

Broken Futures and Expendable Labour

Administrative breakdown, Student dissent, and Youth Precarity in India

Oleena Chaudhuri

What started with a single word — “cockroaches” — rippled into a structural shockwave across the world's largest democracy. On [15 May](#), the Chief Justice of India (CJI), Surya Kant, while commenting on a contempt plea, likened certain litigants to “cockroaches” and “parasites of society”. Though the court later [clarified](#) that the remarks were aimed strictly at fake degree holders and vexatious litigators, the damage was already done. The comment sparked widespread backlash and within hours, India’s youth had reclaimed the slur, plastering it across placards and campuses in a defiant act of collective self-naming. But the real story is not the insult or the reclamation. It is the chilling reality that millions of young Indians now see themselves as insects in their own country’s political imagination — expendable, disposable, and easily crushed.

As Achille Mbembe [reminds us](#), dehumanization is rarely incidental; it is a technology of governance. The term “cockroach” is not simply an insult—it is to place the youth outside the circle of valued statehood. What erupted on the streets was not merely outrage over a single judicial slip. It is the sudden release of a pressure that has been building for years under the weight of institutional decay.

For India’s youth, pathways to a stable middle-class life are collapsing. They have endured a [relentless cycle](#) of exam paper leaks, sudden cancellations, corruption scandals, and bureaucratic opacity around crucial competitive tests like the NEET¹ and the UPSC². These exam failures are not only educational breakdowns; they are labour market disruptions. Competitive exams are gateways into India’s most stable public-sector jobs, and their collapse effectively shuts young people out of formal employment pathways.

In a country where secure, formal employment is scarce, these highly competitive exams represent a singular gateway to stable public-sector livelihoods. This situation can also be framed as a crisis of labour precarity — one that determines who gets access to secure work and who is pushed into informal, unstable, or migratory labour routes. To corrupt this process is to entirely foreclose economic mobility and stability for an entire generation. Yet, when they raised their voices, they were met not with accountability, but with [state hostility](#). This includes the use of lethal and non-lethal crowd control weapons, to being branded “anti-national,” “urban Naxal” for demanding the basic dignity of a functioning system.

The criminalization of dissent can be a deliberate governance strategy. When public institutions fail, the state routinely reframes the systemic administrative collapse as a threat to national security. Students protesting exam corruption are portrayed as destabilizing forces, and the youth demanding transparency are transformed into manufactured enemies undermining the nation.

In India, this takes the form of collapsing every student demand into a binary of 'leftist agitation' versus 'liberal naivety.' By flattening and reducing complex grievances into a simple binary of patriotism versus subversion, the state can dodge accountability for its governance failures.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s recent promises of “[fast-track](#)” courts to deal with exam fraud seem less urgent and more like a belated, punitive shortcut. A simple solution of a fast-track court cannot rebuild trust in an authoritative apparatus that has repeatedly let down its young population. The [resignation of the education minister](#) and the swift appointment of a successor do not resolve the deeper crisis unfolding across

India's campuses. If anything, this abrupt transition underscores the very institutional fragility students have been protesting.

This moment matters because it reveals a deeper rupture — one that carries global weight. The young people filling India's streets are not the disillusioned; they are the last believers in the nation's promise. Furthermore, the [escalating arrests of students](#) make it clear that the crisis is deepening, not receding. Their rebellion is an act of faith in a system they still hope to repair. At the same time, protests cannot indefinitely substitute for functioning institutions. Thus, this moment is no longer about exam fraud or bureaucratic lapses — it is about a government confronting the limits of governing through intimidation rather than institutional protection.

Amartya Sen famously insisted that [dignity is a precondition for democratic belonging](#). When a state repeatedly meets its youth with derision and hostility, precarity reaches its limit. If the state continues to meet their demands with suppression and criminalization, these marches will soon become farewells. The students fighting hardest to stay will be the next to leave. They will not depart because they lack love for their country; they will depart because the state is creating an environment which makes it impossible to thrive. As a researcher studying the forces that drive outmigration among highly skilled youth, I see this shift happening in real time.

The government's silent message here is unmistakable: your labour, skills, and aspirations are expendable. It is precisely this institutional decay at home and state apathy that will continue to accelerate the historic brain drain reshaping labour markets and research hubs from Toronto to Berlin. When domestic labour markets fail, mobility becomes a form of economic survival. India's youth are not simply protesting administrative collapse; they are confronting a labour regime that no longer guarantees stability, dignity, or upward mobility.

The reclaimed slur on campus placards is a brave refusal to accept a dehumanizing gaze. But symbolism cannot replace institutional collapse. The state's reliance on suppression over accountability reveals a system struggling to contain its own legitimacy crisis. Unless the government addresses the breakdown driving its youth to the streets, it risks losing an entire generation. India's most talented young people do not always depart for higher salaries; they leave for places where their labour is respected, and their dissent is not treated as treason or a crime. Without urgent institutional repair, these very students who still imagine a future in India will soon be in line to join the long list of those who have already left.

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