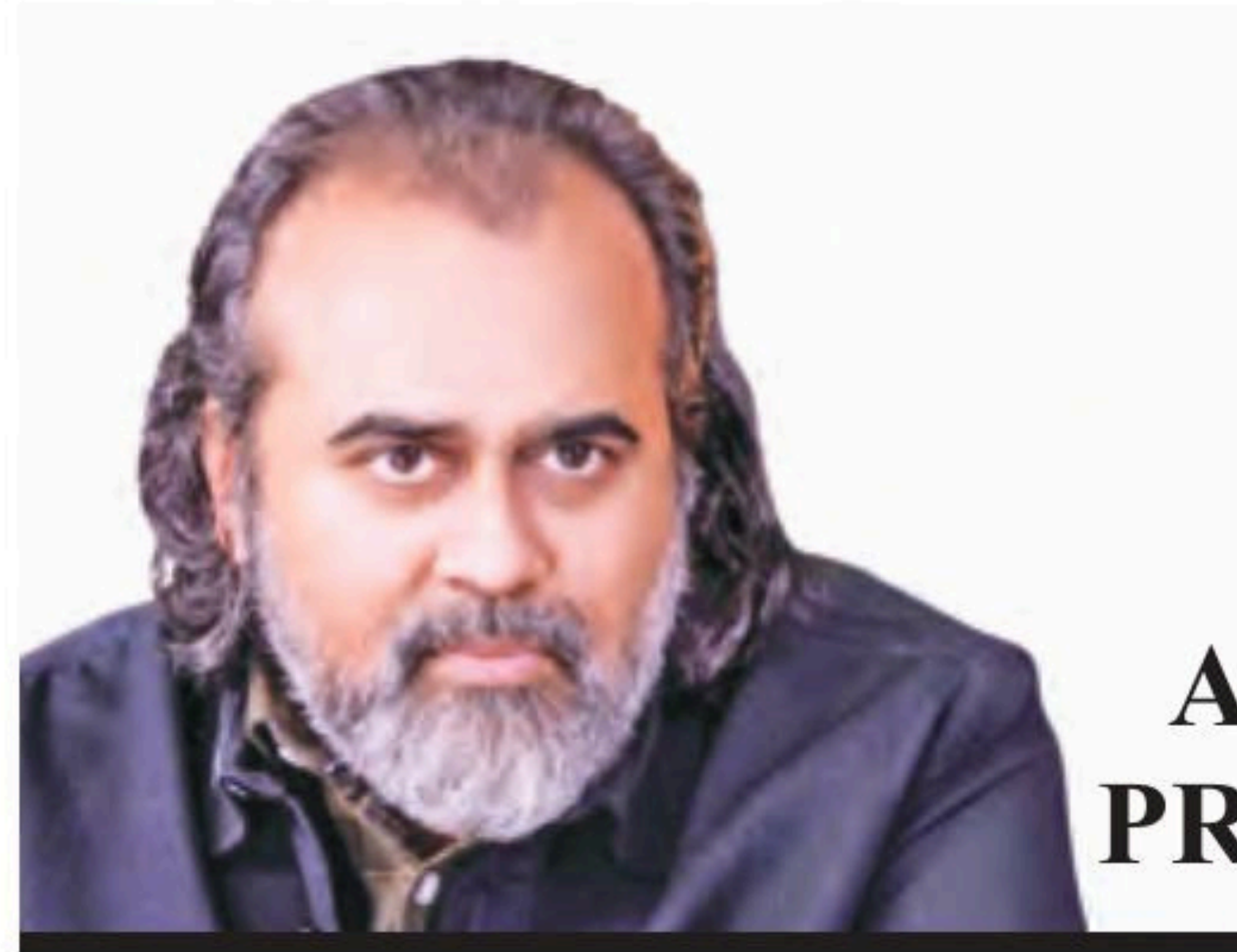




New Regimes, Ancient Hunger: Women as First Casualty



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There is a question beneath the question whenever a society turns its full legislative attention to what a woman wears, where she walks, whether her voice may be heard in a public space, and how much pain her body may absorb before the law takes notice. That deeper question is never asked aloud, because to ask it would be to expose the one who is asking. The surface question is about morality, order, divine commandment or civilisational continuity. The deeper question is about what kind of mind requires all this legislation in the first place; what it is so afraid of, and what it so desperately wants.

We will come to that question. But first, the facts. In the years before 1996, women in Afghanistan made up around 40 percent of the country's doctors and formed the backbone of the education system. Under the first Taliban government, they were removed from all of these positions within months; windows were painted black so women could not be seen from the street; a woman's laughter, audible to men, became a punishable offence. The Republic era that followed restored a portion of what had been destroyed:

by 2021, 3.5 million girls were back in classrooms and domestic violence had been criminalised by law. When the Taliban returned, girls were banned from school, then women from universities. In February 2026, a new criminal code repealed protections against domestic violence, replacing them with a provision permitting husbands to beat their wives and children, provided no bones are broken and no wounds remain visible.

The Confessor's Logic

A society's legal imagination is its most honest self-portrait. The men who drafted the February 2026 provision spent their legislative energy calculating how much damage a woman's body may absorb before the damage becomes legally inconvenient. A government that legislates how much a woman may bleed is not protecting morality. It is revealing its fear.

Watch what happens when a man demands that a woman cover herself completely, that her clothing seal every surface from public view, that even her voice not carry beyond the walls of her home. He presents this as moral hygiene, as the protection of social order, as fidelity to divine

commandment. What he does not present, because he cannot see it, is what the demand discloses about himself. If lust fills the eye, a wrist becomes a provocation; a strand of hair becomes a crisis requiring enforcement. The morality police who arrested Mahsa Amini in September 2022 for what they judged to be improper hijab were not enforcing some divine law. Amini died in their custody three days later. What those men were enforcing was the terror of minds that cannot encounter a woman without the encounter becoming, for them, entirely sexual. The veil is not placed on the woman. It is placed on the man's inability to see her as anything other than a body. In Iran, women marched for the very revolution that stripped them of nearly everything within months. The revolution promised dignity; it delivered the morality police. The women who helped topple one regime became the first casualties of the regime they installed.

The Ego's First Territory

The woman's body is the ego's oldest possession. Before there were nations, before there were property laws, before there were armies, the female body was the boundary marker of lineage, of honour, of a man's legible identity within his community. Her control is not incidental to social order; it is its announcement. When she is controlled, the consolidating power has declared its territory. When she moves freely, the collective ego remains unsettled, for she represents the limit of its jurisdiction.

The unexamined ego consumes. The patriarchal itemisation of a woman's use-value has been consistent across cultures and centuries: her body's labour, her body's pleasure, her body's reproductive capacity. Japan's once-common phrase for an unmarried woman past twenty-five, 'unsold Christmas cake' to be discounted after the holiday, is the patriarchal ego stating, that a woman's value is her availability to male consumption.

The Deeper Wound

Oppression becomes durable only when it is internalised. When a society trains its men to see women exclusively as bodies, it trains its women to see themselves the same way. A young girl stands before a mirror and believes she is asking herself whether she looks good. She is not. She is asking whether she looks attractive to the opposite sex; the question has already been installed in her, so seamlessly that it feels like her own. She has lost her own gaze without knowing it, and she will spend years looking at herself through eyes borrowed from the street.

Consider a parable: A shepherd was troubled that his sheep kept escaping. He gathered his flock and told them: you are not sheep; you are lionesses. We do not slaughter you here; we honour you, we protect you, you are sacred to

us. The sheep, pleased by the elevation, stopped trying to escape. More than that: when one sheep, unconvinced by the parable, moved toward the gate, the others pulled her back. They reported her to the master. They said: she thinks she is a sheep; she does not understand that she is a lioness; she needs to be corrected. The master thanked them and continued his harvest undisturbed. Across the world and across centuries, women have been told versions of this story. Your restriction is your protection; your dependence is your dignity; your submission is your spiritual strength; motherhood is your highest calling. The locked cage is less reliable than the cage that the prisoner has been persuaded to love.

The women who marched for Khomeini in 1979 were not naive. They were not betrayed by the revolution. They were betrayed by the unexamined ego at its centre, which was the same ego they had marched against, wearing a different flag. Nearly one in four Indian women is still married before the legal age of eighteen. No one polices the cage more efficiently than the prisoner who is persuaded that it is her natural home. External liberation without inner transformation will always be reversible.

What Must Change, and Where

The Taliban's most strategically significant act since their return is not the February 2026 beatings provision. It is the ban on girls' secondary education. A woman who can read a legal text, earn independently, and examine the terms of her own existence cannot ultimately be governed by a law that requires her silence and her pain. She can be coerced; she can be imprisoned; she can be killed. But she cannot be made to believe her cage is a palace. And it is precisely that belief, not the bars, that the system requires for its stability.

The question the Taliban's February 2026 law raises is ultimately not only political. It is civilisational: what quality of consciousness produces such an act, and what would have to change, not merely in law but in the human being, for such an act to become genuinely unthinkable?

It is addressed to the woman reading this who recognises, in some version of the pattern described here, something of her own life. Not as a verdict on her past, but as an invitation.

The cage was built from the outside, but the belief that makes it hold was installed from within, and while others may point to the door, the step across the threshold belongs to no one but her. Others will free you only to the edge of their own understanding. Beyond that edge, you must see for yourself. Liberation is not given. One arrives at it by honest seeing.

The Pioneer
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