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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Isotopes of the Body Politic: What Student Movements Have Always Signalled

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Was the government's eventual concession a sign of democratic responsiveness, or of having misjudged the movement's strength until force had already been used?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

Students function as radioactive tracers in the body politic. They carry no baggage, hold no stake in the settled order and have no incentive to misreport the condition of the state. When they light up, the malignancy is real, and the leaked question paper of today is the jobless quarter of tomorrow.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This is the rare piece that hands you a **GS1 historical sequence** and a **GS2 governance argument** in the same frame. The examination agitation gives you the contemporary hook; the historical spine, from Madras 1965 through Navnirman, the JP movement and the Assam agitation, is standard GS1 material on post-independence social movements. Answers that connect the two read as informed rather than reactive.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The protest began over repeated leaks of examination papers, recurrences rather than aberrations, which have claimed more than a score of lives. Its demands were unremarkable: accountability, the minister's resignation, withdrawal of cases, compensation for the families of students who died, and an examination system whose papers do not leak.

The epicentre was **Jantar Mantar**, the eighteenth-century observatory built to read the heavens, now measuring the Republic's mood. On the opening day of the monsoon session thousands marched on Parliament; by Tuesday protesters had rebuilt the camp police had demolished. On Saturday the government conceded, and **Dharmendra Pradhan resigned as education minister**.

That retreat is itself the news. It is the first ministerial resignation of its kind in twelve years, and only the third occasion this government has walked back a position, after the Land Acquisition Bill in 2015 and the farm laws in 2021.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Student movements have a track record that governments consistently underestimate.

YEAR	MOVEMENT	CONSEQUENCE
1965	Anti-Hindi agitation, Madras	Congress displaced; DMK installed in Tamil Nadu
1974	Navnirman agitation, Ahmedabad hostels	Trigger for the wider anti-establishment wave
1974-75	Bihar students invite Jayaprakash Narayan to lead	The JP movement, and the road to 1977
1979-85	Assam agitation, student-led	Assam Accord; AASU's transformation into a governing force

The international record runs parallel: students hastened de Gaulle's exit in Paris, led the Velvet Revolution in Prague, defied Suharto in Indonesia, and more recently drove change in Dhaka, Colombo and Kathmandu. Students do not need to win elections to end governments.

The arithmetic explains the anxiety. Projections put the 15-29 cohort at roughly **37 crore**, a youth population larger than that of the United States. It is a constituency of voters arriving at the ballot box and of aspirants stalled in the job queue, and it has come of political age knowing the promises and disappointments of a single dispensation. Any government arguing with a quarter of its population can change the narrative or submit.

The biographical irony is unavoidable. This alliance owes much to student politics: nearly a dozen ministers emerged from the ABVP and the JP movement, and the Prime Minister's own political formation runs through the Navnirman agitation of 1974. A regime whose résumé was minted in the anti-Emergency movement, amid lathi charges, chose lathis against those carrying the same baton forward, then retreated.

The standard operating procedure failed. Power's usual sequence is ignore, insult, injure, invite. The insult supplied the movement its name, the Cockroach Janta Party, an epithet turned into identity on the old truth that the creature survives everything designed to exterminate it. Spin masters invoked the foreign hand, as was done before the Emergency. University advisories cautioned students against expressing political affinity in person and online. None of it worked.

The underlying grievance is systemic credibility, not one minister. Count the instruments that have failed the young: examinations that cannot certify merit, the **paradox** of unemployment alongside unfilled sanctioned posts, courts with no time for the grievance, internship and job schemes that under-deliver, and

fast-track courts with a slow-track record. The coaching economy that harvests over **7 billion dollars annually** is the market's answer to a state that cannot run a fair test.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Apply the **leading-indicator frame**. Student agitations are rarely about their stated trigger alone; they are early readings of a broader breakdown in the compact between citizen and state. Ask three questions of any such movement:

- ❶ **What is the proximate trigger?** Here, paper leaks.
- ❷ **What is the structural grievance?** Employment scarcity and institutional unreliability.
- ❸ **What does the state's response reveal?** Force first, **concession** later, indicates the state misread the mood rather than disagreed with it.

Avoid the two lazy readings: that the movement is opposition-manufactured, and that a resignation resolves it.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture a pressure vessel. The **inlet** is 37 crore young Indians entering education and the labour market. The **outlet** is a narrow aperture of seats, posts and credible credentials. **Pressure** is the gap between the two. A leaked paper is not the cause of the explosion; it is the crack where an already-pressurised vessel fails. Replacing the minister repairs the crack. Widening the outlet is the only thing that lowers the pressure.

WAY FORWARD

- **Fix the certification function first.** An examination system that cannot guarantee integrity destroys the legitimacy of every credential it issues.
- **Fill sanctioned posts.** The coexistence of unemployment and vacancy is an administrative failure, not an economic one, and it is the most quickly remediable grievance on the list.
- **Treat protest as diagnosis.** Force applied to a leaderless, filmed, networked movement produces images that outlast the policy dispute.
- **Restore the compact explicitly.** Compensation to bereaved families and withdrawal of cases against students cost little and signal that the state distinguishes **dissent** from disorder.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly examined post-independence social movements and the role of pressure groups and civil society in Indian democracy. This editorial supplies both the historical sequence and a contemporary case.

Practice question: “Student movements in India have functioned less as interest groups than as early-warning systems for the political order.” Examine with reference to movements since 1965. (250 words)

Interview angle: Was the government’s eventual concession a sign of democratic responsiveness, or of having misjudged the movement’s strength until force had already been used?

Sources: The New Indian Express, PIB

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