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YOUTH PROTEST IN INDIA: PRESENT AND PAST

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

Youth have repeatedly been the most mobile section of Indian political life all along the journey from the Past to Present but the forms of Protest and their mindset are changed in the course of time from the era of freedom struggle to present days Gen Z move. This article compares the repertoire of youth protest in the freedom struggle (c. 1883–1942) with that of the Gen Z movement of 2026, which grew out of the NEET-UG examination-leak crisis and was led by the satirical Cockroach Janta Party (CJP). It compares trigger, actors, organisation, repertoire, state response, party linkage and external dimension. The past was marked by boycott, national education, secret societies, armed action and mass satyagraha, embedded in organised nationalism and aimed at ending colonial rule. The present is networked, satirical, largely public and focused on accountability within an elected system, but loosely organised and openly allied with opposition parties by October 2026. The article argues that continuity lies in grievance-driven mobilisation and in state responses that alternate between concession and coercion, while change lies in medium, organisation and political aim.

Keywords: *youth protest; student movements; Swadeshi and revolutionary nationalism; Generation Z; NEET paper leak*

Introduction

The history of student movements in India is not new.The movement took place in Bengal. In 1883, the students of Kolkata were able to start a public life by calling a bandh against the arrest of the state leader Surendranath Banerjee in Kolkata. Another student movement took place in Krishnanagar, Nadia, on July 13, 1884. Twenty-five students, including Nagendranath Majumdar, were arrested that day in a student-police clash. The lawyer for the accused in India's first student case was Manomohan Ghosh, India's first barrister and one of the first pioneers of women's education. Since then, the Indian subcontinent has witnessed numerous student movements. Not only have students taken to the streets to protest against various socio-political and administrative injustices, deprivations, and corruption, but their movements have also left the central and state governments in a state of disarray.

Today, the world is changing dramatically, but the common thing is that as it was in the past the present changes also come with the mindset of the youth in every sphere. Every radical change in society comes with the movement of young people. Presently In India, a large part of the population is counted under the youth segment. They are very much aware of the present facts, whether it is from the Socio-political or Socio-economic or anything else. They have a huge amount of information from the digital world, which merely depends on a single domain of knowledge. So the political bias of a particular media house could not impress them; instead, they are judging all the true facts in their own way and verifying it in several digital platforms for getting authentic information. Before Independence in India, when the maximum number of political leaders instigated the mass for the safest moderate mass movement for getting the political leverage but on the other hand the ignited youth followed the root of extremism and being fearless to eradicate the root of foreign rule by devoting their lives for their Nation and Motherland expecting nothing in return. Young people know where the problem lies and they are directly hit that target and move all out to achieve success. So the constitutional authorities of ruling party should address the problem at the initial state and take appropriate steps before it is getting late, prior to the involvement of foreign disturbing entities and by some other political parties for their vested interest. Present Gen Z and Gen Alpha require attention and to be handled with care and steps already been taken by Constitutional head of the Government to neutralize the issue.

Theoretical framing

Behavioral economics says that the effects of gains and losses on us are never, and never can be, symmetrical. A certain amount of gain brings us as much pleasure as a loss of the same amount brings us much more pain. This concept is called 'loss aversion'. The main content of the book 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments' by Adam Smith a professor of moral Philosophy, University of Glasgow, UK, somehow probably be the seeds of behavioral economics. Smith's main statement in the book is that there are two different forces at work in all of us all the time. The first force is 'passion' or emotion and the second is identified by Smith as the 'impartial spectator' or neutral observer. All our behavior is determined by the constant struggle between these two forces. Emotions control our hunger, sexual desire, fear, anger, pain, etc. The neutral spectator, on the other hand, acts like a completely calm, restrained, emotionless, disillusioned, far-sighted and moral person - he stands a little distance and sees all our desires, aspirations and needs, judges and analyzes them. In the terminology of modern economics, therefore, the first force can be called the 'short-sighted doer' (short-sighted worker) and the second force is called the 'far-sighted planner'. According to Smith, when we are faced with a decision that may bring us some immediate gratification but may cost us dearly in the long run, the neutral observer often awakens in us a sense of self-sacrifice and self-control. This does not mean, however, that we can always refrain from making such a decision. Smith says, "Man is often faced with such difficult situations that even the most intense self-control cannot completely suppress his weakness or control the violence of his emotions. In such situations, unfortunately, the neutral observer is completely immersed in the vortex of emotions."
Youth are full of emotions; they are selfless and highly motivated by their initial goal. So, if they set a target, they will fight till the end without thinking about the consequences. Most interestingly, this nature is the same among all the youth, irrespective of the Past and Present and older generations and Gen Z or Gen Alpha.

Literature review

Sarkar (1973) remains the standard account of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, documenting student boycott, national education and the official attempt to discipline students. Wolpert (1962) and Chandra et al. (1989) situate the Extremist wing (Lal–Bal–Pal: Lajpat Rai, B. G. Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal) within the Congress and analyse the Surat split of 1907. Heehs (1993) traces the revolutionary groups of Bengal, most of whose members were young. Brown (1948) and Popplewell (1995) are essential for the foreign dimension: the first documents German–Indian wartime contacts around the Ghadar movement, the second shows how British intelligence read nationalist activity through a security lens. The official Report of the Sedition Committee (Government of India, 1918) illustrates that lens in the colonial state's own words.
Because the 2026 movement is months old, peer-reviewed analysis is not yet available. This article therefore relies on court records, statutes and contemporaneous journalism, flagged as such, and places them beside the established historiography.

Methodology: The study uses qualitative comparative-historical analysis with documents. Source of data mainly from different secondary sources. Though we have different historical data from several Books and journal sources, as the recent movements are absolutely new, there are no such peer-reviewed citations in this area. So the data source mainly depends on Web content, Newspapers and News channels.

Objective: The main objective of this piece of work is to make a comparative analysis of the Past form of Youth Protest in India during our National Movement against colonial rule and the Present form of Youth movement against the failure of the Central Examination System, avoiding direct inclusion in constitutional politics .

Past form of protest

The partition of Bengal, announced in 1905 and implemented that October, became one of the earliest major episodes of sustained student mobilization in modern Indian nationalism. The Calcutta boycott resolution of August 1905 launched Swadeshi and boycott as methods, and students were among the most active picketers. The Bengal administration responded with the Carlyle Circular, which threatened institutions and students who joined political agitation. Nationalists replied by founding the National Council of Education in 1906, creating alternative schools outside government control (Sarkar, 1973). The Extremists argued that petitions to the colonial government had failed and that swaraj required self-reliance, boycott and passive resistance. At the Surat session in December 1907 the Congress split between this wing and the Moderates (Chandra et al., 1989; Wolpert, 1962). The state answered with prosecutions: Tilak was convicted of sedition in 1908 and transported to Mandalay, and the movement lost its most prominent leaders (Wolpert, 1962).
A smaller current turned to secret societies such as the Anushilan Samiti and the Yugantar group, drawing heavily on students and young men (Heehs, 1993). In April 1908, Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki attempted to kill magistrate Douglas Kingsford at Muzaffarpur, but their bomb killed two British women travelling in the targeted carriage. Bose was executed in August 1908, while Chaki died by suicide after being pursued.; in the Alipore bomb case that followed, Aurobindo Ghose was tried and acquitted (Heehs, 1993). In 1909 Madan Lal Dhingra assassinated a British official in London and was hanged. The Ghadar Party emerged in 1913 among Indian expatriates, especially Punjabi migrants, on the American West Coast, and sought to organise an armed uprising against British rule.
A second revolutionary wave followed in the late 1920s. In December 1928, revolutionaries associated with the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association killed Assistant Superintendent of Police J. P. Saunders in Lahore, in an act intended as retaliation for the assault on Lala Lajpat Rai; Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt threw non-lethal bombs in the Central Legislative Assembly in April 1929; Jatindra Nath Das died in September 1929 after a prolonged hunger strike in jail. Bhagat

Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were hanged on 23 March 1931. The Chittagong Armoury Raid of April 1930 under Surya Sen again relied on very young participants (Chandra et al., 1989).
The Rowlatt legislation of 1919 followed the recommendations of the Sedition Committee chaired by Justice Sidney Rowlatt, whose report was published in 1918, and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of April 1919 radicalised a new generation. During Non-Cooperation (1920–22) the Congress appealed to students to leave government institutions; Gandhi suspended the movement after the Chauri Chaura violence of February 1922, evidence that leaders feared losing control of youthful energy (Chandra et al., 1989). During Quit India in August 1942, with the senior leadership arrested within a day, students and young activists carried the agitation in decentralized form.

Present form of Protest

Across the world, especially in India and its neighbouring countries, Gen Z is using protests to challenge existing systems and demand democracy and equality. However, anger and disruption do not always lead to democratic change. When authorities ignore public dissatisfaction and institutions fail to protect democracy, protests may grow into major revolts. Therefore, recognizing the early signs of public anger is essential to prevent political unrest and protect democracy.
In 2024, the NEET-UG examination, conducted on 5 May for more than 23 lakh candidates, became the subject of extensive legal scrutiny following allegations of paper leaks and examination irregularities. The National Testing Agency (NTA) announced on 13 June that the scorecards of 1,563 candidates who had received compensatory marks would be withdrawn, offering the affected candidates the option of taking a re-test. On 23 July 2024, the Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice of India D. Y. Chandrachud, declined to order a nationwide re-test. The Court acknowledged that the question paper had leaked in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand, and Patna, Bihar, but concluded that the evidence available did not establish a widespread or systemic breach sufficient to justify cancelling the examination as a whole. On 1 August 2024, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) filed its first charge-sheet, naming thirteen accused in connection with the alleged paper leak and related irregularities. The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, was also part of the legal framework governing examination-related malpractice. Nevertheless, the controversy raised continuing concerns about examination security, accountability and the reliability of the medical admission process.
NEET-UG 2026 was conducted on 3 May 2026 and subsequently cancelled by the NTA on 12 May following allegations of a question-paper leak and concerns about the examination's integrity. The government referred the matter to the CBI for a comprehensive investigation. The NTA also announced that the examination would be conducted again, without requiring fresh registration or an additional examination fee. The re-examination took place in June 2026. These developments renewed public concern about the security of national entrance examinations and the consequences of examination irregularities for students and their families.
The term “Cockroach Janta Party” emerged in May 2026 following remarks by Chief Justice of India, Surya Kant, who referred to certain unemployed young people entering activism and social media as “cockroaches” during a court hearing. The remarks provoked criticism and public debate. The Chief Justice subsequently clarified that his comments were directed at individuals who had allegedly entered professional fields using fake or bogus degrees, rather than at young people generally. On 16 May 2026, digital communications strategist Abhijeet Dipke launched the Cockroach Janta Party as a satirical online political initiative. On 21 May, its X account was withheld in India, and Dipke announced a replacement account. The episode became part of a wider public discussion about youth unemployment, political expression and the relationship between public institutions and young citizens.
The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026, was introduced in the Lok Sabha on 27 July 2026, passed by the Lok Sabha on 29 July and passed by the Rajya Sabha on 30 July. According to the parliamentary record, the bill sought to amend the 2024 Act and strengthen the legal framework addressing malpractice in public examinations. The passage of the bill took place amid continuing debate about examination integrity and the government's response to allegations of paper leaks.

Deviation from initial Agenda

The clearest observable indicator of “deviation” is not only foreign funding but also the agenda. After the exam-related demands were largely met, the CJP, together with opposition parties and left student groups, held near-daily protests in October demanding the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar over a revision of the voter rolls.

Comparative analysis

The Extremist and Revolutionary Phase (1905–1931) and the Gen Z Examination Movement (2026) differ in their historical context, objectives, and methods, but both reflect public dissatisfaction with existing systems. The earlier movement was triggered by the Partition of Bengal, followed by the Rowlatt Acts and political repression, while the 2026 movement arose from NEET paper leaks, the CBSE marking controversy, and student suicides. The core grievance of the earlier movement was foreign rule and political and economic subjugation, whereas the Gen Z movement focused on failures of institutional integrity and the scarcity of educational opportunities. The earlier movement involved students, graduates, lawyers, extremist leaders, and secret societies, while the 2026 movement involved students and examination aspirants, a satirical online party, left-wing student bodies, and public figures. In terms of organisation, the earlier movement operated through Congress factions, secret societies, and national schools, whereas the Gen Z movement emerged largely through social media with a limited formal structure before

organised student wings joined it. Their methods also differed: the earlier movement used boycotts, Swadeshi, national education, armed action, and hunger strikes, while the Gen Z movement relied on memes, sit-ins, marches, hunger strikes, and litigation. The main aim of the earlier movement was to achieve Swaraj and end colonial rule, whereas the 2026 movement initially demanded a minister's resignation and legal and systemic reforms, later extending to electoral accountability. State responses to the earlier movement included sedition trials, executions, and circulars restricting students, while the Gen Z movement faced police action, restrictions on protest sites, government concessions, and the passage of a law. Politically, the earlier movement was embedded in Congress politics, whereas the Gen Z movement received open support from several opposition parties, although its political independence remained contested. Ultimately, the freedom struggle contributed to India's independence, with mass movements playing a decisive role, while the Gen Z examination movement secured quick concessions, but the broader struggle for accountability and systemic reform continues.

The main difference between the earlier form of Protest and the present form lies in the issues. During our National Movement, the main focus of our youth was to make our motherland free from foreign rule but in the present state the issues are different which is obvious on what situation demands. Still, the shifting of focus from the Examination, Recruitment and unemployment issue to the Electoral roll correction process and demanding the Resignation of the CEC (Chief Election Commissioner) is a major drift,(from pure academic arena to political sphere) which may require proper justification by the organisations that are in the leading role to establish that the present move is not politically biased or externally motivated.

India has always been known for its diversity, with people following different languages, religions, customs, and traditions. Now, generational differences are adding a new dimension to this diversity. Gen Z and Gen Alpha are growing up in a more connected and globally influenced India. They consume content, communicate, build communities, and view brands and authority differently from older generations. However, these differences should not be seen as a conflict between respecting traditions and questioning them.

Conclusion

As India moves towards celebrating 100 years of Independence, it remains a country full of contradictions. It is diverse, resilient, constantly changing, and full of differences. The founding fathers could not have imagined that Gen Z and Gen Alpha would become another important part of this diversity. They could not have predicted that young people would challenge traditional ideas with the confidence of having access to the whole world through their devices. But perhaps this is what makes India special. Every generation believes it can change the country, yet India continues to accept these changes without losing its identity.

The concentration of power in the hands of a few is making the problem worse. Many young people believe that the institutions meant to protect democracy are gradually becoming weaker. As a result, they feel that the country needs to change its direction. All political parties, opposition leaders, and those holding power must take steps to rebuild young people's trust in the political system and prevent it from declining further.

These CJPs or student organizations will no longer be able to build any real resistance by participating in the electoral process. The opposition political parties, which were supposed to build it in parliamentary democracy, are gradually transforming themselves into regional powers due to their abysmal failure, pushing themselves towards irrelevance. Although, according to world-renowned political philosopher Francis Fukuyama, this centralization of power to one party through the strong narrative of nationalism, identity politics, etc. and the opposition parties becoming marginal forces is a global trend of this time, but their helpless surrender, moving away from dominant political activities even in a dynamic political arena like India, is not a good sign for Indian Democracy. It is regrettable that the recent attempt by the main opposition parties to take refuge in symbiosis in the context of the success of a kind of political student movement. The way in which the opposition political parties are trying to strengthen themselves or maintain their relevance by taking refuge in student activists is a perfect example of the above symbiosis which is absolutely not a good sign for Indian Politics also.

At the end, we should expect the formation of a better India that will lead the world, as it did in the historic past, where our bright youth will participate and our constitutional authorities will leave no stone unturned to bring a smile in the faces of Young India.

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