

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

How Gen-Z Protest Reclaimed Democracy in India

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Introduction

While a number of South Asian nations experienced a string of Gen-Z uprisings in varying intensities (in some cases like Nepal and Bangladesh, they brought down the regimes), India, the region's biggest country with largest youth cohort had evaded the broad regional trends for some time. In fact, many commentators were dismissive that a large and diverse country like India would not experience something like Nepal and Bangladesh. To everyone's surprise, India witnessed one of the most intense Gen-Z protests in mid-May which lasted over a month and half forcing one of the powerful governments to submission. Not only was the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was forced to fulfil all the key demands of the protestors particularly the removal of India's Education Minister.

India's Gen Z Protest: A Snapshot

On 15 May, Chief Justice of India Mr. Surya Kant made a disparaging remark where he compared unemployed youth to "cockroaches" and "parasites." He remarked that these youths were resorting to cheap journalism, social media and activism to "attack the system"¹. Deeply offended by the crass remarks, Abhijeet Dipke, a recent Boston University graduate casually floated an online satirical party named the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) to ridicule the Chief Justice and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). To his surprise, in less than a week, CJP's Instagram account attracted more than 20 million followers, easily surpassing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP's social media followers (8.7 million)². Such response to CJP created considerable anxiety and much panic in the ruling establishment which used national security threat to block CJP's social media handles³. This invited much greater outrage where youths launched dozens of new accounts in the name of CJP while the issues raised by

¹ *The Hindu*. 2026. "Oral Remarks and Institutional Limits." <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/oral-remarks-and-institutional-limits/article71002054.ece>.

² Kateel, Avinash. 2026. "Cockroach Party Beats BJP on the 'Gram with 10 Million Followers in 5 Days.'" *India Today*. May 21. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/cockroach-janta-party-10-million-followers-on-instagram-bjp-followers-cji-remarks-genz-youth-2914805-2026-05-21>.

³ Philips, Jacob and Azadeh Moshiri. 2026. "India's Cockroach Janta Party Claims Website Has Been Blocked." *BBC News*. May 23. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cddpq71866do>.

the portals became instant hit among youth⁴. The CJP which led to a flood of memes, parodies, reels and cartoons mimicking the serving politicians and mocking the ruling party and its failures on many fronts, particularly its glaring failures to conduct national medical examination (NEET), finally took the shape of street protests in several cities and towns in early June.

In response to the demands, the federal government showed little or no interest to talk to engage with the protestors. Instead, it launched aggressive misinformation campaigns targeting the key leaders of the protest blaming them as foreign funded and planted by opposition parties. After receiving no positive response from the ruling dispensation, the CJP leadership launched a hunger strike on June 28. As the days progressed, the hunger protest acquired greater national attention (particularly noted educationist and climate activist Sonam Wangchuk joining the fast⁵) as more and more people started pouring from all parts of the country. Despite its best efforts (prohibitory measures, internet shutdown, massive propaganda warfare, brutal police crackdown), the Modi government failed to arrest the protest which received wider support as more and more youth descended to Jantar Mantar. The turning point came when Delhi police launched brutal crackdowns on peaceful protestors on 20 July near the Parliament street and Jantar Mantar. The visuals of police mercilessly beating unarmed protestors triggered massive backlashes against the government as the movement spread to dozens of cities. Finding itself boxed in a corner, the Modi government finally conceded the key demand of the protest: removal of the education minister. For the first time in 12 years, one of the most powerful governments was forced to shunt out a key minister and agreed to initiate a series of education reforms.

What are the key triggers for the Gen Z protests?

While Justice Kant's insulting remarks triggered widespread protests in the forms of memes, parodies and AI-satires, there was a constellation of factors that were waiting for a trigger. Mr. Kant's crass remarks came at a time of growing anger over the government's persistent failures to make exams leak proof. The immediate trigger for protests was paper leak (in May 2026) involving the national medical entrance examination (NEET) which attracts millions of students every year.⁶ This incident angered millions of students and their parents about the glaring failures of the education ministry in checking the paper leaks. Not only this, a school student exposed the evaluation errors of papers for the Central Board of School Education (CBSE) which is attended by millions. Such glitches which the 17-year-old student demonstrated in the social media angered millions of students blaming the education ministry for compromising the exam system⁷. Both controversies which were relentlessly played in television shows and social media created massive outrage not only among large student populations but also among the middle class – long a strong supporter of the Modi government – which felt betrayed by the incompetency of the departments concern and sheer callousness of the Modi government.

⁴ Mateen, Zoya. 2026. "Indian Politics Has Acquired an Unusual Mascot: The Cockroach." *BBC News*. May 21. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz72y11jjq1o>.

⁵ *The Hindu*. 2026. "Sonam Wangchuk Joins CJP Protest, Begins Hunger Strike at Jantar Mantar." June 29. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/sonam-wangchuk-joins-cjp-protest-begins-hunger-strike-at-jantar-mantar/article71157421.ece>.

⁶ *Frontline*. 2026. "NEET-UG Protests Give a Fractured Opposition Its Common Cause." May 26. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/neet-leak-opposition-unity/article71017387.ece>.

⁷ BBC News. 2026. "Hacking Claims, Mismatched Answer-Sheets: Controversies Rock School Exam in India." May 28. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy42e8eljpno>.

What furthered the anger was government's perceived indifference and general lack of accountability. Not only the education minister failed to provide any clear answer to frequent paper leaks and prevailing corrupt practices involving private coaching centers and education bureaucracy, when students themselves exposed the vulnerability of CBSE marking system, the ruling party spokespersons and their media outlets accused them as "Pakistani agents". Thus, the government's callous handling of the issue, its lack of ownership, and its diversionary tactics of passing the blame on others not only infuriated the youth but also invited unprecedented rage, particularly on social media.

While these were immediate triggers for protest, much stronger and invisible triggers came from growing frustrations over price rise fueled by energy supply disruptions and rapid decline in tech jobs⁸ and widening youth unemployment despite India's high growth trajectory. As per a recent report⁹ there is an alarming decline in decent jobs, making as much as 40 per cent of youth (aged 15-25) unemployed. While India has witnessed a massive expansion of higher education in last decades, job creation in secure and regular work segments has not kept pace with the expansion. Only about 7 per cent of unemployed youth secure salaried jobs. Many are forced into informal gig work or low paying jobs. In short, there was a perfect storm that was brewing. The growing anxiety among India's Gen Z was recently captured in a Deloitte global Survey¹⁰. The report revealed that the Gen Z born between 1995 and 2007 report higher financial stress, with majority highlighting home affordability challenges and financial insecurity. It further said youngsters are worried that their problems could deepen as artificial intelligence is beginning to eat away entry-level roles in country's vast back-office IT industry. Of course, these AI-driven disruption trends are not unique to India as many countries are currently impacted by this development. But given India's huge youth cohorts and IT sector being a major employment sector, this trend is creating huge uncertainty and growing despair among the recent graduates.

Third was the anger and frustration over India's "toxic" exam system that is taking a heavy toll on young people. More and more youth are now forced to spend a huge amount of money (often pushing parents into heavy debt) and time in private coaching centers and expensive tutorials to crack the highly competitive exams. For instance, this year's medical entrance exam attracted as many as 2.2 million students for a measly 130,000 seats. The intense pressure on students often leading to many cases of suicide and depression.¹¹ Since the first exams in May, as many as 12 students committed suicides till the re-exam was conducted in June, reflecting a deep crisis in current education system.¹² A well-known economist calls this India's polycrisis¹³ - high unemployment, an

⁸ *India Today*. 2026. "Tech-Related Hiring in India at All-Time Low, Software Engineers Hit Hardest: Study." June 23. <https://www.indiatoday.in/jobs/story/tech-related-hiring-in-india-at-all-time-low-software-engineers-hit-hardest-study-tchc-2932510-2026-06-23>.

⁹ Azim Premji University. 2026. "State of Working India 2026: India's Young Workforce Is Growing and Getting More Educated." March 17. <https://azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/news/2026/state-of-working-india-2026-indias-young-workforce-is-growing-and-getting-more-educated>.

¹⁰ Reuters. 2026. "India's 'Cockroach' Group Goes Viral, Spotlights Gen Z Worries." May 21. <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-cockroach-group-goes-viral-spotlights-gen-z-worries-2026-05-21/>.

¹¹ Ellis-Petersen, Hannah. 2026. "'What If All Cockroaches Came Together?' The Youth Movement Threatening to Shake Up India's Politics." *The Guardian*. June 8. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jun/08/cockroach-janta-party-youth-movement-india-politics>.

¹² *The Indian Express*. 2026. "Ahead of NEET Re-Test, 12 Suicides in 37 Days." June 20. <https://indianexpress.com/article/education/ahead-of-neet-re-test-12-suicides-in-37-days-10748475/>.

¹³ *The Hindu*. 2026. "In Focus Podcast | Decoding India's Polycrisis: Ailing Economy, Broken Education System, Acute Unemployment." June 25. <https://www.thehindu.com/podcast/in-focus-podcast-decoding-indias-polycrisis-ailing-economy-broken-education-system-acute-unemployment/article71142494.ece>.

ailing economy, and a failing education system - accelerating a huge demographic crisis despite the youth bulge. The worse affected by this polycrisis are youth who are at the receiving end of a broken education system that does not provide market required skills and training and yet victimizes them as clearly seen in the remarks of Mr. Kant.

Finally, the Gen Z and their growing online political activism were clearly influenced by the successful youth protests in the immediate neighborhood, particularly Nepal. The dramatic political transformation in Nepal which saw the overthrow of a corrupt regime and the unprecedented victory of Balen Shah largely powered by the Gen Z support in many ways has provoked the social media savvy young generation in India. India's social media platforms have been flooded with AI-generated memes, dark humor, and parody posts borrowing ideas from Nepal's and Bangladesh's student activism particularly how children of politicians are studying abroad (calling them 'nepo-kids', mocking the rich for brazenly showing their wealth, and highlighting growing inequality, among others.¹⁴

Will Gen Z Protest Reshape India's Democratic Recovery?

The unexpected success of CJP-led protest has produced several positive outcomes: some immediate and many long term ones. Although the Gen Z protest did not result in regime changes like Nepal and Bangladesh, it is no less impactful. First, despite Modi government controlling more than two-thirds of state governments and its iron grip over every democratic institution including the judiciary and its hegemonic control of information and narratives, the CJP movement took less than 50 days to shake the very foundation of a powerful government forcing it to negotiate with protesting students. The Gen Z protest and its unprecedented popularity forced the government to shunt out its education minister and a political heavyweight, the first such act by the Modi government in its 12 years' tenures. Not only this, sensing the growing resentment among youth and the middle classes (its core support base), the government swiftly passed a bill promising to severely punish people involved in compromising the exam system. Importantly, the government conducted the retake medical exam with all seriousness (deploying Air Force to deliver question papers, banning Telegram¹⁵). In short, the most visible and immediate outcome of the CJP protest is that some modicum of democratic accountability, missing for years, has finally been restored - for now. Encouraged by the success of CJP movement, thousands of young people who earlier spent time of digital activism have taken charge of local issues such as school education and government accountability in their areas. The CJP protest and its success has now spread to small towns and hinterlands across the country where even school going children (Gen Alpha) have begun protesting over sanitation, absentee teachers and poor quality of facilities¹⁶. Spurred by this, the CJP leaders have launched a new movement called School

¹⁴ *South China Morning Post*. 2026. "Could India's Viral Cockroach Janta Party Spark South Asia's Next Youth Uprising?" June 14. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3356962/could-indias-viral-cockroach-janta-party-spark-south-asias-next-youth-uprising>.

¹⁵ *The Indian Express*. 2026. "Air Force Jets, Isolated Setters, Telegram Ban: Inside the Centre's War Footing for NEET UG Re-Test." June 18. <https://indianexpress.com/article/education/neet-ug-2026-re-exam-nta-war-footing-paper-leak-education-ministry-air-force-transport-telegram-ban-10744098/>.

¹⁶ *India Today*. 2026. "Move Over Gen Z, a Gen Alpha Wave of Protests Has Spread to Five States in India." August 13. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/gen-alpha-genz-protests-india-students-demand-roads-toilets-teachers-school-children-2969682-2026-08-13>.

Theek Karo (improve school education) which is garnering wider societal support¹⁷.

Second and the most consequential impact of the CJP protest is that its surprise success has energized a dormant or closed civic space¹⁸. The momentum created by the CJP protest not only allowed scores of protestors to express their views without fear, criticize and mock the Prime Minister and his cabinet colleagues, but also spurred even teenagers and school goers to use hilarious (often profane) memes, videos, AI generated cartoons to ridicule the government and its unfulfilled promises¹⁹. In short, the lasting contribution of the CJP movement is that it greatly reduced “the fear of the regime”²⁰ as people who earlier were concerned about the repressive tactics of the regime got emboldened to ask hard questions on the performances of the government and its accountability which were missing for more than 12 years.

Third, the youth protest has done well to revive the lost debate on the state of democratic institutions in India. The CJP-led protest has triggered lively conversations on the role of the free media, independence of the judiciary and the Election Commission, free and fair elections and youth under-representation in key democratic forums. Spurred by the CJP success, youths and commentariats are raising hard questions about the ‘compromised’ democratic institutions such as courts, election commission, media (which acts more like government’s lapdogs) and the declining youth representation in parliament and state assemblies²¹. Media (which is increasingly owned and controlled by large businesses) is under intense scrutiny now for their partisan role during the protest.²²

Another unexpected outcome of this protest is it has hugely lessened the deepening polarization and divides in the polity and society. The Gen Z protests over 50 days witnessed open bonding and communal harmony among young people belonging to different religions. While Muslims wearing skull caps and Sikhs with their attires were happily embraced by the Hindus, the young protesters effectively countered the ruling party’s desperate and all-out efforts to communalize the protest. Scores of hate speeches were countered with humorous memes and cartoons by tech-savvy young protestors²³. The positive and secular spirits demonstrated by Gen Z protestors attracted multitudes of civil society actors and pressure groups such as farmers’ unions, minority organizations, left-leaning organizations, human rights and democracy defenders to make a common cause with youths and their demands.

¹⁷ Newslandry. 2026. “‘School Thik Karo’: Lakhs of Schools, Crores in Public Money, But Do They Meet the Basic Tests?” August 27. <https://www.newslandry.com/2026/08/27/school-thik-karo-taxpayers-pay-for-lakhs-of-schools-but-do-they-pass-the-basic-tests>.

¹⁸ Van Wessel, Margit, Rita Manchanda, and Nandini Deo. 2025. “How Civil Society in India Is Marginalized. Civic Space as Relational Process.” *Journal of Civil Society*, 21(3): 237-255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2025.2515038>.

¹⁹ Ali, Asim. 2026. “Revolt of the Cockroaches: How India’s Gen Z Humbled Modi.” *Time*. August 1. <https://time.com/article/2026/08/01/cockroaches-protests-gen-z-india-delhi-narendra-modi-prime-minister/>.

²⁰ *Frontline*. 2026. “The Atmosphere of Fear Is Gone Now: Saurav Das.” August 10. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/cjp-gen-z-protest-india/article71305131.ece>.

²¹ Mishra, Soni. 2026. “A Judge’s Jibe, a ‘Parody Party’, and a Generation’s Anger.” *Frontline*. May 30. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/cockroach-janta-party-gen-z-political-mobilisation-india/article71041637.ece>.

²² *The News Minute*. 2026. “How India’s Media Lost Its Nerve — and Its Money, Under PM Modi.” July 19. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/news/how-indias-media-lost-its-nerve-and-its-money-under-pm-modi>.

²³ Ali, Asim. 2026. “Revolt of the Cockroaches: How India’s Gen Z Humbled Modi.” *Time*. August 1. <https://time.com/article/2026/08/01/cockroaches-protests-gen-z-india-delhi-narendra-modi-prime-minister/>.

Conclusion

To sum up, while India's Gen Z protest did not result in regime change, the youth have facilitated much more enduring outcomes than their South Asian peers. The CJP movement has not only restored some modicum of accountability; it has forced the government to answer larger questions of education reforms, jobs, and institutional performance. Yet, where this movement has (unexpectedly) done exceedingly well is that it has opened the civic space by removing "the pall of fear". Not only are raucous public debates on free speech, media freedom, and the state of democracy, elected representatives and their performance, democratic institutions are back on the menu, but students even at the school level are now agitating over the quality of teaching and basic facilities. What CJP protest has shown is that the young generation can stand up to surveillance, censorship, fear and divisive politics of polarization which the regime deploys to maintain its hegemonic dominance. In short, the successes of the CJP opens the door for India's democratic recovery and accountable governance.■

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