

REVIEW ARTICLE

Navigating the "New India": GenZ at The Intersection of Aspiration, Anxiety and Social Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a thematic analysis of urban, digitally connected Indian Generation Z (b. 1997–2012) as a cohort navigating the contradictions of “New India.” Situated at the intersection of a digital revolution, globalised aspirations, and enduring structural hierarchies, this generation embodies a profound tension between agency and constraint. The paper examines three dialectical themes: the paradox of globally infused ambitions colliding with local educational and economic precarity; the dual-edged nature of digital citizenship, characterised by networked activism alongside algorithmic polarisation and surveillance; and the pervasive psychosocial anxiety generated by hyper-competition, digital comparison, and existential dissonance. Synthesising contemporary scholarship and secondary socio-economic data, the paper contends that urban Gen Z serves as a critical diagnostic for India’s broader social transformation. While explicitly acknowledging its urban-centric and class-biased limitations, the analysis concludes that this generation’s response – whether disillusionment, co-optation, or sustained negotiation – will significantly shape India’s future trajectory.

KEYWORDS

- Generation Z • Aspiration • Digital Activism • Anxiety • Urban India • Precarity
- Social Change

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INTRODUCTION

The Dialectical Landscape of New India

India stands at a unique historical inflection point. As the world's most populous nation and one of its fastest-growing major economies, India has seen the rhetoric of "New India" become a dominant political and cultural trope—a narrative promising hyper-modernity, global competitiveness, and a decisive break from the perceived stagnation of the past. This narrative is materially anchored in post-1991 economic liberalisation, the proliferation of digital infrastructure, and a demographic dividend that positions the country as the world's youngest major society. Yet beneath this triumphalist discourse lies a far more complex and contradictory reality. "New India" is also a landscape of deepening inequality, persistent structural hierarchies of caste and gender, environmental precarity, and an increasingly polarised public sphere. Nowhere are these contradictions more acutely felt than by the country's Generation Z—the cohort born roughly between 1997 and 2012, whose consciousness has been forged entirely in the crucible of this accelerated transformation. India's Generation Z occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of unprecedented opportunity and profound systemic constraint, inhabiting a moment of profound historical transition.

This paper presents a thematic analysis of urban Indian Gen Z, focusing on three core, interconnected themes that define their lived experience. The first is the aspiration paradox—the profound tension between globally infused ambitions and locally constrained structural realities. The second is digital citizenship—the dual-edged nature of online empowerment, characterised by both an unprecedented capacity for networked activism and profound vulnerability to surveillance, polarisation, and commodification. The third is psychosocial anxiety—the pervasive burden of navigating high-stakes competition, digital hyper-connectivity, and existential dissonance, which has emerged as a generation-defining condition. The paper adopts a multidisciplinary theoretical framework, drawing on sociological theories of precarity, digital media studies, postcolonial theory, and psychosocial analyses of risk and anxiety. It synthesises contemporary scholarship, media analysis, and secondary socio-economic data

to construct a conceptual diagnostic of the generational psyche.

Crucially, the analysis is self-limiting. It explicitly acknowledges that its focus is on urban, digitally connected, English-speaking, and relatively privileged youth, a specific, influential, and symptomatically visible segment of the broader national cohort. Secondary analyses of India's digital divide indicate that a significant majority of rural youth lack reliable smartphone access, and their aspirations remain tethered to more traditional benchmarks of success, such as stable government employment, land ownership, or migration to urban centres as manual labourers. The themes explored here, while highly visible in metropolitan discourse, cannot be universally applied across India's vast socio-economic landscape. Furthermore, India is not a monolith; regional variation across states—from Tamil Nadu to Uttar Pradesh to Manipur—profoundly shapes educational access, political culture, and digital penetration. This paper does not presume to speak for these diverse realities but analyses the cohort whose experiences are most frequently invoked in the construction of the "New India" narrative. The paper is, therefore, a thematic investigation of a specific demographic segment, whose experiences nonetheless offer critical insights into the nation's broader trajectory.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL DELIMITATION

For the purposes of this paper, Generation Z is defined as the demographic cohort born between 1997 and 2012. This temporal framing is not merely chronological but socio-cultural. This generation is distinguished from Millennials by having undergone key formative socialisation entirely within the post-liberalisation, post-smartphone era. They are often described as "digital natives," a term that, while critiqued for technological determinism, captures this cohort's fundamental immersion in digital ecosystems from early adolescence (Prensky, 2001). To understand the psyche of Indian Gen Z, we must situate them within a theoretical framework that accounts for systemic uncertainty. Drawing on Ulrich Beck's (1992) concept of the "Risk Society," this generation faces systemic risks—climate change, economic volatility, political instability—that previous generations could,

to some degree, insulate themselves from. This risk consciousness is compounded by the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility. The self is no longer seen as a product of social structures but as a "project" to be continuously optimised, branded, and marketed (Giddens, 1991; Gooptu, 2013).

This individualistic ethos clashes with India's collectivist and hierarchical social structures. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field are particularly useful here. Gen Z's habitus—their deeply ingrained dispositions, tastes, and expectations—is shaped by global digital media, which expands their aspirational field far beyond their immediate material reality. However, their ability to succeed in this expanded field is severely constrained by their inherited social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). This creates a state of profound "aspirational dissonance." To this framework, we must add postcolonial and subaltern perspectives. Partha Chatterjee's (2004) distinction between "civil society" (the domain of elite, rights-bearing citizens) and "political society" (the domain of marginalised populations negotiating survival through informal means) illuminates why the aspirational vocabulary of global meritocracy remains inaccessible to vast swathes of the population. For urban Gen Z, the tension lies in being socialised into the expectations of civil society while witnessing the precarity of political society around them. Similarly, Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach reminds us that aspiration without the substantive freedoms—education, healthcare, economic opportunity—to realise it becomes a source of frustration rather than fulfilment. The paper also incorporates feminist perspectives, recognising that gendered norms uniquely constrain young women's aspirations, digital access, and mobility, subjecting them to heightened surveillance and honour-based expectations (Nagpal, 2025).

THE ASPIRATION PARADOX: GLOBAL IMAGINARIES AND LOCAL REALITIES

The aspirational psychology of urban Indian Gen Z is forged in a crucible of contradictory forces. On the one hand, their imaginative landscapes are profoundly cosmopolitan. Through platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and Netflix, their benchmarks for success—education, career,

lifestyle—are increasingly globalised. The "success script" has been rewritten to valorise creative autonomy, digital entrepreneurship, and personal branding, moving away from the stable, linear career paths of previous generations (Gooptu, 2013). This paradigm is deeply individualistic, reflecting a neoliberal ethos in which the self is treated as a project to be optimised and marketed (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013). However, this globally informed aspiration exists in perpetual friction with the granular realities of the Indian context.

The first major point of friction lies within the educational ecosystem. While aspiring to global pedagogical models that emphasise critical thinking, a significant proportion of urban Gen Z remains trapped in a system defined by rote learning and extreme competition. This creates profound cognitive dissonance, fostering frustration and alienation among students who are aware of alternative possibilities yet cannot access them (Jeffrey, 2010). The relentless pressure to secure credentials from a narrow set of elite institutions often reduces education to a high-stakes survival game rather than a journey of intellectual growth. The coaching factory culture, particularly in cities like Kota, has become a symbol of this tragic paradox, in which students spend years sacrificing physical and mental well-being for the slim chance of entry into a prestigious institute. Secondary analyses of student suicides and mental health surveys underscore the human cost of this system. The state's policy response, notably the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, attempts to bridge this gap through multidisciplinary learning and vocational training. However, critical analyses highlight persistent implementation challenges, inadequate funding, and a continued emphasis on measurable outcomes over holistic development.

The second, more critical site of friction is the socio-economic structure. The glittering world of start-ups and global finance, as portrayed in the media, is accessible only to a thin, urban, and privileged stratum. For the vast majority, the reality is defined by the informalisation of labour and the rise of the gig economy. While offering flexibility, this new world of work replaces job security with income volatility and erodes the social safety nets that previous generations relied upon (Appleby, 1984). The "platform worker" is the

paradigmatic figure of this precarious reality – told simultaneously that they are their own boss while being algorithmically controlled and economically fragile. The structural unemployment crisis, documented by secondary analyses of Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) data, reveals persistently high youth unemployment rates, indicating a systemic failure of the economy to generate sufficient formal employment. The promise of meritocracy—a central tenet of their aspirational worldview—is routinely challenged by the lived experience of systemic inequality, where caste, class, and regional networks continue to shape career trajectories far more than individual talent (Jodhka & Prakash, 2016). Gen Z is more vocal in calling out discrimination, but they are not immune to its effects, and the gap between the meritocratic ideal and the hierarchical reality is a primary source of disillusionment.

In response to these contradictory forces, Gen Z has developed a distinctive form of cultural hybridity. They deftly code-switch between global and local cultural lexicons, navigating multiple registers with remarkable agility. They may champion global environmental causes while negotiating traditional family expectations around marriage or career; they consume international cinema while producing hyper-local digital content in regional languages on platforms such as Moj, Josh, and ShareChat. This is not a simple rejection of tradition in favour of Western modernity, but a strategic, context-dependent negotiation. Kaur and Eqbal (2019) term this the “vernacularisation of global modernity,” in which global forms are adapted, indigenised, and given new meaning within local frameworks. The aspiration is not to become “Western” but to craft a viable “global Indian” identity capable of operating across multiple cultural registers. This hybridity is a source of great cultural creativity, but it is also exhausting, requiring constant mental labour and ontological fluidity. Feminist scholars further note that for young women, this hybridity is complicated by the burden of “respectability,” in which global aspirations must be continually negotiated against familial expectations of modesty and honour, subjecting them to a distinct and more constraining form of aspirational dissonance (Nagpal, 2025).

DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AND THE NETWORKED SELF

For urban Gen Z, the digital realm is not an alternative space but the primary substrate of social life, political consciousness, and civic identity. Their socialisation has coincided with the rise of smartphones and cheap data, rendering the online/offline binary largely meaningless. This has given rise to a novel form of digital citizenship, in which rights, responsibilities, and participation are enacted and mediated through digital platforms (Singh, 2014). Their political engagement is marked by deep distrust of traditional, hierarchical institutions—political parties and mainstream media—and a preference for horizontal, network-based mobilisation. The tools of this engagement—the hashtag, the viral video, the meme, the online petition—enable rapid collective action that bypasses traditional gatekeepers.

The past decade has seen remarkable episodes of networked activism, with Gen Z at the forefront of shaping national discourse. The movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) saw students and young professionals use social media to coordinate protests, disseminate legal information, and craft counter-narratives to state-sponsored messaging (Bhattacharya, 2025). The use of art, poetry, and music in these protests, widely disseminated through digital platforms, emphasised the significance of aesthetic resistance. Similarly, conversations around feminism (MeTooIndia), caste discrimination (DalitLivesMatter), and LGBTQ+ rights have been mainstreamed through the advocacy of digitally savvy young Indians (Nanditha, 2022). This activism is deeply personal; the body, identity, and personal testimony become sites of political resistance, allowing marginalised voices to bypass traditional gatekeepers and speak directly to a global audience.

However, this digitally enabled empowerment coexists with profound new forms of vulnerability and fragmentation. The public sphere they inhabit is algorithmically curated. Platforms designed to maximise engagement often create echo chambers and filter bubbles that reinforce pre-existing beliefs and exacerbate societal polarisation (Mittra & Das, 2025). The same tools that enable progressive activism are equally effective at

spreading hate speech, misinformation, and communal propaganda. A critical and often overlooked aspect is the majoritarian activism of Gen Z. While global media often highlights progressive youth movements, secondary analyses of survey data and political trends reveal that a significant, and arguably larger, segment of this cohort is increasingly drawn to majoritarian, authoritarian, and religious-nationalist narratives (Udupa, 2019). This phenomenon must be understood as a complex response to perceived crises—economic insecurity, cultural anxiety, the erosion of traditional authority, and a longing for belonging and dignity in a rapidly changing world. The state's narrative of "New India" as a resurgent Hindu nation resonates with young people who feel left behind by secular modernity and seek meaning in a politics of cultural affirmation.

Furthermore, platform architecture commodifies activism. Metrics such as likes, shares, and followers can incentivise performative "slacktivism"—superficial engagement that entails minimal risk yet yields maximal social capital (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). The pressure to signal "correct" beliefs online creates a new form of peer pressure, in which authentic engagement is often sacrificed for social validation. At the same time, the state has expanded its digital surveillance capabilities, creating a chilling effect on dissent. For Gen Z activists, the risk is not only offline violence but also digital reprisal: doxxing, cyberbullying, legal harassment, and the weaponisation of surveillance (Udupa, 2021). Their struggle is not only for social justice but also for sovereignty over their digital selves in an increasingly monitored and commercialised online world. From a subaltern perspective, the digital public sphere remains profoundly exclusionary; those without linguistic capital, technological access, or social networks to amplify their voices remain unheard, their grievances confined to the offline margins. Thus, the democratisation of voice that digital platforms promise is undercut by the persistence of offline hierarchies.

THE BURDEN OF THE FUTURE: ANXIETY AS PSYCHOSOCIAL CURRENCY

Beneath the curated confidence of social media profiles and the assertive rhetoric of online activism lies a pervasive undercurrent

of anxiety. This is not merely a clinical issue but a generation-defining psychosocial condition—a direct symptom of navigating the high-stakes, high-velocity, and often contradictory environment of "New India." This anxiety is a rational, embodied response to objectively stressful structural conditions; it is the human cost of rapid transformation.

The first major source of anxiety is academic and professional precarity. The "tyranny of merit," coupled with a highly competitive and often outdated education system, places immense psychological pressure on young people. The fear of failure is magnified by family expectations and the social shame of "falling behind" (Jeffrey, 2010). The structural unemployment crisis confirms that this fear is not irrational but grounded in objective economic reality. The shift to a gig economy replaces job security with income volatility. Chronic uncertainty about the future—whether one will have a job next month, whether one can afford healthcare, whether one can ever own a home—fuels a constant state of economic anxiety (Appleby, 1984). This financial precarity is exacerbated by the neoliberal narrative that blames individuals for their "failure" to succeed, leading to self-doubt and shame.

The second major source is digital hyper-connectivity. Constant social comparison on visual platforms fuels "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO) and feelings of inadequacy. Research has established a significant positive correlation between social media intensity and depressive symptoms in this cohort (Bhat *et al.*, 2024). Peers' curated highlight reels often mask mundane struggles, creating an unattainable benchmark for personal success. The 24/7 news cycle fuels "doomscrolling" and collective helplessness. Climate anxiety, or "eco-anxiety," is particularly acute among Gen Z, who perceive a dire ecological future yet feel profoundly powerless against systemic inertia (Mannan & Basu, 2026). The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a cataclysmic amplifier of these stresses, disrupting formative years, exposing the digital divide, and triggering a widespread mental health crisis that existing support systems were ill-equipped to handle (Deb *et al.*, 2023). The Mental State of the World reported that the well-being of Indians aged 18-24 declined most steeply during this period (Thiagarajan & Newson, 2024).

Finally, a profound existential and moral anxiety stems from cognitive dissonance. This generation is caught between progressive values absorbed online and conservative norms prevalent in their immediate environments. The mental labour of constantly code-switching—negotiating intergenerational conflicts over career choices, marriage partners, and religious practice—exacts a heavy psychological toll (Pandey, 2025). For marginalised youth, this is compounded by the constant vigilance required to navigate spaces marked by casteism, Islamophobia, or homophobia. Feminist analyses emphasise that young women bear a disproportionate burden of this anxiety, as their mobility and choices are subjected to familial surveillance and community scrutiny. Crucially, Gen Z has been instrumental in destigmatising mental health discourse, openly discussing therapy and burnout within global wellness frameworks. However, a yawning “therapy gap” persists. According to World Health Organization data, India has fewer than one psychiatrist per 100,000 people, rendering the gap a structural crisis rather than a mere affordability issue. Consequently, many turn to digital substitutes—mental health apps, online support groups—solutions embedded in a commercialised wellness industry that often individualises systemic problems (Pandey, 2025). The pursuit of mental well-being is, therefore, a deeply political act—a demand for a society that does not sacrifice its youth’s psychological health at the altar of economic growth.

INTERCONNECTIONS: A TRIPARTITE WEB OF CONTRADICTION

The three themes explored above are not isolated phenomena but deeply interconnected constituents of a single dialectical experience. Aspiration drives digitality; the desire to meet globalised benchmarks necessitates a digital presence. Conversely, digitality amplifies aspiration; algorithmic exposure to global lifestyles raises the aspirational bar, making local reality appear more constrained. Simultaneously, digitality mediates anxiety. The same platforms that foster community and activism are the primary engines of social comparison and doomscrolling. The hyper-connected self is exposed to constant social comparison, directly feeding anxiety. Constant

exposure to global crises generates eco-anxiety and political helplessness. Finally, precarity exacerbates both. Systemic constraints in education and the economy make high-stakes competition intensely stressful. Anxiety generated by precarity is further amplified by the digital environment, creating a self-perpetuating feedback loop. The body and mind become battlegrounds for these systemic contradictions. The state’s institutional failures—in education, employment generation, and mental health infrastructure—compound these pressures, leaving young people to navigate systemic crises through individualised coping mechanisms. Yet, in their digital organising and destigmatisation of mental health, Gen Z simultaneously resists this logic, gesturing towards a more collective and caring politics.

CONCLUSION

Future Trajectories and the Cartography of Care

Indian Generation Z faces a critical historical inflection point, tasked with navigating aspirations that exceed structural realities while reshaping the nation’s democratic and social fabric. This thematic analysis argues that to understand “New India,” one must grasp the tripartite experience of its urban youth: globally infused yet locally constrained aspirations, digitally empowered yet vulnerable citizenship, and pervasive anxiety as the psychosocial cost of this navigation. They are the demographic dividend, the digital vanguard, and the moral conscience of a nation in flux. However, this experience is not monolithic. It is fractured along profound axes of caste, class, gender, religion, and geography. The urban, digitally connected cohort analysed here is a minority, while the silent rural majority operates within a different reality in which aspiration is defined by basic access to services and stable employment. Regional variation across India’s federal states further complicates any unified portrait, demanding future research attentive to local specificities.

Several future trajectories are possible. One is the path of fragmented disillusionment, in which unfulfilled aspirations lead to cynicism, social withdrawal, or the embrace of radical ideologies. Another is the path of co-optation,

in which disruptive energy is channelled into consumerism and apolitical technosolutionism, thereby neutralising political demands. The most hopeful trajectory is the path of sustained negotiation, in which Gen Z leverages digital fluency to build solidarity networks and pressure institutions towards greater inclusivity and responsiveness (Kaushik, 2023). A comparative perspective across the Global South shows that this negotiation is not unique to India; young people in Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia face similar contradictions, suggesting potential for transnational solidarities.

Their greatest legacy may be the forging of a new ethic of care—for the self, the community, and the planet—that stands in contrast to the uncritical hyper-nationalism and ruthless individualism of earlier models. The ultimate success of India's transformation will not be measured merely by GDP but by its ability to foster a generation that is not only aspirational and connected but also psychologically resilient, socially anchored, and democratically engaged. Navigating "New India," they are not merely passengers but cartographers, sketching the contours of a new, more equitable social contract, even as it is tested by the enduring realities of a complex, pluralistic democracy.

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