

Protesters in India Shake Media-Savvy Modi’s Grip On the Digital Narrative

By MUJIB MASHAI

NEW DELHI — In an Instagram revolt of the young, India’s “WhatsApp Uncles” are at a loss.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who for more than a decade has used social media to project an image of nearly divine infallibility, is facing perhaps his most formidable challenge in years in the form of a Gen Z-driven protest that has seized the digital narrative with videos, memes and authentic outrage.

As the demonstrators vent their anger at India’s economic failings and a lack of accountability, the signs and slogans in New Delhi at the main site of the protests — which spread this week to several other Indian cities — are aiming directly at Mr. Modi. Usually criticized only in whispers, the strongman leader has suddenly found himself the subject of jokes and taunts, with protesters defacing him on billboards and mocking him in verse, sharing the images online to an audience of millions.

One widely viewed video shows a group chanting about the prime minister as a “56-inch monkey,” a reference to his boasting of a 56-inch chest. Others are pointedly more profane.

The Indian state, its vast authority increasingly built around Mr. Modi’s image, has struggled to match the protesters’ creativity and tenacity. Anurag Minus Varma, the author of a book about how social media algorithms are transforming India, said the massive mobilization on the streets had broken a sense of fear and offered a release for pent-up anger.

“Because of the comfort of the crowd, now people can voice out their opinion,” Mr. Varma said. “And when they are voicing out their opinions, it is almost an outburst because every safety valve of democracy was closed by this particular regime.”

The protest movement was not really about Mr. Modi at the beginning.

It started as a sit-in in New Delhi demanding the resignation of the education minister, under whom several college exam cheating scandals have affected millions of young people worried about their career prospects in India’s super-competitive job market. Last weekend, police officers in plain clothes fought their way through supporters of a prominent activist who had gone on a hunger strike, dragged him to a hospital and began forcibly clearing the protest camp.

In the days that followed, Mr. Modi was largely silent. And his government’s dismissive response — with the education minister, Dharmendra Pradhan, calling the protesters a “B-team of terror groups” — exposed a generational gap.

Hunger Strike Ends For Indian Activist

By PRANAV BASKAR

A prominent Indian activist ended his hunger strike on Friday after 26 days of fasting to demand the education minister’s resignation over a series of botched entrance exams. But India’s young protesters are continuing what has grown into a wider fight against corruption, poor job prospects and the government’s mismanagement of the education system.

The activist, Sonam Wangchuk, said on social media that he had broken his fast “after long negotiations” with government ministers and “in view of possible violence in the country.” He had started striking in solidarity with a wider protest that began after India’s medical school entrance exams were canceled because test questions had been leaked.

The cause has since morphed into a Gen Z movement calling for structural changes to the education system and labor market.

The Delhi police said its officers had moved Mr. Wangchuk, a long-time activist on education and climate issues, “to the hospital for essential medical care” in keeping with court orders. As Mr. Wangchuk’s health deteriorated there, government ministers urged him to break his fast.

Yet there was no indication that the government had agreed to meet any of the demands driving Mr. Wangchuk’s strike. Chief among them was the resignation of the Indian education minister, Dharmendra Pradhan, under whose watch a number of national exams have been marred by leaks. Mr. Wangchuk has also called on the government to vow not to punish protesters.

Mr. Wangchuk urged “all to stay very vigilant about not allowing violence of any kind anywhere.”

Many of the protesters in India are students, and many others have jobs, but they share a sense of desperation and rage about education and employment prospects.

It was the kind of condescension that the protesters call “WhatsApp Uncle”-speak — a lecturing, one-way discourse that has taken over India’s public space as Mr. Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party dominates the social messaging platform to promote its agenda with texts that are duly forwarded by supporters.

That was the tone in which many young Indians heard India’s chief justice, in mid-May compare the country’s unemployed young people to parasites and “cockroaches.” In response, a graduate student created the satirical Cockroach Janata Party online. The group quickly blew up on Instagram, where it has nearly 26 million followers, almost three times the number of the tech-savvy B.J.P.

India’s mainstream news media, much of it co-opted by Mr. Modi and his party, hardly covered the sit-in as it began at Jantar Mantar, in the heart of the capital. It spread thanks to YouTubers and small digital news outlets such as Peek TV, which collected over 200 million views of its short videos from the protest site across Instagram and YouTube in one week. Another YouTube account, Unfiltered by Samdish, captured video from behind the police lines on Monday as officers tried to break up the sit-in with batons and tear gas. The episode received more than two million views in two days.

Protesters have documented the police response in ways that have made officials look plodding and out of touch.

When security forces rushed at them with batons, young protesters filmed over their shoulders as they outran the middle-aged officers. Others pushed their cellphones in the faces of the police as they were attacked, some sneeringly asking for more punishment.

In one video, a group of protesters films from the back seat of a police van as the officer riding shotgun raises the possibility that they could be slapped with bogus drug charges. The young man holding the cellphone flips the camera to himself, his hand over his mouth in a look of astonishment familiar from countless internet memes.

Joyojeet Pal, a University of Michigan professor who studies political communication in India, said the protests have demonstrated that the centralized control of the information space that Mr. Modi enjoyed for the past decade may no longer be working. The government’s top-down messaging style is ill suited for social media algorithms that now prioritize authenticity, he said.

“It is no longer, ‘Look what the police did,’ and it is more, ‘This is how today felt,’” Mr. Pal said.

The protests have focused on real economic concerns, but they have also been a gold mine of content creation.

There were “get ready with me” videos, including one by a young protester who puts foam pads inside his trousers to protect his behind from police batons. Some tongue-in-cheek “fit checks” focused on what people were wearing at the protest site. A protester who was being driven away to detention with a large group posted, “Thanks to the world’s largest democracy, got a window seat in police bus.”

Another filmed police picking up their gear after breaking for a meal and said to the officers, “Did you eat, uncle ji? Stomach is full? Now going to war? Best of luck!”

It remains to be seen how Mr. Modi, 75, will try to placate the protesters, whose demands have expanded from the education minister’s resignation to include amnesty for peaceful demonstrators and greater accountability from the government over the exam leak.

Before the last national elections, in 2024, he brought influencers and podcasters to his side, an acknowledgment that the Indian social media space was changing. His party remains dominant in Parliament and has been on a winning streak in state elections, the political opposition is in disarray, and no one comes close in India to Mr. Modi’s political power or fundraising prowess.

Late Thursday night, Mr. Modi addressed the protests on video for the first time. Gone was the slick, often multicamera production that Indians are used to seeing him in. The camera was right in his face, as if filmed selfie-style on mobile.

“Friends,” he began, in English, before promising strict action against anyone found to have played a role in the exam leaks. He made no mention of the demand for the minister’s resignation.

The video was released just as mobile internet service had been blocked around the main protest site in New Delhi.

“Internet has been blocked in Jantar Mantar,” one social media user wrote in a comment on Mr. Modi’s video. “How will those people watch it, sir?”



MAY 12 Student protesters clashed with police after the exam for medical schools was canceled.

ADNAN ABIDI/REUTERS

How a College Test Scandal Grew Into a Youth Movement

By PRANAV BASKAR and PABI O ROBI ES

What began in India as a student protest over a canceled college entrance exam in May has grown into a wider campaign against corruption, poor job prospects and mismanagement of the education system. The movement is posing a rare challenge to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has been in power for more than a decade. Here’s how it has unfolded:

May 3 | National Medical Entrance Exam

More than two million students took the exam, known as NEET. The grueling test is the gateway to a coveted spot in India’s medical education system. Students often spend years preparing.

May 12 | Exam Canceled

The Indian government scrapped the exam and ordered everyone to take it again because of an alleged leak of questions, prompting outrage.

The National Students’ Union of India organized a protest. Some members were detained. Protests were held in other cities in the following days.

May 15 | ‘Cockroaches’

India’s chief justice, Surya Kant, said that some unemployed young Indians were like “cockroaches” who complain about the system on social media.

Abhijeet Dipke

@abhijeet_dipke

Those who wish to join the movement, hit the link below:
<https://forms.gle/ovSxwtgd5ArBYfeTA>

Eligibility criteria:

Unemployed

Lazy

Chronically online

Ability to rant professionally

2:12 AM

May 16, 2026

The image in the post above was created with A.I.

May 16 | The Cockroach Party

As a response, Abhijeet Dipke, a 30-year-old graduate of Boston University, started the “Cockroach Janta Party” as a joke.

May 21 | Followers Mount

Within days, some of the C.J.P.’s accounts had more followers on social media than India’s biggest political parties.

June 2 | Gaining Momentum

Protests over exam leaks continued into early June in several cities including Mumbai, India’s financial capital.

June 6 | First C.J.P. Protest

Mr. Dipke returned to India from the United States to lead the C.J.P.’s first street protest, demanding the resignation of the education minister, Dharmendra Pradhan. Hundreds gathered for the peaceful demonstration.

June 11 | ‘Manifesto’

The C.J.P. released a five-point “manifesto,” including compensation for students who were affected by the canceled exam and other changes to the testing system.



ANUSHREE FADNAVIS/REUTERS

June 20 | First Day of Sit-In

C.J.P. supporters began a sit-in at Jantar Mahar, a designated protest site near Parliament in New Delhi, after the government failed to act on the group’s demands. Protesters, above, have remained at the site around the clock ever since.

June 28 | Hunger Strike

The prominent Indian activist Sonam Wangchuk began a hunger strike in solidarity with the protesters.

July 9 | Promotion

Mr. Wangchuk called for a peaceful march to Parliament on July 20, when it would be back in session. The C.J.P. promoted the march under the slogan “Chalo Sansad,” or “March to Parliament.” On July 18, Mr. Wangchuk was moved to a hospital by police against his will.

20 July | Chalo Sansad!



@COCKROACHJANTAPARTY VIA INSTAGRAM

Monday | March to Parliament

Thousands of young people marched and faced a heavy police response. Smaller protests took place in Mumbai and Bengaluru.

Security forces used tear gas and batons to disperse the crowds. Dozens were arrested by the police. Many have remained camped out at the site despite authorities’ calls for them to disperse.

Wednesday | On Video

A defining scene of the protests is caught on video, below, in Mumbai: a young woman blocking a police van, demanding the release of protesters inside.



@JOURNALISTSOHITMISHRA VIA YOUTUBE

Thursday | Prime Minister Responds

The C.J.P. said protests had spread to at least 30 cities in India as it called for nationwide demonstrations.

Narendra Modi, India’s prime minister, released his first video message about the protests, saying that “nothing is more important than the welfare and future of our youth” and promising to fast-track punishment for those who spoiled the exam.

Friday | Fast Ends; Protests Continue

Mr. Wangchuk ended his hunger strike after 26 days after negotiations with government officials and citing concerns about possible violence. The C.J.P. celebrated the end of Mr. Wangchuk’s fast but said protests would continue.



SAUMYA KHANDELWAL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

FRIDAY Supporters of the Cockroach Janta Party (C.J.P.) demanded the resignation of the education minister.