



BETWEEN SILENCE AND PROTEST UNDERSTANDING GENZ'S SELECTIVE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

Gen Z is often portrayed either as politically disengaged or as a permanently connected protest generation. Both portrayals infer stable political dispositions from highly visible episodes. This conceptual article examines why young citizens move among attentive silence, private voice, digital expression, institutional participation, collective civic action and contentious protest. It conceptualizes this movement as participatory fluidity. The analysis draws on a structured integrative review and a comparative examination of secondary evidence from youth-centered cases in Germany, Nigeria, Kenya, Bangladesh, Nepal and India, including the TGPSC, NEET-UG and UPPSC examination protests. The proposed Selective Participation Model argues that youth participation is shaped by the interaction of issue resonance, clarity of responsibility, portability of evidence and specificity of remedies with political efficacy, institutional trust, perceived risk, social location, peer visibility and mobilisation infrastructure. Institutional responsiveness, litigation, repression, fatigue and political learning subsequently influence transitions from silence to participation and from protest to quieter forms of engagement. Eight theoretical propositions explain when distrust generates protest rather than withdrawal, when digital visibility develops into sustained collective action, and why diffuse problems such as corruption and poor governance may remain under-mobilised. The article contributes to behavioural public administration and political sociology by treating silence as a differentiated political condition rather than straightforward evidence of apathy. It also locates youth voice within administrative systems that make participation intelligible, safe and consequential. The article concludes by proposing a future mixed-method research programme to test the model across Indian states.

Keywords: *Gen Z; Youth Political Participation; Protest; Political Silence; Participatory Fluidity; Digital Activism; Public Accountability.*

Introduction

India's young citizens occupy a political environment of extraordinary scale and density. Elections, parties, universities, competitive examinations, social movements, news media and social platforms expose them to public affairs almost continuously. The Election Commission of India's Atlas of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections reports that electors aged 18 - 29 constituted 22.78 percent of the electorate (Election Commission of India (ECI), 2025). Yet demographic weight and digital visibility do not translate automatically into coherent or continuous political action. Young citizens differ in whether they vote, contact officials, join associations, post online, sign petitions, attend demonstrations, support consumer boy cotton withdraw from politics. They also differ across issues and over time.

Two stereotypes obscure this variation. The first describes Gen Z as impatient, distracted and politically apathetic. The second celebrates it as digitally fluent, morally expressive and continuously ready to mobilise. Both infer a durable generational character from selective observations. A person may be highly active on a personally consequential issue and publicly silent on another. A student may join a protest over an examination rule because the harm, authority and remedy are visible, yet feel unable to



act against procurement corruption because responsibility is dispersed and evidence is difficult to communicate. The same person may move from public protest to private discussion after police action, online harassment, examination pressure or disappointment with official response. This unevenness matters for public administration. Administrative arrangements affect whether young citizens can understand a decision, identify a responsible authority, lodge a complaint, obtain reasons and observe a response. Opaque procedures, inaccessible data, fragmented responsibility and unprotected grievance systems reduce external political efficacy. Conversely, clear service standards, usable public information, reason-giving, social audits, time-bound grievance redress and feedback can convert concern into institutional participation. Youth participation is therefore not only a question of attitudes. It is partly an outcome of administrative design.

The puzzle becomes sharper in relation to corruption, poor governance and misuse of public resources. These problems may impose large social costs but fail to generate sustained mobilization proportional to their severity. Unlike a single examination decision or a vivid incident, systemic failures are often slow, technical and distributed across agencies. Citizens may suspect wrongdoing without possessing portable evidence; know that services are poor without agreeing on who is responsible; or condemn corruption while expecting collective action to be futile. Silence in such settings may express strategic caution, constrained choice, issue fatigue, partisan filtering or learned ineffectiveness rather than approval.

The central research question is: Why does Gen Z in India move between silence and participation across issues, contexts and time? Five subsidiary questions guide the analysis.

RQ1: How can political silence be distinguished from apathy, latent engagement and constrained non-expression?

RQ2: How does issue architecture shape movement from concern to action?

RQ3: How do efficacy, trust and perceived risk influence the choice among private, digital, institutional, civic and contentious repertoires?

RQ4: How do peer networks, platforms, organizers and political opportunities convert individual concern into collective mobilization?

RQ5: How do official response, litigation, repression, fatigue and learning shape movement from protest back to silence or towards continued participation?

The paper makes four contributions. First, it conceptualizes participation as movement among modes rather than as a binary active-inactive status. Second, it places issue architecture-resonance, responsibility clarity, evidence portability and remedy specificity at the centre of mobilisation. Third, it connects micro-level cognition and emotion with meso-level networks and macro-level institutions. Finally, it translates the framework into testable propositions and a future empirical programme suitable for comparative analysis across Indian states.

Research Objectives and Scope

The study pursues five objectives:

1. To define political silence, selective participation and participatory fluidity in conceptually distinct and measurable terms.
2. To integrate major explanations of youth participation from political sociology, political communication, social-movement research and public administration.
3. To use brief global and Indian illustrations to distinguish policy, procedural, agenda, leadership, organisational and repressive outcomes.



4. To explain why corruption, poor governance and misuse of public resources may generate concern without sustained collective action.
5. To formulate testable propositions, valid measures and a future mixed-method programme for evaluating the framework in India.

The title uses Gen Z as a practical cohort label, not as a claim that all members share a common psychology. The empirical design concentrates on citizens aged 18-29 because this range aligns with electoral eligibility and the ECI's published age category. Birth-year definitions of GenZ vary, and future studies should report both age and birth cohort rather than rely on the label alone. The paper also distinguishes Gen Z-centred cases from youth-rich intergenerational movements' and from earlier digital-era precedents. This prevents retrospective relabeling of every youth mobilisation as a Gen Z movement.

Methodological Approach

Integrative, Problem-Centred Review

The article uses a structured, integrative and problem-centered review to connect literatures that usually operate separately: political participation and civic voluntarism; political efficacy and trust; collective action and social movements; youth citizenship; digital and connective action; preference concealment and self-censorship; policy feedback; administrative burden; and transparency, voice and social accountability. The review combines foundational works with scholarship published through April 2026. Literature was identified through structured searches of Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection and Google Scholar, supplemented by backward and forward citation tracing. Search blocks combined youth terms (youth, Gen Z and student), participation terms (political participation, protest, silence, voice and digital activism), contextual terms (India, governance and accountability) and mechanism terms (efficacy, trust, risk, political opportunity, connective action, and administrative burden and policy feedback).

Sources were included when they provided a relevant theoretical mechanism, empirical finding, and official record or verifiable case outcome. Priority was given to peer-reviewed research and traceable primary materials from election authorities, courts, legislatures, ministries, commissions and United Nations bodies; reputable news reports were used to document time-sensitive outcomes not yet covered in scholarship. Duplicate records, untraceable claims, unsupported commentary and social-media posts lacking triangulation were excluded. Analysis proceeded in four steps: concepts were differentiated; recurring mechanisms were extracted; mechanisms were organized by issue, individual, network and institutional level; and propositions with observable implications were derived. This is an integrative review, not an exhaustive systematic review or meta-analysis; it therefore makes no claim of complete coverage or effect-size representativeness.

Structured illustrative comparison

The global and Indian cases are structured illustrations, not a dataset from which causal effects are estimated. Cases were selected because young people were central or highly visible, digital communication mattered, a governance-related grievance was identifiable and a documented public outcome could be observed. Each case was examined through the same questions: What made the issue resonant? Was responsibility clear? Which repertoires were used? How did institutions respond? What immediate and longer-term outcomes followed? The evidence hierarchy prioritised statutes, court decisions, election and commission records, government and parliamentary documents and United



Nations sources, supplemented by peer-reviewed scholarship, reputable research institutions and established news organisations.

Outcome claims are deliberately bounded. A reform that followed protest is not automatically attributed solely to protest; legislation and administrative change normally result from multiple institutions and prior processes. The text the refore uses formulations suchas_‘followed’, contributed to‘or_was associated with ‘unless the official record establishes direct decision. The evidence cutoff is 30th April 2026. Developments after that date are excluded even where later information is available.

Outcome Typology

A movement outcome is not reducible to victory or defeat. The paper distinguishes: (a) agenda outcomes, when an issue gains durable public attention; (b) procedural outcomes, when consultation, scheduling, review or grievance arrangements change; (c) policy outcomes, when a law, rule, budget or programme changes; (d) institutional outcomes, when new oversight or implementation mechanisms are created; (e) leadership outcomes, when officeholders resign or governments change; (f) movement-capacity outcomes, when networks, identities and skills survive beyond the episode; and (g) repressive or chilling outcomes, when coercion, surveillance or legal exposure narrows later participation. A single episode may produce several, even contradictory, outcomes.

Conceptual Foundations

Political Participations Repertoire

Political participation comprises activities intended to influence public decisions, officeholders or collective outcomes. Contemporary repertoires exceed voting and party work. They include contacting an official, filing a grievance or information request, attending a public hearing, volunteering, donating, boycotting, creating or circulating political content, signing a petition, joining a campus action and participating in a demonstration (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018; van Deth, 2014). These acts vary in effort, visibility, risk, audience and proximity to decision-makers. Counting them in one undifferentiated index can hide meaningful substitution among modes.

Silence Is Not a Single Condition

Political silence is the non-expression of a view in a specified setting and time. It does not reveal, by itself, whether a citizen lacks an opinion, supports the status quo or is unable to speak. Research on standby citizenship, the spiral of silence and preference falsification shows that low visibility can coexist with attention, concern and readiness to act under changed conditions (Amnå&Ekman,2014;Kuran, 1995;Noelle-Neumann, 1974).Atleast five forms should be distinguished.

1. Uninvolved silence: low attention, low concern and no present intention to act.
2. Attentiveorst and by silence: monitoring and private judgment without current public action.
3. Strategic silence: deliberate on-expression to preserve future influence, relationships, employment or educational opportunity.
4. Constrained silence: with held voice because of perceived legal,physical,reputational, familial or economic risk.
5. Disillusioned silence: withdrawal after perceived futility, failed response, repression, fatigue or movement fragmentation.
6. These categories can overlap, and respondents may move among them. The crucial empirical task is to measure the belief, concern, counterfactual willingness and constraint behind non-action rather than coding every zero as apathy.



Selective Participation and Participatory Fluidity

Selective political participation is uneven engagement across issues, modes or moments. Participatory fluidity is the process that generates this unevenness: movement among participation states as issue conditions, perceived risks, networks and institutional signals change. Fluidity does not imply randomness. Transitions can be patterned. A recruitment controversy may move an aspirant from attentive silence to peer discussion, online expression and public demonstration because personal stakes and responsible authority are clear. A later coercive response may shift the same person toward anonymous expression or withdrawal. A visible administrative concession may instead strengthen efficacy and widen future engagement.

State	Working definition	Illustrative Indicators
Attentive silence	Follows an issue but takes no observable public action	Issue knowledge; private concern; counterfactual willingness
Private or protected voice	Discusses privately, reports anonymously or uses closed groups	Private discussion; anonymous complaint; encrypted/closed communication
Digital expression	Creates, endorses or circulates public political content	Posting; sharing; has hashtag; digital petition
Institutional participation	Uses recognized electoral or administrative channels	Voting; contacting; RTI/grievance; consultation; hearing
Collective civic action	Act with others outside a single contentious event	Volunteering; association; monitoring; boycott; campaign work
Contentious participation	Makes claims through public disruption or protest	March; sit-in; strike; blockade; demonstration

Table 1. Participation states used in the participatory-fluidity framework.

Gen Zasa heterogeneous political cohort

Generational language is analytically useful only when nested within social structure. Gender, caste, tribe, religion, class, region, disability, language, education and employment shape resources and risks. Rural and urban youth encounter different infrastructures of connectivity and association. Telecommunications growth does not erase these inequalities. TRAI reported 1,073.44 million broadband subscriptions at the end of April 2026, while urban and rural teledensity stood at 152.11 and 60.74 respectively; these indicators include multiple connections and should not be read as unique-user counts (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India [TRAI], 2026). Digital access also differs from digital skill, political knowledge and freedom from surveillance or harassment. The relevant unit is therefore a situated young citizen, not an abstract digital native.

Theoretical Framework

Civic voluntarism: resources, engagement and recruitment

The civic voluntarism model explains why people do not participate through three answers: they cannot, they do not want to, or nobody asked them (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995). Time, money, education and civic skills reduce the cost of action; political interest and efficacy supply



motivation; recruitment by organizations and networks converts capacity into behavior. For Indian youth, educational status, employment precarity, family obligations, language and place strongly condition these resources. A Smartphone may reduce the cost of expression while leaving time, organizational access and social protection unequally distributed.

Efficacy, trust and the protest-withdrawal fork

Internal efficacy concerns the perceived ability to understand and participate in politics. External efficacy concerns whether authorities are believed to hear and respond. Trust is related but distinct: it concerns the perceived competence, fairness or trustworthiness of institutions (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Niemi et al., 1991). Distrust does not have a uniform behavioral effect. When collective efficacy is high and a target is reachable, distrust may motivate protest. When institutions appear untrustworthy and immovable, distrust can produce exit, cynicism or adaptive silence. The key theoretical fork is therefore not trust versus protest but distrust combined with efficacy versus distrust combined with futility.

Identity, Emotion and Moral Conviction

Grievances become mobilising when they are framed as shared, unjust and changeable. Collective identity identifies a ‘we’; emotion supplies urgency; moral conviction makes compromise costly (Jasper, 2011; Skitka et al., 2005; van Zomeren et al., 2008). Anger often encourages approach, while fear or hopelessness can suppress public action. Identity can also narrow participation: citizens may mobilize when an issue implicates their occupation, community, campus or generation but remain distant from harms framed as belonging to others. Cross-cutting frames—fair recruitment, clean government, equal citizenship or public safety—can widen coalitions when they connect diverse experiences without erasing differences.

Mobilization Infrastructure and Political Opportunity

Grievance is common; organised action is not. Social-movement theory emphasizes leadership, organisations, networks, resources and openings in the political environment (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Tarrow, 2011). Student associations, coaching-centre networks, professional groups, unions, civil-society organizations and local intermediaries can validate information, coordinate logistics and negotiate demands. They also provide continuity after online attention moves elsewhere. Political opportunities are relational rather than fixed: divisions among elites, judicial access, an upcoming election, administrative consultation or an available grievance forum may increase the expected value of action.

Connective action and the limits of visibility

Digital platforms allow personalized content to travel through loosely connected networks, producing connective action without the membership structures of older organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). They accelerate discovery, framing, documentation and coordination. Meta-analytic evidence generally links social-media use with participation, but effect sizes and causal directions vary (Boulianne, 2015; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Visibility may bridge users into offline action, substitute for costlier participation, or create a short-lived spectacle. Platform metrics measure attention among users, not representative public opinion. Algorithmic amplification, coordinated campaigns, unequal connectivity and hostile speech can distort apparent consensus.

Risk, The Spiral Of Silence And Preference Concealment

Public action is undertaken under uncertainty about social and institutional consequences. Young citizens may



anticipate conflict with family, loss of employment, academic sanctions, policecont act, trolling, doxxing or durable digital records. Perceived minority status can intensify self-censorship even when private support is substantial (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Kuran’s account of preference falsification further suggests that individuals may conceal private beliefs until the perceived participation threshold changes (Kuran, 1995). Rapid cascades are therefore possible: visible early movers can reduce uncertainty and reveal latent support. The reverse also occurs when repression or hostile counter-mobilisation raises the perceived cost of speech.

Public Administration, Voice and Policy Feedback

Institutions shape participation before, during and after mobilization. Administrative burden can make rights and remedies costly to use (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Procedural and informational justice influence whether citizens view decisions as legitimate (Colquitt, 2001; Tyler, 2006). Participatory designs differ in who can speak, what they can decide and how authority responds (Arnstein,1969;Fung,2006;Nabatchi&Leighninger,2015).Policy feedback the nalters future expectations: a visible response can teach citizens that participation matters, while opaque non-response can teach futility (Mettler & Soss, 2004). Digital voice is most consequential when connected to institutions capable of investigation, reason-giving and remedy (Fox, 2015; Peixoto & Fox, 2016).

The Selective Participation Model

The model links four domains. Issue architecture concerns whether a problem is personally resonant, morally legible, and attributable to a responsible actor, supported by communicable evidence and connected to a specific remedy. Citizen appraisal concerns internal and collective efficacy, trust, perceived risk, identity and resources. Mobilisation ecology concerns peer visibility, platform affordances, recruitment, organisers and political opportunity. Institutional and movement feedback concerns official response, policy outcome, repression, learning, fatigue and organizational survival. Their interaction shapes the repertoire selected at a particular time.

Selective Participation Model: Movement Between Silence And Protest

The arrows indicate conditional transitions, not a fixed linear sequence.

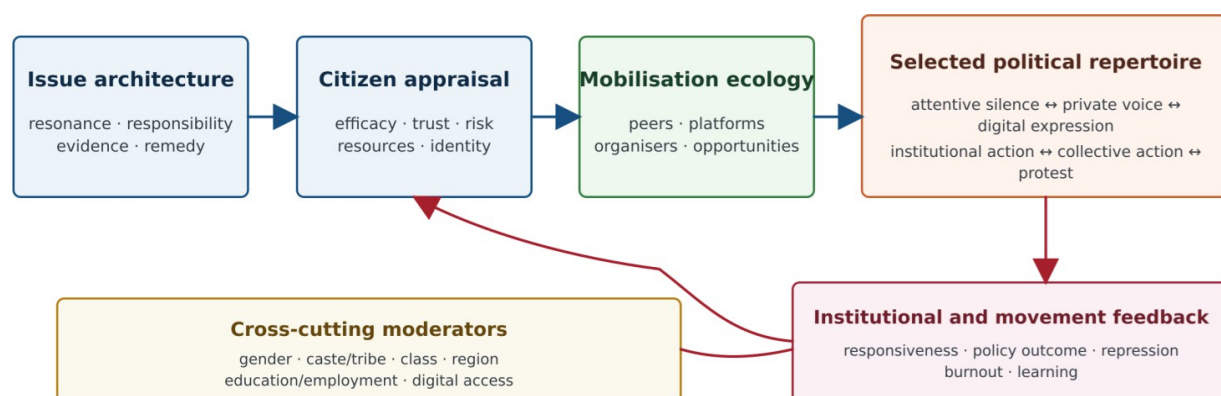


Figure 1. Selective Participation Model. The sequence is conditional and permits movement in both directions.

Issue Architecture

Four properties make a grievance easier to mobilise. Issue resonance links the claim to lived



experience, identity or moral concern. Responsibility clarity identifies an authority or actor who could reasonably be held answerable. Evidence portability allows a claim to be summarised, verified and circulated without imposing prohibitive technical or legal burdens. Remedy specificity translates dissatisfaction into an actionable demand. A problem may be severe yet under-mobilised when these conditions are weak.

From Appraisal to Repertoire

Young citizens do not choose between silence and protest in a single step. They assess whether they understand the issue, whether peers will support them, whether collective action can work, whether institutions might respond and what costs are likely. Low-cost expression can be an entry point, an endpoint or a protective substitute. Institutional participation can be chosen when channels appear credible; contentious action becomes more likely when stakes and efficacy are high but routine channels appear blocked. Silence remains likely when concern is low, but also when concern is high and risk or futility dominates.

Feedback and protest-to-Silence Transitions

Outcomes reshape later behaviour. A procedural concession can strengthen external efficacy even without full policy change. A policy reversal can validate mobilisation but also dissolve the coalition once the immediate demand is met. Repression can create fear, anger or both; its effect depends on solidarity, documentation, organisational support and perceived legitimacy. Non-response may produce escalation, innovation or disillusioned withdrawal. Burnout and issue replacement can return highly visible participants to private or attentive states without erasing political learning.

Global Illustrations and Outcomes

The global cases demonstrate that youth participation produces heterogeneous outcomes. They were chosen for analytical variation rather than regional representativeness. Germany illustrates an institutional-legal pathway; Nigeria a rapid organisational concession with incomplete accountability; Kenya a fiscal-policy reversal alongside continuing protest and repression; Bangladesh the expansion of a bounded quota claim into a regime-level crisis; and Nepal a digitally triggered anti-corruption mobilisation followed by leadership turnover and electoral realignment at high human and institutional cost.

Case	Mobilizing structure	Documented out come through 30th April 2026	Analytical implication
Germany: youth climate litigation (2021)	Young complainants used constitutional litigation within a wider climate movement; the claim joined Intergenerational justice to a legally identifiable statute.	The Federal Constitutional Court held parts of the climate law incompatible with future freedom because post-2030 reductions were insufficiently specified. Parliament then raised the 2030 reduction target to at least 65% and moved climate neutrality to 2045.	Clear institutional venue, portable scientific/legal evidence and a specific remedy converted youth concern into durable legal-policy change; Implementation remained a separate challenge.



Nigeria: (2020)	Digitally networked, youth-led protest against police brutality focused on a named police unit and documented abuses.	Authorities disbanded SARS and established judicial panels, but UN and other official assessments reported incomplete publication, prosecution and accountability.	A visible target enabled rapid concession; incomplete implementation and coercion weakened the conversion of organisational change into trusted accountability.
Kenya: anti-Finance Bill protests (2024-25)	Predominantly young networks translated tax proposals and governance grievances into mass digital and street mobilisation.	The President declined to sign the 2024 Finance Bill and called for its withdrawal. Protests and accountability demands continued, while UN reporting documented deaths, injuries and restrictions around later demonstrations.	A specific bill and decision-maker enabled policy reversal, but broader corruption and policing claims were harder to resolve and generated a longer protest cycle.
Bangladesh: student quota movement (2024)	A public-employment quota dispute provided a concrete distributive grievance; student networks expanded the frame toward governance and political accountability.	Quota rules were narrowed, but violent repression and movement expansion preceded the fall of the former government and formation of an interim administration. OHCHR later called for accountability for serious violations.	A bounded policy issue became a wider legitimacy crisis when repression altered identities, demands and perceived stakes.
Nepal: 'GenZ' protests (2025)	A social-media ban interacted with anti-corruption, nepotism and employment grievances; digital Networks rapidly Coordinated youth action.	The ban was lifted and Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli resigned. An interim government led by Sushila Karki oversaw the March 2026 election, in which Balendra Shah's Rastriya Swatantra Party won 182 of 275 seats. The unrest also caused extensive deaths, injuries and institutional damage.	A platform ban activated latent anti-corruption and employment grievances. Leadership turnover and electoral realignment were major outcomes, but they did not by themselves establish a durable anti-corruption reform.

Table 2. Brief global illustrations and differentiated outcomes.

Sources for Table 2: Federal Constitutional Court of Germany (2021); German Federal Government (2021); Federal Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2021); United Nations Committee Against Torture (2021); Office of the President of Kenya (2024); United Nations Special Procedures (2025); Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2025a, 2025b); Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2025); and Sharma (2026).

Comparative lessons

Three lessons emerge. First, target ability matters. A named unit, bill, quota rule or statute gives collective action direction. Second, an immediate concession does not settle accountability. SARS was disbanded, the Kenyan bill was withdrawn and quotas changed, yet implementation, prosecution, trust and broader governance grievances remained contested. Third, institutional pathway shapes cost. Germany's legal route produced formal policy change without the scale of street-level coercion seen in several other cases, but it depended on judicial access, rights-based standing and technically portable



evidence. Global examples therefore should not be imported as scripts; they identify mechanisms to test under different institutional conditions.

India: Context, Cases and Outcomes

Electoral Weight, Digital Reach and UN Equal Capacity

India combines a large young electorate, high platform use, strong electoral competition and uneven organisational access. ECI data confirm the numerical importance of 18-29-year-olds, while Lokniti research shows that youth are politically heterogeneous rather than a single vote bloc (Kumar, 2014; Kumar & Kumar, 2024). Digital campaigning has expanded direct communication and mobilisation, but parties, influencers and organised actors remain important intermediaries (Neyazi et al., 2016). The same platforms that enable voice also carry misinformation, abuse and traceability. Connectivity disparities mean that highly visible urban platform publics cannot stand for all Indian youth.

Precedents and Gen Z-era cases

Two earlier digital-era mobilisations are analytically important but should not be relabeled as Gen Z movements. The 2011 India against Corruption mobilisation brought large numbers of young participants into an anti-corruption frame and was followed by the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013. The 2012 protests after the Delhi gang rape similarly involved substantial youth participation and were followed by the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013. Both outcomes arose through wider legislative, committee and political processes; neither should be attributed mechanically to protest alone. They are best treated as repertoire-building precedents that demonstrated the power of moral clarity, visible grievance and focused demands.

Gen Z-era cases display greater outcome diversity. Anti-CAA mobilisation created major campus and community networks but did not secure repeal; the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules Were notified in 2024. The farm-law movement was intergenerational rather than youth-led, yet young participants were visible in logistics, digital communication and protest; Parliament repealed the three laws in 2021. Agnipath protests produced a one-cycle increase in the upper age limit but not withdrawal of the scheme. Telangana recruitment disputes following the 2023 paper leak led to cancelled examinations, procedural correction and extended litigation; the Supreme Court's dismissal of the remaining challenges on 2 April 2026 cleared the Group-I recruitment. NEET-UG protests produced institutional review without a nationwide re-examination, while UPPSC aspirants obtained a narrower scheduling concession.

Indian Case And Cohort Role	Claim And Repertoire	Documented Outcome	Analytical Implication
India Against Corruption (2011) youth-rich precursor	Anti-corruption; mass rallies, fasting, television and early social-media diffusion; visible legislative demand.	The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act were enacted in 2013 after a broader legislative process.	Moral clarity and a named institutional remedy can turn diffuse corruption into a mobilisable claim.



Nirbhaya mobilization (2012-13) youth-rich precursor	Gendered violence and public safety; spontaneous demonstrations, vigils and sustained national attention.	The Criminal Law(Amendment) Act, 2013 followed, alongside institutional and policing debates.	A vivid incident can produce agenda and legal change, while Implementation and everyday safety remain distinct outcomes.
Anti-CAA mobilisation(2019-20) - students and Gen Z visible	Citizenship, equality and regional identity; campus action, sit-ins, constitutional symbolism and digital networks.	No national repeal occurred; the 2024 Rules operationalised the Act. The movement nevertheless produced civic networks, political socialisation and agenda effects.	High identity resonance can sustain mobilisation, but polarization, repression, pandemic disruption and limited institutional concession can shift protest toward silence or dispersed advocacy.
Farm-law protests(2020- 21) intergenerational with youth participation	Agrarian policy and livelihood; encampments, unions, digital communication, mutual aid and negotiation.	Parliament enacted the Farm Laws Repeal Act, 2021, removing the three central laws.	Dense organizations and a specific policy target can sustain costly action beyond short digital attention cycles.

Indian case and cohort role	Claimant repertoire	Documented outcome	Analytical implication
Agnipath protests(2022) -recruitment-age youth central	Military recruitment, job security and career expectations; demonstrations, blockades and digital coordination.	The upper age limit for the 2022 cycle was increased to 23 as a one-time measure; the scheme was retained.	Direct personal stakes and clear authority generated rapid protest, but the concession was partial and procedural rather than policy reversal.
NEET-UG controversy (2024)-GenZ central	Examination integrity and equal opportunity; student protest, petitions, litigation and high-volume digital debate.	The Supreme Court did not order a nationwide retest; a high-level committee recommended NTA and examination reforms, followed by implementation monitoring and administrative changes.	When courts require proof of systemic failure, public outrage must be translated into legally sufficient evidence; protest may still produce institutional review without the demanded remedy.



TSPSC/TGPSC paper-leak and Group-I re-examination protests(2023-2024) -youth-centred	The 2023 paper-leak crisis, repeated cancellations, disputed biometric and OMR safeguards, and later objections to Government Order 29 and examination scheduling. Aspirants used demonstrations, petitions and judicial review.	The October 2022 preliminary examination was cancelled after the leak. The Telangana High Court set aside the June 2023 re-examination and ordered a fresh examination with the notified safeguards. A new notification followed in 2024, and the mains proceeded after courts declined a last-minute stay. The High Court later upheld the evaluation process, clearing the recruitment of 563 candidates.	Protest sustained public scrutiny, but Cancellations and final outcomes arose through investigation, commission action and judicial review. Specific procedural defects produced correction; broader later objections did not halt the recruitment.
UPPSC aspirant protests(2024)-youth central	Exam scheduling, normalization and fairness; sustained gathering outside the Commission and negotiation.	The PCS preliminary examination was moved to a single day; RO/ARO arrangements were postponed/referred to a committee.	A narrow, implementable demand addressed to a single authority can produce a rapid procedural outcome.

Table3. Indian illustrations, cohort caution and outcomes through 30th April 2026.

Sources for Table 3: India Code (2013a, 2013b, 2021); Ministry of Home Affairs (2024); Ministry of Defence (2022); Supreme Court of India (2024); Ministry of Education (2024); Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee (2025); Telangana High Court (2023); IANS (2024); New Indian Express (2026); News On AIR (2024); Sinha (2024); and Srivastava (2024).

What the Indian cases show

The cases do not establish that young Indians participate only when personally affected. Citizenship, gender justice, agrarian policy and anti-corruption claims show moral and solidarity mobilization. They do show that participation becomes easier when a grievance is narratable, a target is identifiable and a remedy is expressible. Examination protests are especially revealing because applicants share an administrative status, communicate through dense preparation networks and can identify a commission, ministry or court. Corruption and misuse of resources often lack these advantages unless activists translate them into a specific contract, recruitment, audit, service or budget demand.

They also show why outcome must be disaggregated. The farm-law case produced national statutory repeal; Agni path produced a one-cycle age adjustment; UPPSC produced scheduling change; NEET produced review and administrative reform without a national retest; anti-CAA produced mobilisation and socialization without repeal. Treating all five as either ‘successful protest’ or ‘failed protest’ would destroy the variation the theory seeks to explain.

Why Serious Governance Problems Can Produce Silence

Diffuse responsibility and scale mismatch

Corruption and poor governance are frequently produced through chains of delegation involving elected officials, departments, local bodies, contractors and front line offices. Citizens may observe a harmful outcome but disagree over the responsible actor. National rhetoric may be directed at problems



whose remedy lies with a municipality or state department; local grievances may be framed so broadly that no administrative target is reachable. This scale mismatch disperses blame and reduces strategic clarity.

Technical Complexity and Evidence Portability

Public procurement, budget execution and regulatory decisions are technically dense. Evidence may be distributed across tenders, audit observations, file nothings and implementation records. A credible claim must often survive legal, journalistic and partisan scrutiny. Young citizens may therefore hold a strong suspicion but lack confidence to speak publicly. The mobilization problem is not absence of concern but the cost of converting documents into a concise, defensible narrative. Intermediary organizations, data journalists, social auditors and domain experts can lower this cost.

Normalization, Coping and Private Exit

Repeated exposure to weak services can normalize dysfunction. Families purchase private tutoring, health care, transport, security or water; citizens use brokers or informal payments; aspirants shift examinations or migrate. These coping strategies are rational at the household level but can reduce the time and incentive for collective reform. Hirschman's framework is useful here: exit and voice are alternatives shaped by loyalty and the perceived possibility of repair (Hirschman, 1970). For disadvantaged youth, however, private exit is often unavailable, producing adaptation rather than consent.

Partisan filtering and social risk

Governance evidence is interpreted through political identity. Supporters may discount allegations against a preferred government; opponents may accept weak evidence that confirms prior beliefs. Public discussion then becomes a test of loyalty rather than a shared inquiry. Young citizens who reject this binary may remain silent to avoid being assigned a partisan identity. Online abuse and permanent digital records heighten the cost, particularly for women, minorities, precarious workers and students dependent on institutions.

Low Expected Responsiveness

Concern is unlikely to become sustained action when citizens do not expect a response. Opaque grievance systems and consultations without feedback weaken external efficacy. Broad slogans such as 'end corruption' express a moral objective but provide no immediate administrative test. Specific demands—publish contracts, disclose selection criteria, conduct a social audit, protect whistle-blowers, issue a reasoned order or decide complaints within a deadline—make institutional response observable. Remedy design is therefore part of mobilization design.

Theoretical Propositions and Observable Implications

The framework yields eight theoretical propositions. Each identifies a directional relationship and, where appropriate, a moderator. The propositions concern issue-specific participation rather than a stable personality trait and require future empirical testing.

Proposition	Testable Statement
P1-Issueresonance	Personal relevance, moral conviction and collective-identity fit will increase participation intensity across modes, net of political interest and resources.



Proposition	Testable statement
P2- Visibility× infrastructure	Peer and platform visibility will increase digital expression more strongly than sustained collective action; the effect on sustained action will be larger where credible organizers and offline networks are present.
P3- Distrust efficacy	Low institutional trust will predict contentious participation when collective efficacy is high, but attentive/disillusioned silence when collective efficacy is low.
P4- Risk substitution	Higher perceived legal, academic, occupational, reputational or physical risk will reduce identifiable public action and shift engagement toward private, anonymous or lower-visibility modes.
P5-Governance target ability	For corruption and public-resource issues, responsibility clarity, evidence portability and remedy specificity will each increase willingness to act; their joint presence will have a super-additive effect.
P6-Institutional responsiveness	Reason-giving, time-bound acknowledgement and visible follow-up will increase external efficacy and reduce the probability of protest-to-disillusioned-silence transitions.
P7- Conditional digital inclusion	Digital access will increase participation more strongly among respondents with higher civic skills and offline recruitment; access alone will not eliminate social inequalities in voice.
P8 - Feedback and future participation	Perceived success will increase subsequent cross-issue participation, while repression or non-response will increase withdrawal; solidarity and organizational support will weaken the withdrawal effect.

Table 4. Propositions derived from the Selective Participation Model.

Measuring selectivity and fluidity

Cross-sectional selectivity may be operationalised as the within-person dispersion of participation intensity across (J) issues. Let (P_{ij}) represent person (i)'s standardized participation intensity concerning issue (j). An illustrative Selective Participation Index is:

$$SP_i = \sqrt{\frac{1}{J-1} \sum_{j=1}^J (P_{ij} - \bar{P}_i)^2}$$

where ($\bar{P}_i$) is person (i)'s mean participation intensity across all issues. Higher values indicate greater unevenness in participation across issues, suggesting that the individual participates intensively in some issue domains while remaining comparatively inactive in others. Lower values indicate a more uniform distribution of participation. However, low dispersion may characterize both consistently active and consistently inactive individuals. The index should therefore be interpreted jointly with the individual's mean participation level.



This measure assumes that issue-specific participation indicators have been standardized and are sufficiently comparable. Because modes of participation—such as attentive silence, private voice, digital expression, institutional participation and collective protest—are qualitatively distinct and not necessarily ordinal, the dispersion index should be supplemented with latent-class or latent-profile analysis. Issue-by-mode concentration may also be examined using a normalised entropy-based measure, with the direction of the index clearly specified so that higher values consistently represent either concentration or diversification. Participatory fluidity is inherently longitudinal. Let (C_{it}) denote the latent participation state of person (i) at wave (t). A descriptive Participation Fluidity Index may be expressed as:

$$PF_i = \frac{1}{T-1} \sum_{t=2}^T \mathbf{1}(C_{it} \neq C_{i,t-1})$$

where $\mathbf{1}(\cdot)$ equals 1 when the participation state changes between consecutive waves and 0 otherwise. The index ranges from 0 to 1: a value of 0 indicates no observed transition, whereas a value of 1 indicates a change at every consecutive observation.

Because latent-state membership is probabilistic and transition counts ignore the direction, duration and substantive meaning of change, the principal analysis should rely on latent transition analysis. Where the timing and duration of participation states are available, multi-state event-history models may be employed. These approaches can distinguish transitions from attentive silence to private or public voice, from digital expression to institutional or collective action, and from protest to withdrawal, disillusioned silence or renewed participation.

A high fluidity score should not be interpreted as inherently desirable or democratically superior. Frequent transitions may reflect political learning and strategic adaptation, but they may also result from repression, declining efficacy, unstable political opportunities, issue fatigue or institutional distrust. Fluidity must therefore be interpreted in relation to the direction, causes and consequences of transitions.

Future Empirical Research Programme for India

Overall strategy

No primary data were collected for this article. The following programme specifies how the propositions could be tested. A future sequential mixed-method study could combine a multi-state probability survey, an embedded factorial vignette experiment and a three-wave panel. Interviews and focus groups could clarify how respondents interpret silence, risk and institutional response. A digital-trace component could examine public attention and network diffusion, but it should not be used to infer the prevalence of opinion or the meaning of non-posting. Joint displays could integrate statistical patterns with process accounts.

Population and sampling plan

The target population is Indian citizen aged 18–29. A feasible high-quality design would survey approximately 4,000 respondents across about 20 states, selected through multistage probability sampling. States should be stratified by region, urbanization and political-administrative context; districts selected with probability proportional to size; and rural villages and urban census blocks sampled within districts. House hold selection should use a document edrandom procedure, followed by random selection of one eligible respondent. Oversamples may be used for Scheduled Tribe



respondents, the North-East, women in low-connectivity settings and persons with disabilities, with design weights restoring population estimates.

A panel subsample of roughly 2,000 respondents should be re-interviewed after six and twelve months. Attrition-prevention procedures should include consented multimode contact, small non-coercive compensation, and language choice and refreshment samples. Survey administration should combine face-to-face and secure self-administration for sensitive items. Mode effects must be tested rather than assumed away.

Discussion

Participatory fluidity offers a middle position between romanticizing digital youth and diagnosing a generation as apathetic. It preserves agency while recognising constraint. Gen Z may be distinctive in the speed, visibility and platform dependence of some repertoires, but the underlying mechanisms-resources, efficacy, identity, risk, recruitment and opportunity-are not uniquely generational. The framework therefore makes a bounded claim: contemporary communication and institutional conditions alter the timing and observable form of participation, while social inequalities continue to shape who can act and at what cost.

The global cases strengthen this claim by showing that apparent mobilisation strength does not map neatly onto durable reform. A specific bill can be withdrawn while wider accountability grievances persist. A police unit can be dissolved while prosecution remains incomplete. A quota policy can change while repression expands the conflict. A legal judgment can generate statutory change through institutional channels. What matters is the combination of issue architecture, mobilisation infrastructure and response, not grievance intensity alone.

The Indian cases similarly reveal a hierarchy of target ability. Examination schedules and age limits are administratively bounded; citizenship and agrarian policy involve wider ideological and institutional conflicts; corruption is often structurally diffuse. Yet diffuse problems are not inherently unmobilisable. Anti-corruption campaigns become more actionable when they identify a contract, selection process, audit finding, service standard or oversight remedy. The model thus shifts analysis from ‘_Why do young people ignore corruption?’ to ‘_Which institutional and communicative conditions make a governance claim actionable, safe and consequential?’

The framework also clarifies the normative distinction between participation and democratic quality. High mobilisation can coexist with misinformation, exclusion or violence; silence can reflect reflection or coercion; policy responsiveness can be justified or opportunistic. The desirable objective is not maximal protest. It is a democratic system in which young citizens possess meaningful, protected and evidence-responsive routes to influence, and in which authorities can distinguish legitimate disagreement from unverified allegation through fair procedures.

Limitations

The paper is conceptual and uses illustrative cases; it does not estimate how common any participation state is or demonstrate that the proposed mechanisms caused the reported outcomes. Case selection favours visible episodes with documented consequences and therefore risks underrepresenting quiet, local and unsuccessful mobilisation.

The Gen Z boundary is approximate and can obscure life-course effects. Age, education, unemployment and first-time electoral experience may explain behaviour attributed to generation. The



proposed 18–29 sampling frame improves empirical clarity but does not cover the youngest members in popular definitions. India's linguistic, regional and social diversity also makes measurement equivalence difficult. The model simplifies reciprocal relationships. Participation can increase efficacy, create networks, raise risk or change identity; institutional response can be anticipated before action; and digital visibility may be both a cause and a consequence of mobilisation. If implemented, three survey waves would improve temporal inference but would not eliminate endogeneity. The proposed experiment would identify effects of stylised cues on intended action, not the full behaviour of real movements.

Finally, silence is difficult to observe without creating it as a response category. Self-reports may be affected by recall and social desirability, while digital traces systematically miss private action and non-users. Discriminant validity from apathy, fear, ambivalence and low political knowledge is therefore a central empirical requirement, not a minor measurement detail.

Conclusion

Gen Z in India is neither uniformly silent nor continuously rebellious. Its members move among attention, private voice, digital expression, institutional participation, collective civic action and protest as issues, risks, networks and institutional responses change. Participatory fluidity names this movement and turns it into an empirical problem. The paper argues that participation is most likely when an issue is resonant, responsibility is identifiable, evidence can travel, a remedy is specific, peers and organisers reduce uncertainty, and authorities provide a credible route to response. The absence of these conditions helps explain why corruption, poor governance and misuse of public resources can generate widespread frustration without sustained mobilisation. Silence under such conditions should not be mistaken for consent. For public administration, the practical lesson is direct. Democratic institutions cannot demand youth engagement while making claims opaque, risky or inconsequential. Voice becomes durable when citizens can understand a decision, reach the responsible authority, speak without retaliation and see a reasoned answer. The distance between silence and protest is therefore occupied not by apathy alone, but by the quality of governance itself.

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