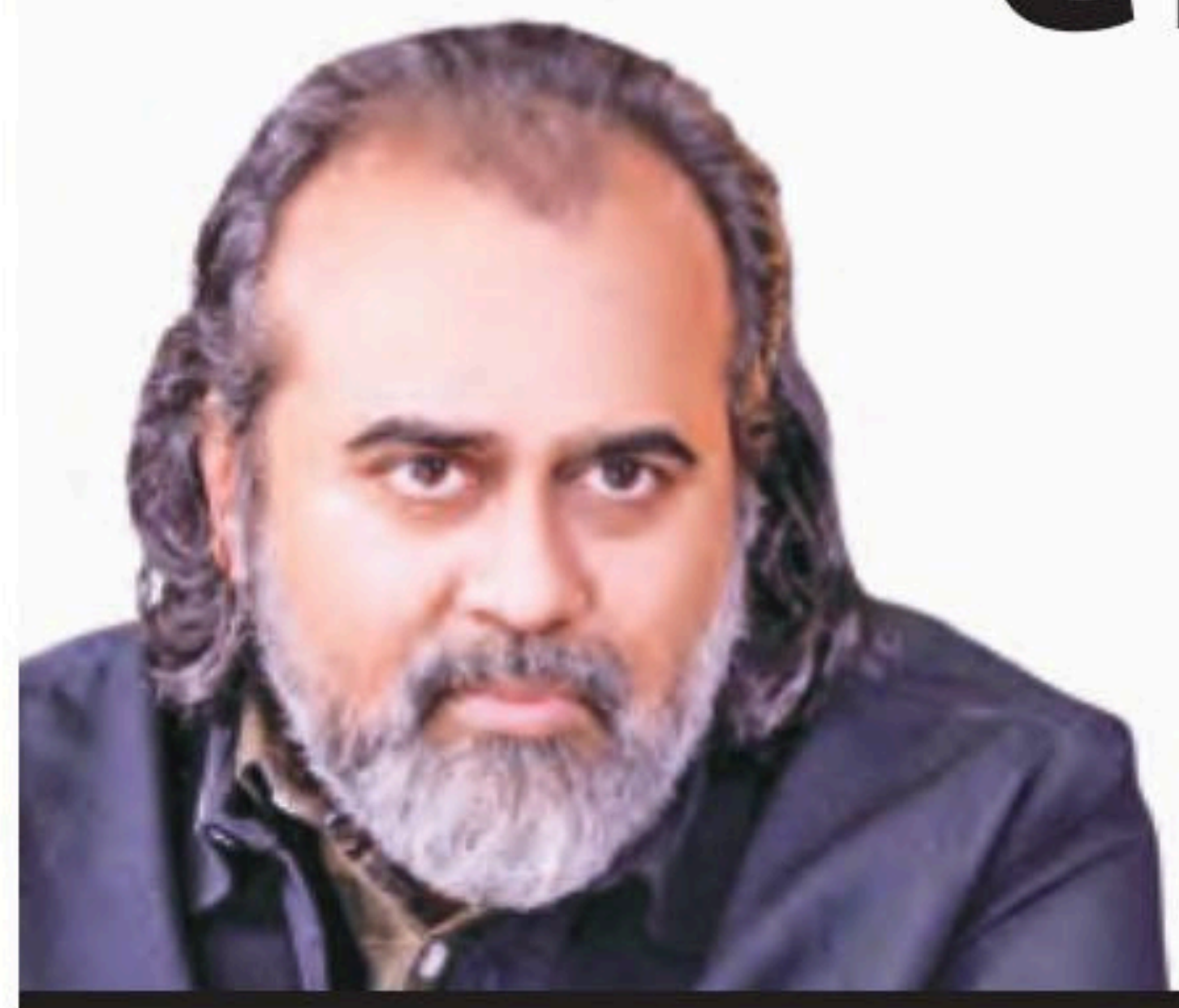




Ballots in a burning world: What elections cannot vote away



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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. The ballot does not measure aspiration. It measures the voter. And what the voter is, in any given moment, is precisely what the government of that moment will reflect back, faithfully, without apology and without the capacity to be otherwise.

The question worth sitting with is not which candidate deserves your trust, but what kind of person you are when you enter that booth. The ballot 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 is largely determined before election day, and no party, no charismatic face on a lamppost can correct what has not been examined within you.

The apple orchards of Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir are failing. Not because of poor agricultural policy, but because the temperature at which apple trees flower and fruit is no longer reliably available at the altitudes where those orchards stand. The glaciers feeding the rivers that sustain this subcontinent are retreating at rates that scientists describe as historically unprecedented; the Ganga, the Brahmaputra, and the Indus all draw from ice that is now diminishing, and the hundreds of millions 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. India holds nearly eighteen per cent of the world's population but has access to only four per cent of its freshwater; six hundred million citizens face high to extreme water stress. More than a million Indians die each year from air pollution, a toll that exceeds the annual dead of most wars, appearing in no manifesto as an emergency.

Not one of these facts appears as a central concern in any election campaign, not because politicians are uniquely incompetent, but because the voter has not demanded them. In a democracy, the politician is not a leader. He is a follower, and it is almost never said.

Consider what a democracy actually is, struc-

turally. The leader arrives in power because enough people preferred him; he stays by continuing to reflect what enough people prefer. He cannot walk ahead of the people; he walks behind them and calls it leadership. The politician who tells the electorate that their comforts are incompatible with a survivable future would not survive the next election. This is not a moral failing. It is the arithmetic of the system.

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 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. A survey in late 2023 found that only eight per cent 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 towards 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 mobilises voters through caste arithmetic, communal anxieties, regional resentments, and the promise of freebies may be, in private life, a perfectly ordinary person. He performs what the crowd requires because the crowd's requirements are the condition of his survival. He is the mirror, and the mirror shows you what you brought to it. The ugliness in the political sphere is not imported from somewhere outside society. It is ours, amplified and returned.

And here is where it becomes personal: who produces the political class we keep condemning? According to the Association for Democratic Reforms, forty-six per cent of newly elected members of Parliament had declared criminal cases, up from twenty-three per cent in 2004. A candidate with criminal cases had a winning probability of 15.3 per cent; a clean candidate had just 4.4 per cent. The electorate was more likely to elect someone with a criminal record than someone without. 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.

Why does this happen? When a voter who feels diminished encounters a candidate, voting for that candidate can feel like a further act of self-diminishment. But voting for someone who shares your rough edges feels like victory. We won; our kind won. The ego does not choose the best candidate; it chooses the one who makes its own condition feel legitimate, through caste, region, religion, language, sub-caste, and the 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. 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 tolerance for collective disorder, their unwillingness to demand better of the world because they have not yet demanded 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; what needs to change is not the form but the person casting the vote.

The crises threatening us were not produced by governance failures, but by billions of individual choices, each driven by the ego's structural conviction that fulfilment lies in accumulation. The richest ten per cent of the world generate roughly half its carbon emissions; India's expanding middle class is entering precisely the consumption register that produced this crisis elsewhere. It is a crisis of an ego with no sufficiency point, not from malice, but from a vacancy that no acquisition has ever filled. No ballot addresses this vacancy. Politics operates at the level of expressed preferences; it cannot reach below those preferences to the psychological soil in which they grow. Only a teacher indifferent to approval can walk ahead of the people and say what the campaign rally is 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, for the most part, older than you. The parties come and go; the earth does not. And the person who must decide what to do about that is not on any stage or any poster. That person is reading this.

This is not a counsel of disengagement: vote, because it is a responsibility, and in the absence of wisdom, one chooses the lesser disorder. Vote for those who name water security and ecological survival in their manifesto rather than confecting grievances along every available line of identity. But vote knowing what the ballot is and is not. It is the last act of a long inner drama.

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 in you is producing the world you keep hoping someone else will fix.

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