

A crisis beyond education



A NATIONWIDE student uprising rarely begins with something as mundane as a leaked examination paper. Yet in India, that spark has ignited one of the largest youth mobilisations in recent memory. What began as outrage over recruitment irregularities has evolved into a generational revolt, symbolised by the satirical ‘Cockroach Janta Party’ — a label students reclaimed from a dismissive official remark and turned into a banner of contempt for a system they believe has failed them.

The revolt is not really about leaked papers. It is about the collapse of faith in meritocracy. A generation raised on promises of growth is discovering that education no longer guarantees opportunity, and institutions no longer guarantee fairness. To read the protests as anger over exam scandals is to

mistake the symptom for disease. What distinguishes this movement is not the irregularities themselves but the scale of the response: millions of young Indians openly questioning whether hard work and merit still lead anywhere. That question, once it takes hold across a generation, does not stay confined to universities and examination halls — it becomes a referendum on the credibility of the system as a whole.

This is the paradox at the heart of India's growth story. The economy expands at over 6 per cent a year, yet nearly 83 per cent of its unemployed are youth, most with secondary or higher education. The India Employment Report 2024 confirms the disconnect: unemployment runs substantially higher among educated youth than among less-educated workers, and the share of unemployed with secondary education has risen sharply over the past two decades. Three decades of expanding higher education, digital transformation, and world-class infrastructure have raised aspirations faster than they have created secure jobs. Each year, more graduates enter the labour market with better degrees and higher expectations, only to meet the same narrow set of openings.

That mismatch has made government employment more coveted than ever. Public-sector jobs promise stability, prestige, and a predictable career in an otherwise uncertain market, so recruitment examinations now attract hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions of applicants for a few thousand posts. In that context, a leaked paper is not an administrative lapse; it is a betrayal of the one promise that talent and effort will be rewarded on which millions have staked years of preparation and sacrifice.

Examinations occupy a place in Indian public life that has no real equivalent in most developed economies: they are simultaneously the gateway to higher education, public employment, and social mobility, and their legitimacy rests entirely on the belief that the process is fair. India has seen a succession of leaks, cancelled recruitment tests, delayed appointments, and prolonged litigation. Individually, each might look like an isolated failure; together, they signal that failure has become structural rather than exceptional. For candidates who spend years preparing, often at real financial cost to their families, the damage is not only material. It is the loss of confidence that success depends on merit rather than manipulation or incompetence.

That erosion of trust does not stay contained within education. Public institutions derive legitimacy not only from legal authority but also from citizens' confidence that they operate competently and fairly. Once that confidence weakens, every new controversy compounds the last rather than standing on its own. A recent controversy involving remarks by the Chief Justice became, for many students, further evidence of a governing class out of touch with a generation facing unemployment and closing doors. Their embrace of the 'Cockroach Janta Party' label was less a joke than a

declaration of alienation from institutions they see as distant and unaccountable.

None of this becomes systemic without an accountability deficit. Leaks and recruitment failures recur because responsibility stays diffuse and corrective action consistently lags the scandal. After more than a decade of political continuity under prime minister Narendra Modi, India has enjoyed policy stability and decisive leadership, genuine assets for a large and diverse democracy. But prolonged dominance can dull responsiveness if the mechanisms meant to enforce accountability fail to keep pace with it; a government can retain electoral legitimacy while growing steadily less attentive to accumulating grievances. To be fair, the government has moved quickly to announce enquiries and retesting after several of the more prominent leaks. But ad hoc fixes address individual scandals, not the structural pattern producing them -- and it is precisely that pattern the protesters are pointing to. Their demand is not only for fair examinations but also for institutions that remain credible, transparent, and accountable between scandals, not only during them.

Economic development never unfolds in a political vacuum. For the past decade, India's political discourse has been dominated by religion, nationalism, and cultural identity — themes many voters experience as a legitimate reaffirmation of heritage, even as their growing prominence has deepened polarisation and made consensus on shared economic challenges harder to sustain. The student uprising suggests those themes have limits. The protesters are not organising around religion or caste; they are demanding fair examinations, transparent recruitment, decent jobs, and institutions that

keep their promises — demands that cut across community lines because they stem from a shared experience of insecurity rather than a shared identity.

This does not mean identity politics has lost its pull. It means identity alone cannot indefinitely satisfy an educated generation confronting shrinking opportunity and an uncertain future. As economic pressure intensifies and institutional trust erodes, the politics of opportunity begin to compete with the politics of identity for the same voters, not replacing it but crowding it for space on the political agenda. Governments can shape narratives, but they cannot permanently redefine what citizens actually want. When young people stop believing that education leads to employment and merit leads to opportunity, economic reality tends to reclaim the agenda regardless of which narrative is dominant at the time.

The controversy over examination leaks will fade, as such controversies always do. Investigations will conclude, procedures will be adjusted, and the protests now filling the streets will subside. But unless the deeper structural tensions that produced this uprising are addressed, similar crises will resurface in new forms and around new triggers. India's student revolt is not simply about education; it is a developmental reckoning. Rapid growth has raised incomes and aspirations without securing fairness, accountability, and trust in equal measure -- and citizens, once their basic material needs are met, tend to expect all three together, not growth alone.

That lesson extends well beyond India. Many emerging economies have achieved impressive growth and expanded education, only to discover that when economic transformation outpaces institutional renewal, the gap between aspiration and opportunity becomes fertile ground for frustration,

alienation, and political discontent. The leaked papers were only the trigger. The deeper causes — educational expansion and rising aspirations colliding with a labour market and a set of institutions that have not kept pace with either — have been accumulating for years, largely out of public view until now.

India's next challenge, in other words, is not growth but governance. Unless institutions are renewed to restore public trust, the social contract will fray and democracy itself will weaken under the strain. Growth without fairness is not resilience; it is fragility disguised as success. How India responds to this generation's disillusionment will determine not only the prospects of its youth but the durability of its democracy and the credibility of its economic rise on the world stage.

Dr Golam Rasul is a professor of economics at the International University of Business, Agriculture and Technology, Dhaka, Bangladesh. He is a widely published scholar and a regular contributor to regional and international media on global development, geopolitics, and economic affairs