

Modi pledges free exam coaching after 'cockroach' protests

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Narendra Modi has promised free coaching and AI training for India's youth, weeks after Gen Z protesters took to the streets to vent their anger over the leak of highly competitive exam papers and the lack of opportunities in the world's most populous country.

The prime minister did not directly address last month's demonstrations but said his government would ease the financial pressures facing young Indians as he pledged to harness their "immense potential".

Speaking from the ramparts of Delhi's 17th-century Mughal-era Red Fort on Saturday to mark the 79th anniversary of independence from Britain, Modi said the "competition surrounding coaching classes has become a huge burden for middle-class families".

He went on to outline plans for free online exam preparation and training of 10mn young Indians in AI skills over the next year. "Every parent feels that if they do not send their child to a coaching centre, they are somehow falling behind or do not belong to a respectable family."

The pledges follow protests by hundreds of thousands of young Indians last month led by the Cockroach Janta Party, which began as a social media-fuelled satirical movement after India's chief justice described unemployed youth as cockroaches.

The CJP soon morphed into a broad channel to voice frustration over corruption in the education sector as well as the scarcity of secure, well-paid work in a country where nearly 40 per cent of graduates aged 20-24 are unemployed, according to data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, a forecasting company.

The protests and scenes of police violence in Delhi, where officers fired tear gas and baton-charged demonstrators, were widely reported. They forced Modi's usually unyielding government into a humiliating climbdown with the resignation of his education minister — one of the protesters' main demands.

Modi's administration has also backed tougher legal penalties for exam leaks and established a panel to review the examination system. The exams are seen as a gateway to secure employment for millions of young students, many of whom spend years preparing in the hope of achieving financial stability.

The 75-year-old prime minister argued that India's youth would be "fully harnessed in nation building" and become the biggest beneficiaries of his ambition to turn the country into a developed economy by 2047.

In past years, Modi has used the annual address to set out political pledges and policy priorities.

In 2025, he vowed to build a "self-reliant India" and announced tax and regulatory reforms aimed at businesses and the middle classes after the US imposed tariffs of 50 per cent on the country.