

‘Cockroach’ youth movement rises up to challenge Modi

Students demanding change could pose the biggest threat to Indian PM in 12 years, writes **Amrit Dhillon** in Delhi

A few days before rioters laid siege to Delhi, Narendra Modi, India's seemingly unassailable prime minister, was doing what Modi often does. He stood at a train station in Jind, a city about three hours' drive from the capital, and waved off the country's first domestically built, hydrogen-powered train. It was a major leap forward for India, declared Modi.

The messaging was clear: this was another demonstration of his ability to usher in his nation's headlong surge towards superpower status. Riches would follow for all under Modi's benevolent stewardship.

The economic train may have left the station, but Modi's promises are ringing increasingly hollow today. By yesterday morning, rioters, led by the same generation of young people that Modi has pledged to lift out of poverty, had violently expressed their growing resentment of his government.

The night before, as Delhi was rocked by pitched battles between protesters and the police, Mukul Kapoor, a 24-year-old delivery agent from Aligarh, sat on the pavement at about 8pm, slumped against an iron railing.

He looked stupefied by the turn of events. "The police hit me on my back ... I can't move," he said. "Why are they being violent with us, with a peaceful protest? Is it wrong to ask the government to listen to us?"

His incredulity was echoed by many among the tens of thousands of students, parents and professionals who flocked to join a march on parliament this week. It was organised by a protest movement known as the Cockroach Janta Party or CJP. Its name is born out of resentment after the chief justice of India called some unemployed youths

"cockroaches". Students embraced the label.

The turnout — some put the crowd at 50,000 — surprised everyone, including the cockroaches. The vast majority were from very ordinary families. One Instagram reel showed a young man sitting on the ground eating the snack he had brought with him all the way from Madhya Pradesh in central India: peanuts, onion and pickle.

The police response was equally surprising to protesters. Batons and tear gas were used to stop demonstrators reaching parliament, but all it did was send them surging through the roads radiating out from Jantar Mantar, the protest site where the CJP has been camped since June 20.

At the heart of the matter is an education system that pushes students to study up to 14 hours a day and drives many to depression or suicide. Every year about two million youths sit an exam in the hope of winning one of 136,000 places at medical college.

In the firing line is Dharmendra Pradhan, the education minister, who is facing calls to resign over an exam paper leak in May that forced a resit for two million students. Nisha Munda, 16, who attended the protest with her father, a carpenter, said: "If I don't do my job properly, won't I be sacked so that someone else can do it better? This is a basic rule the government refuses to follow."

Disbelief is the overriding emotion. Young Indians cannot fathom why the Modi government is so obdurate about not talking to them and why dissent is not tolerated. The prime minister has faced criticism from opposition politicians, liberals and the left who berate him for curbing freedom of speech and undermining democracy by not allowing peaceful protests.

Rahul Gandhi, the opposition Congress party leader, called on Modi to resign and was detained during a protest outside the prime minister's house yesterday. He later shared pictures of himself being carried away by police, including one in which he appeared to

have blood around his nose. "This fight for justice for students will now not stop or be halted," he said on X.

Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr, a political analyst, said: "Now the disbelief has spread to other sections of society, adding to the malaise over unemployment. The result is a movement that is posing a challenge to Modi's government."

Asim Ali, a political researcher, said it was about more than education. "Education and unemployment are linked. There are no jobs and no sense of a future. Moreover, it's the first time we are seeing anger directed at Modi personally."

Modi's critics say he usually deflects public anger by somehow dissociating himself from the cause. It is always someone else's fault. This time he is squarely on the receiving end.

Youths cheered a young woman who saw Modi's picture on a bus shelter and started hitting it with her handbag.

At the protest in Delhi were two fathers who struggled to hold back tears as they spoke about their sons, who committed suicide when the exams were cancelled in May. "I have come here because of my boy," said one, a farmer, holding a photograph of his son. "They don't understand our grief because their own children don't have to suffer the way my son did."

Analysts suggest there is a distinct shift in the public mood in India. In fact, they say something was afoot even in the general election two years ago when Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, failed to win an outright majority. The disappointing result forced it to rely on allies in what was a massive blow to the prime minister's ego.

Monica Ahuja, a consultant who used to support Modi, has been sending her driver to Jantar Mantar twice a week with food and water for the protesters.

"These are our children and our future and it's unbelievable that Modi won't talk to them," she said. "How can our own government beat up our own children? As a parent, I can't understand this arrogance."

The next few days could prove critical for Modi's ability to overcome this challenge, not least depending on whether the protesters can sustain momentum. The CJP has no organisation, no ideological direction, no distinct leadership as such and little idea of how to carry its momentum forward. It comprises young, inexperienced people plunging into public life for the first time.

But the "cockroaches" are determined and have vowed to remain at Jantar Mantar until Pradhan resigns. "This is a significant moment," Ali said. "It feels like the beginning of something. Once you lose the trust of young people, whether it's over unemployment or corruption, anything can happen, as we have seen in Bangladesh and Nepal."



Narendra Modi usually deflects public anger by dissociating himself from the cause, say critics, but the protests over youth poverty and a gruelling exam system place blame squarely at his door