

India Student Protests Spur Wider Discussion On Education System

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The Gen Z protests that convulsed the streets of Indian cities in recent weeks began with dreams dashed in the classrooms of India's schools.

This is the Achilles' heel of India's demographic promise: It has the world's largest youth population, something that in principle can drive economic growth. Most Indian children are in school. But millions of them graduate ill prepared for university, let alone for the workplace, even as their families pay more than ever for education and harbor big ambitions for their future.

That matters because India's young population — 367 million people between ages 15 and 29 — is the largest Gen Z cohort in the world. And even though their street protests ended last week-end with the resignation of India's education minister, the rage against the country's education system is one of the most serious challenges yet to the 12-year leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"We are not learning anything here. Nothing," Abeer Agarwal, a 19-year-old college student said about his years spent in school, as he joined thousands demonstrating in the Indian capital last week. "Our schools are not up to the standard."

The trajectory of India's swelling youth population is projected to slow by 2030, researchers say, which means that the country has a short time to take advantage of its demographic dividend. Access to education remains unequal. There's an exodus from government schools into private institutions. Families spend dearly on private tutors. College admissions are intensely competitive, expensive and out of reach for the poor.

Jobs are scarce, even for the educated.

"Never before have so many young Indians been as educated and as connected," concluded an exhaustive study on young people in the Indian labor market called the State of Working India published this year by researchers at Azim Premji University in Bengaluru. "Creating remunerative and meaningful employment for this highly aspirational cohort is imperative if we are to reap the dividends of demography."

The protesters played on an aspirational slogan coined by the prime minister. Instead of his "acche din," signifying the promise of good days ahead, the protesters held up placards that read "bacche din," signifying the promise of kids' days ahead.

Alex Travelli contributed reporting.

The learning gap

Mr. Agarwal's complaint about the quality of his education is borne out by the data.

According to the latest government assessment of language skills, nearly half of all ninth graders in India are unable to summarize the main points of basic texts, like news articles. Their scores on math, science and social science assessments are even weaker.

Rural schools are in especially bad shape. According to the 2024 Annual Status of Education Report, carried out by an independent group, roughly 30 percent of children in eighth grade in rural schools struggle with reading and understanding second grade-level texts. Around half struggle with basic arithmetic.

"Teachers don't care whether we are studying, understanding or even coming to school," said Anshul Yadav, 20, the son of farmers and a high school graduate from a rural district in Uttar Pradesh State. College is out of the question, he said, because paying for extra classes to crack the college-entrance exams is beyond his family's means. Instead, Mr. Yadav is preparing to take the army-entrance exam.

His frustrations led him to travel eight hours by train to take part in the protests in the capital last week. "Our eyes have opened," he said. "We can't unsee what we are now seeing."

Many schools are still without the basics. A recent review by the government's public policy research arm found that over 100,000 schools lack "functional electricity," nearly 99,000 schools lack a girls' toilet, and nearly half of all government secondary schools don't have science labs. There was a shortage of teachers, especially in rural areas; and many teachers were unprepared, scoring "below 60-70 percent in subject papers of the grades they teach."

"Classroom instruction is primarily dominated by the pressure to finish textbooks, often at the cost of foundational learning," the report said.

The cost of ambition

India's Gen Z was born after the opening up of India's economy, and many of them were buoyed into school by a transformative 2009 law that promised free and compulsory primary school education. Their ambitions are high, as are the ambitions of their parents; so much so that spending on tutors more than doubled between 2017 and 2025, according to government surveys from both years.

Lakshmi Diwakar, 15, a 10th grader in a government school in New Delhi, needs private coaching in four subjects. Her mother is



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Above, protesters demanding the resignation of India's education minister, who stepped down days later. Students outside a coaching center, left.



ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

a domestic worker, and her father is a day laborer; the cost of tutors eats up nearly a tenth of their monthly income. But without tutoring, she said, she can follow very little in class, and her teachers have no time to entertain all her questions. "I am very weak in studies," she said. "I don't understand what the teacher is teaching in school."

In another measure of ambition, there's been a steady exodus from public schools. Barely half of all secondary school students attend government schools, down from more than 70 percent just 20 years ago. Private schools are seen as better, but aren't always.

Pressure to succeed

Abeer Agarwal, the protester in New Delhi, said it was all but

"compulsory" to pay for private tutors if you want to compete in school or get into university. In high school, he went to private tutors for math and science. Then he enrolled in a yearlong online course to prepare for engineering college-entrance exams. He didn't score highly enough to get into engineering school, he said, and he is now studying physics and chemistry at Delhi University. (Even though what he really wants to do is be a filmmaker.) "It becomes a pressure on the student also that their parents are spending so much," he said. "They expect some results from us."

The family of Habiba Zinnara Moujood, a 21-year-old medical student, spent around \$2,000, almost equal to India's annual per capita income, on a yearlong coaching class to prepare for the

medical-school-entrance exam in 2025. The expense was not easy for her family, she said, but it answered their prayers: She passed.

Luckily, she said, she didn't have to face what 2.2 million test-takers faced this year. The entrance exam was scrapped after it was revealed that some questions had been leaked beforehand — and students were ordered to take it again later.

"I thank my stars the paper leak did not happen last year," Ms. Moujood said.

That leak burst the dam of India's Gen Z fury.

In a measure of the pressure facing his administration, Mr. Modi on Sunday announced that an independent task force would look into how to reform the college-entrance examination system. The government has not an-

nounced any plans to address wider concerns about India's education system.

The downside of college

Enrollment in college has soared in the last 40 years, especially among women, and today, more than one-fourth of young Indians are going to college.

The number of colleges have expanded significantly, but they have also become much more expensive, especially for professional degrees. Today, the cost of getting a medical or engineering degree exceeds the per capita spending of poor households, according to the State of Working India study. "Poorer households cannot afford professional degrees," the report said bluntly.

A college degree, though, offers little guarantee of employment for millions of young graduates.

To Shane M., a graduate student at the University of Madras, it seemed that only wealth offered that certainty. If you have money, he said, you can go to a better school and speak better English. You can afford private coaching to get into a good college, and if your family has the right contacts, you can find an internship that can ultimately land you a job. His father works as a bus conductor. He set aside his dreams of going to engineering school because coaching classes were unaffordable.

"No matter how well you study, the system finds a way of breaking you," he said. "Will I get a job or not is always a big question mark. It is better to graze cattle than to study."