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**Modi's "Cockroach" Moment:
Is India's Gen Z Revolt Becoming a
Serious Threat to the BJP?**

By

Kipp Mann-Benn and Mollie Sinclair



16 September 2026

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For information about Rosa&Roubini Associates, please send an email to info@rosa-roubini-associates.com or call +44 (0)20 7101 0718.

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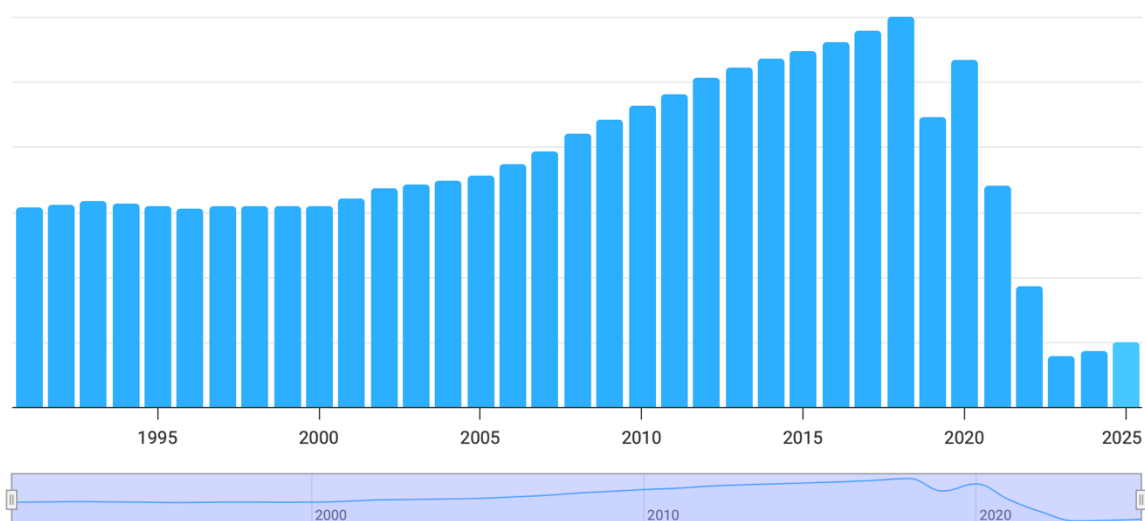
16 September 2026

Executive Summary

- ✦ Youth disillusionment with the BJP runs deeper than the exam scandal and predates Modi's tenure, with 40% unemployment among under-25s, social mobility constrained by caste, and private tuition spending that now exceeds the government's entire higher education budget, pointing to fifty years of underinvestment that no single resignation addresses.
- ✦ The NEET leak was a trigger rather than a cause, which is what makes the movement difficult to defuse. Conceding on the minister satisfies the proximate demand while leaving the structural grievances intact.
- ✦ The BJP's broadcasting dominance is structurally mismatched to the electorate it most needs to win, with 61% of under-25s seeking news from Instagram and 55% from YouTube, and its attempts to compete on those platforms having generated mockery rather than traction among the demographic it is trying to reach.
- ✦ The cockroach movement has dented Modi's personal brand more than his party's electoral position, with the education minister's resignation marking the first visible concession to street pressure in over a decade.
- ✦ The movement's political durability remains unproven, and comparable movements have dissipated once immediate grievances were partially addressed.
- ✦ Because the BJP does not intend to contest elections, its effect will turn on whether opposition parties can absorb its energy before Uttar Pradesh votes in 2027, and on how far Modi's standing has fallen among under-35s, a cohort that adds 10 million voters a year.

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Key Picture: India: Youth Unemployment Rate (1991–2025)



Source: [Macrotrends](https://www.macrotrends.net)

1. Origins of the Protests

A series of major exam leaks has forced millions of Indian students into retakes, including over 2 million medical students who were competing for just 130,000 spaces, with the scandal linked to over 20 suicides.¹ This coincided with the Chief Justice referring to India's unemployed youth as cockroaches and parasites, prompting Abhijeet Dipke to ask on X: 'What if all cockroaches come together?'²

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Dipke, a political communications strategist who previously worked with the Aam Aadmi Party, launched the satirical Cockroach Janta Party movement from Boston, before returning to India in June to lead it. The CJP, a mocking echo of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), gained over 25 million online followers, dwarfing the BJP's own online presence. Its traction comes from giving voice to students and families who have faced decades of hardship, captured in its tagline that doubles as a further jab at the BJP: "A political party for the people the system forgot to count". Notoriously intolerant of criticism, the BJP unsuccessfully tried to block the CJP's online accounts, citing national security concerns.

When longtime activist Sonam Wangchuk began an indefinite hunger strike in solidarity with the movement, his sacrifice reignited the protests, drawing national attention and broadening their reach beyond students³. The movement has since spread to over 30 cities across India⁴, where demonstrators have been met with a large police presence and official warnings, and Dipke has accused the BJP of inciting violence at them⁵. What started as a joke on X has since sparked a nationwide challenge to the government, a rare contest to Prime Minister Modi's authority, and, alongside Wangchuk's solidarity, has culminated in the resignation of India's education minister. Protesters say the movement is now bigger than the CJP itself, and that what is being mobilised is a generation which has spent years struggling against the same system.

2. Underlying Grievances

The anger driving India's Cockroach movement has not emerged overnight. The dissatisfaction is deeper than the multiple exam scandals and ministerial failures, as irregularities in education and chronic unemployment have persisted since the 1970s. The economic growth of the late twentieth century came without broad investment in education or private-sector job creation⁶, creating a dependency on government jobs that has been tightening since. The result is a system under extraordinary pressure. With over 40% of people under 25 unemployed and competition for jobs correspondingly fierce, entrance exams have become life-defining events. When those exams are compromised, as epitomised in the NEET scandal, it destroys years of struggle and financial sacrifice by students and their families.

Indian families now spend more on private tuition than the government allocates to its entire higher education budget.⁷ This financial burden hurts families who feel that exams and jobs can be bought rather than just passed. This dysfunction drives the Cockroach movement, which is seeking to overhaul the overly commercialised education system that extracts money from families while failing to deliver fair access and meaningful qualifications that translate into employment. Beneath all of this runs caste, which continues to constrain social mobility in India. Education is meant to be the equaliser, and in practice it has become another arena in which the same hierarchies are reproduced.

India has the world's largest youth population, with over 65% of its population under 35⁸. That population does not feel supported or reflected in the politics the BJP pursues. The CJP is explicit that it is demanding accountability for these long-term failures, beyond the education minister's resignation. Supporters of the CJP say it is about democracy, the constitution, and representation, signalling the movement sees itself as a reckoning against the system itself. Its demands extend to structural reform of the exam system, genuine job creation and investment, courses that equip students to compete in both public and private sectors, and respect from those in power.

3. The Media Contest

Over the past twelve years, the BJP has built one of the most effective media ecosystems in democratic politics. Godi media, which translates as ‘lapdog’ media, has become shorthand for the television establishment that is largely owned by allies of the BJP government. Through a vast network of party workers, local group admins, and IT cell operatives, they mastered WhatsApp and were able to push narratives and posts to millions of private groups.⁹ Gen Z, however, has largely abandoned television for independent reporting, with 61% getting their news from Instagram and 55% from YouTube. For the BJP’s voting bloc, this sophisticated machine was effective, but it did not account for this behavioural shift. The consequences were on display at the CJP protests, where independent journalists with discreet microphones were allowed in, while those with large ‘godi’-branded microphones and pro-government reporters were physically escorted out.

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Although the BJP has tried¹⁰, independent journalism has proven far harder to control, and the party has scrambled to adapt by flooding Instagram with Gen Z slang and looser, youth-facing content.¹¹ The effort has been widely mocked as trying too hard. The Party’s authority was built for a broadcasting environment that it could easily own, but the CJP operates in a space distinct from and distrustful of these institutions. The CJP’s rise also shows the success of humour in mobilising the younger generation, visible across its online presence and in the thousands of witty, sarcastic placards at the demonstrations, largely mocking Modi and the BJP. For a prime minister who spent a decade cultivating an image of immutability, the sheer volume of young Indians laughing at him may erode his authority.

4. Elections and Modi’s Authority

In West Bengal, a state where the CJP had been gaining momentum, the BJP recently won an outright majority. However, the victory came after 9 million names were removed from the state’s electoral roll, justified by Modi as a way to stop ‘infiltrators’¹² from voting, a pejorative largely aimed at Muslim Bangladeshi immigrants. While some deletions were legitimate, including some deceased voters and duplicates, many eligible voters who were struck off feel deliberately targeted by the Hindu nationalist BJP. The path from a social movement to sustained political pressure is a difficult one, as comparable movements elsewhere have found, and that is especially true of the CJP, which insists it will remain outside parliamentary politics. Since it fields no candidates, has not contested and will not contest the coming elections, and has deliberately avoided establishing a leader, the opposition parties may be the ones to capitalise on its momentum.

Yet, even if the movement’s electoral power remains unproven, its damage to Modi himself is already visible. The threat is threefold: his personal brand has cracked, his playbook is no longer working, and he has already conceded once by allowing the education minister to go.

The damage to Modi’s personal standing probably matters most. For the past decade he has cultivated an image of immutability that has tended to sit higher than his party’s, functioning as armour for the BJP when the party itself is unpopular. The CJP has dented that image, and its broadcasting of his age and his values has hardened the sense that the political class is out of touch. If this generation, which adds 10 million people to the electorate every year, internalises this view of Modi as the man who presided over their unemployment, corrupt exam systems, and their broken institutions, but did not deliver noticeable change, that is a structural shift no amount of Instagram reels can undo. His authority is probably not under existential threat, but the invincibility narrative is gone, and in Indian politics, his personal brand is an asset he cannot afford to lose. Adding to the damage, the government conceded a central CJP demand when it allowed the education minister to resign. For the first time in over a decade, the government has visibly yielded to street pressure, further weakening the immutable façade.

5. The Verdict

The BJP has spent years making dissent feel risky¹³ with sedition laws, coordinated pile-ons, and visible surveillance, but the cockroach movement has shown that this generation is not afraid to protest regardless, breaking a threshold of fear that had held for years. The usual tactic of branding protesters anti-national or foreign-funded has also failed here, because the movement is pluralistic. It has drawn politicians from across the spectrum, cannot be pinned on a single religion or community, and has pulled in young people from the BJP's own upper-caste Hindu base. For the first time, Modi's authoritative playbook designed to delegitimise and suppress dissent is not working.

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In electoral terms, the outcome remains uncertain. It will hinge on whether the government offers lasting concessions to win back disaffected young voters, whether opposition parties can translate the movement's energy into electoral strategy or whether the movement itself can sustain momentum, as social movements so often dissipate. Whichever way the coming state elections fall, Modi's authority has been weakened. The CJP started as a joke, yet its ability to turn online traction into street mobilisation and political pressure has caught the BJP off guard and has broken the threshold of fear that once protected Modi. Where he was once feared, he is now openly mocked, and in Indian politics, this may prove harder to recover from than the lost seats themselves.

NOTES

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