

The CJP Agitation: How Student Protests Filled India's Political Vacuum

BY **GARIMA SARKAR**



As traditional opposition parties struggle to mobilise public opinion, student movements are increasingly shaping India's democratic conversation

Democracies depend not only on competitive elections but also on a vibrant political opposition. Opposition parties perform several critical democratic functions. They scrutinise governments, articulate alternative policy visions, represent dissenting voices, and channel public grievances into institutional politics. When these functions weaken, democratic contestation rarely disappears. Instead, it often migrates to other arenas. In contemporary India, one of the most visible expressions of this shift has been the growing prominence of student protests. As opposition parties have struggled to provide a cohesive and credible counterweight to the ruling establishment, universities and student movements have increasingly become spaces where political dissent is articulated, debated, and mobilised.

India's student movements have historically played an important role in shaping political change. From the anti-colonial movement and the Navnirman agitation in Gujarat to the JP Movement of the 1970s and the anti-Mandal protests of the 1990s, students have repeatedly entered the political arena during moments of national uncertainty. More recently, protests over university autonomy, citizenship legislation, educational reforms, and issues of social justice have reinforced the perception that campuses remain among the few institutional spaces where organised dissent continues to thrive.

The renewed visibility of student activism cannot be understood in isolation from developments within India's broader opposition politics. Over the past decade, opposition parties have faced significant organisational, electoral, and ideological challenges. Internal factionalism, leadership crises, declining grassroots networks, fragmented alliances, and inconsistent messaging have reduced their ability to mobilise public opinion effectively or present coherent policy alternatives. While these challenges vary across states and parties, their cumulative effect has created what many observers describe as an opposition deficit within India's political ecosystem.

The consequences of this deficit extend beyond electoral competition and party politics. When citizens perceive that established political parties are unable or unwilling to articulate their concerns effectively, civil society organisations, social movements, professional associations, and student groups often assume greater prominence. Universities become not merely educational institutions but also arenas for democratic participation and political expression.

This phenomenon is neither unique to India nor unprecedented. Comparative political research indicates that periods of dominant-party politics often coincide with the emergence of extra-parliamentary forms of political participation. Student movements, labour unions, environmental organisations, and civil society networks frequently become important vehicles through which citizens express dissatisfaction when institutional opposition appears ineffective. Such developments should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of democratic decline. Rather, they often demonstrate democracy's capacity to generate alternative forms of participation when conventional political channels appear constrained.

Several recent student movements in India highlight this broader dynamic. Whether the issue concerns university governance, freedom of expression, educational access, unemployment, or constitutional values, student organisations have frequently succeeded in shaping national political conversations. Digital media has amplified their visibility, allowing campus-based protests to resonate far beyond university walls and enter mainstream public discourse.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to portray student movements as substitutes for political parties. Their objectives, organisational structures, and sources of legitimacy differ substantially. Political parties seek electoral mandates and govern through constitutional institutions. Student organisations, by contrast, represent particular constituencies and generally mobilise around specific issues rather than comprehensive governing agendas. Their increasing prominence, therefore, reflects not a healthy democratic equilibrium but an indication that important representative functions are being performed outside formal party politics.

The nationwide protests that followed allegations of irregularities in the 2026 NEET examination illustrate how educational crises can rapidly evolve into broader political controversies. Initially driven by concerns over examination integrity, fairness, and accountability, the movement soon attracted support from student organisations, civil society groups, and political actors across the ideological spectrum. The episode demonstrated that issues affecting young people often become focal points for wider debates about governance, transparency, and institutional credibility.

The political response to the NEET controversy also underscored the changing relationship between student activism and opposition politics in India. Student-led demonstrations provided a visible platform around which opposition parties sought to mobilise public criticism of the government's handling of the issue. Rather than originating solely within party organisations, political contestation was significantly shaped by protests emerging from universities, coaching hubs, and youth networks spearheaded by the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP). In this sense, student mobilisation became an important catalyst for parliamentary debate and broader public discourse.

The NEET protests further reveal how contemporary political movements increasingly emerge through interactions between grassroots activism and formal political institutions. The CJP framed the issue primarily as one of merit, equal opportunity, and examination integrity, while political parties interpreted it within broader narratives of governance and accountability. These overlapping narratives expanded the issue beyond education policy into a wider discussion of public trust in national institutions.

However, it would be inaccurate to conclude that student protests simply replace or extend opposition politics. Political parties possess institutional responsibilities that student movements cannot fulfil, including legislative oversight, policy development, and electoral representation. Student protests can elevate issues onto the national agenda, but sustained democratic accountability ultimately depends on an effective parliamentary opposition capable of converting public grievances into institutional reforms.

The NEET episode, therefore, highlights an important feature of contemporary Indian politics: moments of public dissatisfaction increasingly originate outside traditional party institutions before entering formal political debate. Whether this reflects a temporary political dynamic or a more enduring transformation remains uncertain. What is clear is that student and civil society activism have become increasingly influential components of India's democratic ecosystem, particularly on issues directly affecting younger citizens.

Ultimately, a healthy democracy requires both an active civil society and an effective political opposition. Student movements can draw attention to pressing concerns and demand accountability, while opposition parties must provide sustained institutional scrutiny and credible policy alternatives to ensure the effective functioning of Indian democracy. The NEET protests, and the visibility gained by the CJP through them, reveal how the absence of an effective opposition has created opportunities for unconventional political formations to become vehicles for public dissent, raising important questions about representation, democratic accountability, and the functioning of India's national political system.

(Dr Garima Sarkar is an assistant professor of comparative politics and public policy and assistant dean of international collaborations at Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University)

GARIMA SARKAR

Dr Garima Sarkar is an assistant professor in Jindal School of International Affairs at OP Jindal Global University