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Ballots in a Burning World: What Elections Cannot Vote Away



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A democracy gives you exactly what you are. Not what you say you want, not what you tell the pollster, not what you believe about yourself in your more generous moments, but what you actually are at the level of your unexamined fears, your inherited loyalties, your accumulated hungers. This is democracy's deepest feature and its most uncomfortable truth: the ballot does not measure aspiration. What the voter is, in any given

moment of history, is precisely what the government of that moment will reflect back, faithfully, without apology, and without the capacity to be otherwise.

The party flags multiply on every lamp post, the television studios sustain their nightly performance of outrage, and somewhere a rally is being held at which thousands of people have gathered to feel, briefly and collectively, that something enormous is being decided. Politicians who spent years denouncing a party cross the floor to join it, citing conscience; the party that spent years denouncing them issues a statement celebrating their integrity; neither side notices the contradiction, or notices that you noticed. The 2024 Lok Sabha election cost an estimated one lakh thirty-five thousand crore rupees, making it by most accounts the most expensive democratic exercise in world history. We have never invested more in this spectacle. And yet, the things that needed to be decided keep not getting decided.

The question worth sitting with, before you choose whom to vote for, is a different and more uncomfortable one. Not which candidate deserves your trust, but what kind of person you are when you enter that booth. Because the ballot does not arrive in a vacuum. It arrives at the end of a long inner history, shaped by fear, identity, inherited loyalty, and all the unexamined conditioning that the ego calls its convictions. The quality of the choice you make on election day was largely determined before election day. And no party, no alliance, no charismatic face on a lamp post can correct what has not been examined within you.

This is not an abstraction. It has consequences of the most concrete kind, consequences that will outlast every politician currently seeking your vote.

The apple orchards of Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir are failing. Not because of poor agricultural policy, though that exists, but because the temperature at which apple trees flower and fruit is no longer reliably available at the altitudes where those orchards stand. The same condition that makes it impossible to grow apples in Delhi is now creeping up the hillsides toward orchards that have fed those states for generations. The glaciers feeding the rivers that feed this subcontinent are retreating at rates that scientists describe as historically unprecedented; the Ganga, the Brahmaputra, the Indus all draw from ice that is now diminishing, and the hundreds of millions of farmers and city-dwellers who depend on those rivers downstream have not been told, by any party competing for their vote, what happens when that ice is gone. India suffered extreme weather events on 318 days in 2023 alone, claiming over three thousand lives across all thirty-six states and union territories. India holds nearly eighteen percent of the world's population but access to only four percent of its freshwater; around six hundred million people face high to extreme water stress, and major cities are projected to have severe groundwater depletion within this

decade. Scientists project that these depletion rates will more than triple by mid-century. Closer still, the air that the citizens of Delhi and a dozen other major Indian cities breathe each winter has been formally classified as hazardous; more than a million Indians die each year from causes attributable to air pollution, a toll that exceeds the annual dead of most wars, and that appears in no manifesto as an emergency requiring commensurate action. Meanwhile, hundreds of species are being permanently lost every single day, at rates between one thousand and ten thousand times the natural background. Creatures that evolution spent millions of years producing are gone, because we needed the land for something else.

Not one of these facts appears as a central concern in any election campaign. They are not absent because politicians are uniquely stupid; many are not. They are absent because the voter has not demanded them, and in a democracy, the politician is not a leader. He is a follower. This distinction matters more than anything else that will be said during this election season, and it is almost never said.

Consider what a democracy actually is, structurally, beneath the language of mandate and representation. The leader arrives in power because enough people preferred him. He stays in power by continuing to reflect what enough people prefer. The moment he moves in a direction they have not chosen, he separates himself from his base, and in India, where some assembly or municipal election is always weeks away, the distance between any politician and his next test before the voters is never very great. He cannot afford to walk ahead of the people; he can only walk behind them, and call it leadership. The politician who actually understood the ecological emergency and acted on that understanding, who told the electorate that the comforts they are accustomed to are incompatible with a survivable future, would not survive the next election. This is not a moral failing peculiar to our politicians. It is the arithmetic of the system.

Consider what happened at a now-famous gathering in Paris, when the heads of government of nearly every nation sat together and agreed, with apparent sincerity, that carbon emissions must fall and warming must be held within limits. The agreement was real; the understanding was real; the consensus in that room was genuine. Then they flew home and did nothing of consequence. Not because they were all venal, but because they could not. Every leader who returned to an electorate that had not asked for sacrifice found that sacrifice was the one thing his democratic mandate would not permit him to deliver. This is the structural trap, and it is not a failure of political will. It is the precise and faithful functioning of a system that was never designed to ask people to be asked to give up.

A legitimate question presents itself here. If democracy faithfully mirrors the voter, why have some democracies produced meaningful ecological policy through precisely this electoral mechanism? The Nordic nations, Costa Rica, and significant portions of the European Union have enacted environmental legislation of a kind that Indian politics has not approached, and they have done so through the same instrument of the popular vote. The answer is not that democracy works differently there; it is that the mirror reflects differently because what stands before it is different. Those electorates had accumulated, over generations, a civic inheritance that included genuine ecological concern as a shared cultural value, not a minority position. The politician walking behind those people was walking behind people who had already moved. This is not a counsel of despair; it is a precise diagnosis. The instrument is not broken. The person operating it determines what it produces. Which means the only variable worth changing is that person.

A thought experiment clarifies the matter: imagine a democracy instituted within a madhouse. The patients vote; there are more patients than staff, so the patients win. The doctor ends up behind bars, placed there by a free and fair democratic process, while the patients write policy about their own treatment. You might say: but we are not patients in a madhouse. The question is whether you are certain of that. Pre-election survey data from late 2023 found that only eight percent of Indians considered climate change a major concern, even as the country was recording its warmest months in over a century. A society that spends the most money in world history on an election, and directs almost none of that energy toward the questions that will determine whether the next generation has a liveable planet, is not obviously on the sane side of the argument.

The candidates understand this better than their public statements suggest. A politician who delivers inflammatory speeches at rallies, who mobilises voters through caste arithmetic, communal anxieties, regional resentments, and the promise of freebies calibrated to specific identity groups, may be, in private life, a perfectly ordinary and even temperate person. He is not necessarily what he performs; he performs what the crowd requires, because the crowd's requirements are the condition of his survival. Visit him privately and you may find someone who knows the performance is hollow; who will tell you, if he trusts you, that what he says in public is for public consumption. He is not wrong. He is the mirror, and the mirror shows you what you brought to it. The ugliness in the political sphere, the divisiveness, the manufactured grievance, the reduction of every question of governance to a question of tribe, is not imported from somewhere outside society. It is ours, amplified and returned.

Though it is worth being precise about how the amplification now works. Between the voter and the politician sits an entire ecosystem of media: television channels sustained by the economics of outrage, social media algorithms that surface whatever produces the strongest reaction, and messaging platforms that carry content calibrated to inflame at a speed and scale that no previous generation of voters had to contend with. This ecosystem does not merely reflect egoic division; it actively cultivates and monetises it. The mirror has been retrofitted with a mechanism that makes the reflection louder, angrier, and more tribally sorted than the underlying voter alone would generate. Inner change, then, must contend not only with conditioning already present but with a system that is economically incentivised to deepen that conditioning continuously, and to do so while the voter believes he is simply being informed.

And here is where it becomes personal in a way that cannot be evaded, not merely sociological. In a democracy, it is worth asking who produces the political class we keep condemning. The data from the 2024 Lok Sabha elections is instructive: according to the Association for Democratic Reforms, forty-six percent of newly elected members of Parliament had declared criminal cases against themselves, up from twenty-three percent in 2004. In twenty years, the proportion of elected legislators with criminal records has doubled. More striking still: a candidate with declared criminal cases had a winning probability of 15.3 percent; a candidate with a clean record had a winning probability of just 4.4 percent. The electorate, in aggregate, was more likely to elect someone with a criminal record than someone without one. This is not the corruption of democracy by a criminal class. It is democracy functioning exactly as designed, reflecting the preferences of its voters back at them with mathematical precision.

It is worth noting, before this picture becomes entirely uniform, that India's youngest voters show somewhat greater ecological awareness than the generations preceding them. Whether that awareness will survive the pressures of economic aspiration, identity mobilisation, and a media environment designed to redirect attention toward grievance remains to be seen. Awareness without intent is not yet transformation, and intent without the inner movement that precedes it does not yet change what the mirror receives. But the direction exists, and is worth naming, because it is the only direction from which genuine change can begin.

Why does the broader pattern persist? The ego's logic here is worth examining, because it is not simple cynicism. When a voter who feels diminished, overlooked, and powerless encounters a candidate of obvious power, voting for that candidate can feel like a further act of self-interest. It is not about the candidate, but about the need to see someone before whom

you will feel even smaller. But voting for someone who shares your limitations, your background, your rough edges, feels like a form of victory. We won; our kind won. The ego does not choose the best candidate; it chooses the candidate who makes its own condition feel legitimate. And this logic operates not only through caste, which has long been the most visible organising principle of the Indian vote, the working assumption that he is one of us and will act for us, but through every axis of identity available: region, religion, language, sub-caste, and the simple tribal hunger to see one's own face reflected in power.

This is the first thing elections cannot change: the inner state of the voter. And the inner state of the voter determines everything downstream, the candidate, the campaign, the manifesto, the quality of the institutions that the resulting government builds or dismantles. The potholes in the road are not merely an administrative failure. They are a materialisation of something inside the people who use that road, their relationship to the commons, their tolerance for collective disorder, their unwillingness to demand something better of the world because they have not yet demanded something better of themselves. Give a people who have not changed a better road, and they will return it to its former condition. Give them a new government without changing what they are, and they will, in time, produce the same government by other means.

This is not an argument against democracy; the form is not the problem. What we have is not a failure of the democratic form but a democracy faithfully reproducing the inner state of its participants, which means the only reform that can change what the system produces is the reform of those participants. What needs to change is not the form but the person casting the vote.

The crises that are actually threatening us were not produced by governance failures. They were produced by the aggregate of billions of individual choices, each driven by the ego's structural conviction that fulfilment lies in accumulation; that the next acquisition will complete what the last one did not; that more is always the direction of better. The richest ten percent of the world generate roughly half its carbon emissions. This is not, as it might appear, a distant statistic about wealthy nations; India's expanding middle class is now entering, at scale, precisely the consumption register that produced this crisis elsewhere. The trajectory is not unique; it is the same ego, operating in a new geography, acquiring the same things for the same reasons, moving toward the same insufficiency by a different route. It is a crisis of an ego that does not know when it has had enough, because the ego has no sufficiency point. It defines itself by what it has an

civilisation organised around that

definition will consume its ecological basis without ever intending to, not from malice, but from a vacancy at the centre that no acquisition has ever filled.

No ballot addresses this vacancy, and no party platform proposes that the voter examine what is driving him. This is not a criticism of politics; it is a description of what politics can reach and what it structurally cannot. Politics operates at the level of expressed preferences. It cannot reach below those preferences to the psychological soil in which they grow. Something else must do that work, something that is not answerable to the electorate, that has no seat to lose, no constituency to appease, no next election to survive. Only a teacher in that position, indifferent to approval, can walk ahead of the people rather than behind them; can say what the campaign rally is architecturally designed to prevent anyone from saying: that your condition is not the fault of whoever you oppose, and cannot be fixed by whoever you support, because your condition originates within you. What happens outside is a faithful report of what you are.

The candidates competing for your attention are, most of them, older than you. They will not live in the world their choices are building. The planet you were born on and will die on is not on any ballot. No party will be held accountable for what the water table looks like in thirty years, or for the species vanishing today that your grandchildren might have needed. And this is not incidental to democracy's design; it is structural. Only the living vote, and the living, with understandable consistency, vote their present interests. Future generations, who will bear the full cost of today's ecological choices, have no candidate, no seat, no representation in that booth. Some nations have begun experimenting with constitutional commissioners for future generations, long-term ombudsmen charged with representing what no election can represent. India's own Supreme Court moved, in April 2024, to recognise the right to be free from adverse effects of climate change as a constitutional fundamental right, placing ecological obligation inside Articles 14 and 21, in the one domain of governance that is not answerable to the next election cycle. That the courts are quietly routing around what the ballot structurally cannot address is itself a form of acknowledgment. The parties come and go; some will not exist in their current form a decade from now. The earth does not go. And the person who must decide what to do about that is not on any stage or any poster. That person is reading this, and the choice belongs entirely to them.

This is not a counsel of disengagement: vote, because it is a responsibility, and in the absence of wisdom one chooses the lesser disorder. Honesty requires acknowledging what the lesser disorder actually means in practice. Casting this election has placed ecological collapse at the centre, which is itself the most precise

confirmation of the argument being made here. The lesser disorder means choosing those who at minimum do not actively deepen the divisions that prevent these questions from being raised at all; who have the courage to name water security and ecological survival in their manifesto rather than confecting grievances along every available line of identity to fill the space where those questions should be. But vote knowing what the ballot is and is not. It is the last act of a long inner drama. The quality of what you put into that box was determined long before election day, by what you have been willing to examine in yourself, by whether you have ever stopped to ask why you believe what you believe, fear what you fear, and resent what you resent.

The ballot is real; use it. But do not confuse it with the work. The work is harder, quieter, and the only kind that lasts: to look without protection at what you are, at what is driving your choices, at what in you is producing the world you keep hoping someone else will fix.

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