

Janhavi Acharekar on India's Cockroach protests:

Had these events unfolded before the printing of the anthology, they would, most certainly, have found their way into my text.

To provide a brief background to this issue: In May 2026, a parody social media account called the Cockroach Janata Party or CJP (satirizing the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP) was created on social media platform X by Boston-based Indian political strategist and communications professional, Abhijeet Dipke, in response to a comment made about unemployed youth by the Chief Justice of India. The satirical handle gained instant popularity and turned into nothing short of a revolution.

In June, an examination paper leak called for a re-examination of NEET – the highly competitive national medical school entrance exam. This led the CJP to call for peaceful student protests around the country which, together with the hunger strike undertaken by educator and environmental activist Sonam Wangchuk, led to the resignation of the Minister for Education, Dharmendra Pradhan. The government also agreed to meet the CJP's demands for education reforms, among other things.

The protests that brought over 50,000 people on the streets of Delhi, and thousands more in other cities around India, were mobilised entirely on digital or rather, social media (Instagram, in particular), and came to be known as the Gen Z protests or the youth movement. In reality, I would say that they found support across generations. It is significant that they also cut across class, caste, religion and gender, and that there were many references to Dr Ambedkar during the protests.

The movement was marked by youthful irreverence and humour – in stark contrast with the serious, moralistic and paternalistic tone of the government. Rather than literature influencing these events, I would say that the events

have sparked protest literature of a different sort, so to speak, in the form of witty slogans, clever captions, songs and visual imagery.

About the future, I don't think we can speak of social media and literature – and here I mean traditional publishing – in the same breath. We need to be cognizant of the fact that memes and reels are spontaneous and unfiltered with a much wider reach than traditional literature which is process driven and takes its own time. Unless literature assimilates into new platforms with agility or unless publishers find newer, quicker ways of putting ideas out there, social media – in its own chaotic way – will occupy the place that literature once did.

The reach of social media coupled with the sentiment of the time, is apparent in the fact that the CJP movement has spawned other localized protests related to separate issues. Whether all this discontent inspires reforms and change remains to be seen as the situation continues to unfold. There is, however, reason for optimism as CJP has injected an ageing, flawed democracy with a jolt of youthful energy to keep it on its toes in a way that opposition parties couldn't (interestingly, the protests had the government scrambling to make its presence felt on Instagram).

The events of the past few months reflect the theme of my text. Truth is indeed stranger than fiction (and social media has a wider reach than literature). I've referenced comedy and parody in my final story in the anthology. In real life, I'm hopeful that this movement which began as satire will succeed in restoring people's faith in political democracy and that the cockroaches will continue the long fight for social democracy.

Janhavi Acharekar, September 2026