no, it is because today the MPs don't have power. The PM and his office make the laws. It means India needs to make MPs more powerful. Give them power and quality of the debate will improve. Power has shifted away from MPs. You have to empower the MPs, he says.

Another LSE student asks: If you are Prime Minister how will you empower the youth? And another person asks about transparency in political funding. On that, Gandhi says that electoral bonds are opaque and wrong. And on empowering youth, he tells the student, much to her delight, that Congress would recruit students like her.



The audience await Rahul Gandhi's arrival. Photo credit: LSE/Maria Moore, 2018. All rights reserved.

Have you ever been wrong in your judgments?, a student asks. Yes, many times, Gandhi says. That's how he learns. He gives an example – he had believed that by simply improving economic position of a person there will be a change – that it would result in reduction in caste-based thinking in India. It didn't happen that way, he says. If you look at things in depth you will always find mistakes you made, he says. But if you think you are never wrong then you are not human, he says, taking a not too subtle dig at Modi.

He gives another example, of a man coming to see him and after their conversation telling him that he couldn't believe he was talking to him. Why, Gandhi asked. Because he had been an MLA in Punjab, and 25 years ago, he said, he would have killed Gandhi. He was a militant once. And Gandhi says that made him realise the power of conversation. When someone hates you, it is because of misunderstanding. People are genuinely nice. Conversation is important, he says, repeating a point he has made earlier.

A student from Rajasthan asks him about Congress's strategy in Rajasthan. Gandhi says he should ask Sachin Pilot or Ashok Gehlot, reinforcing the point that he is decentralising decision-making. He then speaks about free medicine and healthcare, which are ideas he would extend to the whole country. It was however, surprising that Gandhi didn't talk about what I thought was the single-most important issue in Rajasthan – the communalisation and lynching in places like Alwar and elsewhere.

How would you fight corruption?, another student asks. Gandhi says he would strengthen the Right to Information Act, Lok Pal, and through greater decentralisation. He then turns to the [Rafale deal](#). He points out how the state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd has a seventy year history, making MIGs, Sukhois, Mirages, Jaguars, and no debt. Yet it was removed from the deal with Dassault and a company with no experience, formed a week before the deal was to be signed, which has Rs 45,000 crore in debt, was given the contract. The contract's size was reduced from 126 planes to 36, and the cost per plane rose from about 500 crore to about 1600 crore. Why is that not being picked up? he asks.

A student from King's College asks him if he agrees with the BJP on any issue. Yes, Gandhi says; the day the BJP signs the women's reservation bill into law, Congress will support that action. His party will also cooperate in a GST that works. The GST that is developed is destructive, he says.

Another student from King's College asks him when India will see a female Prime Minister again. Gandhi says he is not a soothsayer. But adds that there will be many more women leaders at many levels.

Gandhi concludes saying that while he was a student at Cambridge, he loved the interaction at LSE, and informs the audience that, you are all quite brilliant.

Closing thoughts

So what do I make of Rahul Gandhi after two encounters – his LSE town hall and the press meet he had the following day? That he is sincere, honest, apparently genuine, and a polite man. He took every question. (At the end of the session at LSE someone shouted from the audience, thanking him for an unscripted Mann-ki-Baat, a reference to [Narendra Modi's weekly broadcasts](#)).

There did not seem to be any planted questions, and whilst Dr Banerjee had all freedom to choose who could ask, she showed no favouritism. It was a remarkably open and genuine town hall.

Gandhi has figured out a message that he wants to tell India – that India needs a healing touch after the last four years. Following the actions of the current government, the divisions in India need to be narrowed, he feels, and India has to be made whole again.

But Gandhi doesn't seem to possess the vocabulary for it. He knows what's right, and what he wants to do, bringing values and morality back into politics, is a fine message. He wants to do it by listening, by enabling, by showing empathy, including towards his opponents. Those are good virtues in any human being. But those need to be seen and shown as strengths, and not weaknesses. In the next few months, that's his job – and the job of those who subscribe to his vision of India – to show that these virtues are indeed virtues, and not vulnerabilities.

Will he succeed? I have no idea. Should he succeed? That would depend on your politics. Should he or will he be the next Prime Minister? Not necessarily and in any case it is too difficult to predict – elections are many months away, and as Harold Wilson famously said, a week is a long time in politics. The Government and its supporters have been effective in making him look and sound like a caricature – as Pappu, as a naive fool – and overcoming that image is neither easy, nor will it be quick.

He is right in saying that the opposition will figure out who will be the PM. His challenge lies in shifting the debate away from *Modi versus Gandhi* into a debate about the alternate visions of India – the one RSS offers, of a majoritarian India, and the one that India's founding fathers and mothers offered during the freedom struggle, of a more inclusive India.

You can watch the video of the LSE Townhall event [here](#).

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About the Author



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