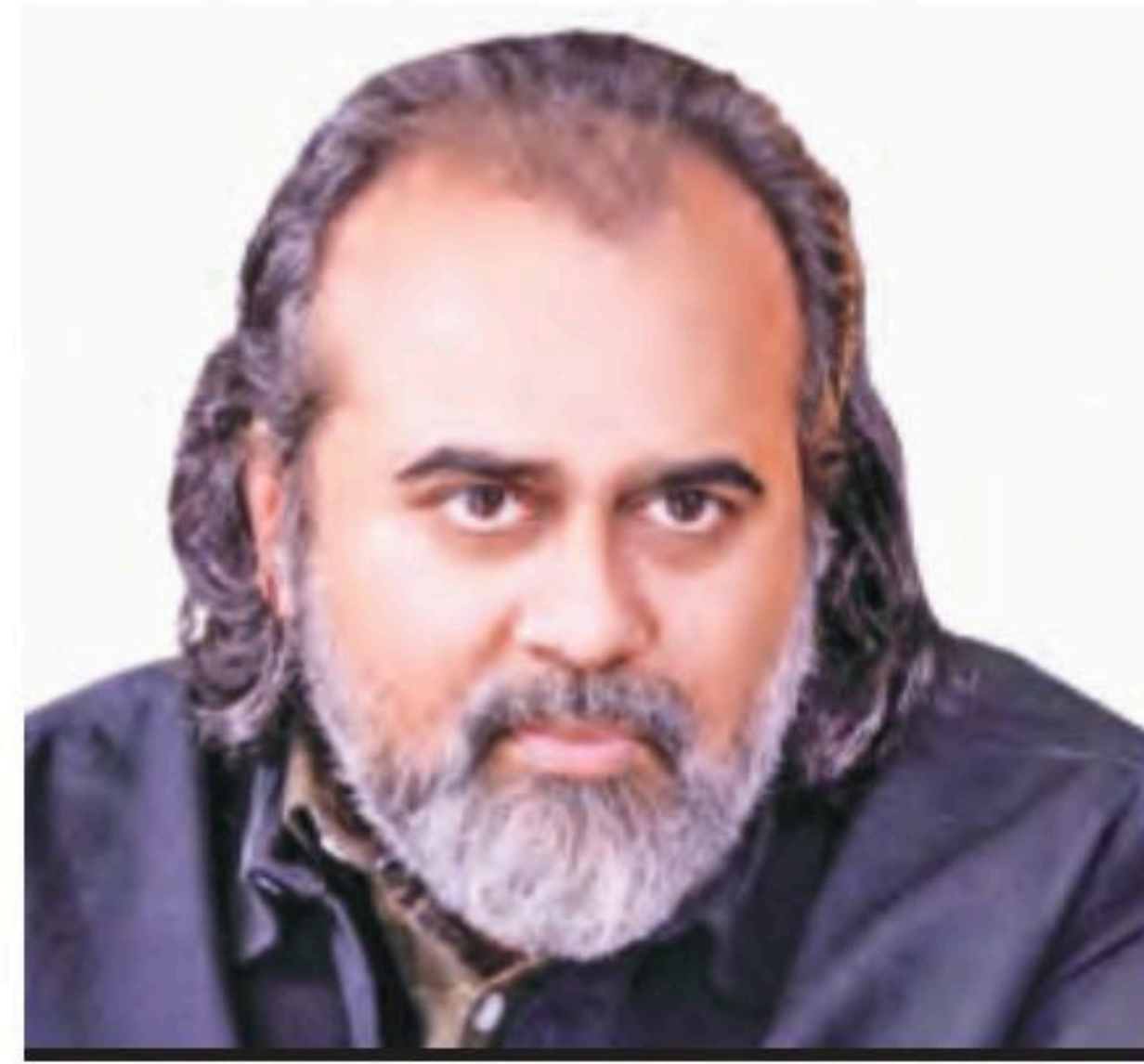




‘Super monday’: Boredom as ballot, spectacle as sovereignty



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On the fourth of May, three sitting Chief Ministers lost power and a film star became the likely next chief minister of Tamil Nadu. The vocabulary that surrounded these results was, as always, ceremonial: “mandate,” “popular verdict,” “historic upheaval,” words that imply an electorate exercising considered judgment. That courtesy is not incidental to electoral democracy; it is load-bearing. Without it, the ceremony would be required to account for itself more honestly.

Mamata Banerjee, who had governed West Bengal for fifteen years, lost her own seat at Bhavanipur as her party was routed by the BJP. MK Stalin lost his own Kolathur seat to a TVK debutant. In Kerala, the CPM yielded after a decade of consolidated dominance. And in Tamil Nadu, the man

who will in all likelihood be the next chief minister is Vijay, a film star whose manifesto is considerably newer than some of his blockbusters. The analysts called it a historic upheaval. The vocabulary worked overtime.

What actually happened is considerably simpler, and considerably less flattering to the idea of the voter as a sovereign exercising considered judgment: the voter got bored.

This is not anti-incumbency, and the distinction is not academic. Anti-incumbency implies a specific form of disappointment, a government that made promises, fell short, and was held to account by an electorate that was paying attention. What the results reveal is something far more ordinary and far more intractable. The ego, the actual unit of electoral action beneath all the aggregated data, has a structural relationship with its objects: it seeks them, uses them, grows accustomed to them, grows tired of them, and moves toward the next available option. Not because the object failed to deliver, but because the ego’s restlessness is not produced by the object at all. The source of the restlessness is the ego itself, a fact it will not examine, and so it keeps changing what surrounds it in place of changing what it is.

Consider what the DMK-AIADMK history in Tamil Nadu reveals. For close to fifty years, the Tamil electorate sorted itself between two parties sharing a genealogy, a vocabulary of symbols, and a shared claim to represent something deeper than mere preference for a face. If that commitment had been real, the abandonment could not have happened at the speed and scale at which it happened. What dissolved was not commitment but attachment, and attachment has shallow roots, which is precisely why it can be uprooted so quickly when someone arrives with a more luminous image. Vijay’s ascent does not represent a rejection of Dravidian politics; it represents the unmasking of what Dravidian politics always was for most of its voters: an attachment to a style of performance. When the performance grew familiar and another, more spectacular, became available, the audience drifted. Nothing in this deserves the name of democratic awakening.

The most instructive Indian example is not from Super Monday but from nearly half a century ago. The 1977 general election, fought in the immediate aftermath of the Emergency, produced what appeared to be the most morally charged verdict in independent India’s history. A population that had suffered suspension of civil liberties, forced sterilisations, and press censorship voted the Congress out. Within three years, the Janata coalition had collapsed. And in 1980, the same electorate returned Indira Gandhi to power with a large majority. The voter who had risen in passionate defence of democracy voted back the person who had suspended it, within a single electoral cycle. If anti-incumbency were a real phenomenon, this reversal would be inexplicable. As an expression of the ego’s boredom cycle, it requires no explanation.

What the actor-politician reveals is not an aberration but a confession, and the South deserves credit for the candour its critics mistake for political naivety. Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh have a long history of electing professional actors to their highest offices: MGR, NTR,

and now, in all probability, Vijay. When a state elects a film star as its chief minister, it is not making an error in judgment; it is acknowledging, without the decorum that dresses the same reality up elsewhere, that the electorate has always been choosing between images. The professional actor has trained for precisely what electoral competition demands: the projection of an image that an audience will find compelling, and the calibration of emotion for people who did not gather to be informed but to be moved. The North’s politicians are also actors, the rally, the roadshow, the calculated display of righteous anger, the tears that arrive on cue, but they do not describe themselves in those terms, and the voter colludes in not naming what is clearly visible. The South has, in this specific sense, arrived at a more transparent arrangement.

The voter who surveys the Super Monday results and asks what went wrong with Mamata’s Bengal or Stalin’s Tamil Nadu will find abundant material: misgovernance, administrative complacency, accumulated resentment. All of it is available, but none of it reaches the root. The fifteen years of Trinamool rule were chosen, ratified, and extended by the same people who have now chosen something else. If the government was what it was, it is in significant part because the electorate was what it was, and the electorate is not substantially different now: only restless in a new direction, bored of the last face, freshly attached to the current one.

But a consolation is also, by definition, a substitute: what one performs instead of the thing one cannot bring oneself to do. Toppling a chief minister is what the voter does in place of examining himself. It is the change that keeps the real change at bay, the noise that fills the silence in which an inconvenient question might have become audible. There is, beneath all the noise of Super Monday, only one question worth asking, and it will not be put to air on any channel: if the voter has changed his government for the seventh or the tenth or the fifteenth time, and if the problems said to have motivated each successive verdict, dignity, employment, security, fairness, ordinary safety, continue in their essential form despite every renewal and every fresh mandate, at what point does the continuous ceremony of changing governments begin to look less like the exercise of popular sovereignty and more like the elaborate, inexhaustible activity of a self that has decided, with extraordinary thoroughness, never to examine what has not changed?



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