Swabhimaan

A LIBERTARIAN PERSPECTIVE ON INDIA

ISSUE 1 | 6 AUGUST 2026

The Most Expensive Feedback Form in India

THE EXAM-LEAK PROTESTS WON EVERYTHING THEY ASKED FOR. THE CHARTER THEY LEFT BEHIND ASKS FOR THE WRONG THING.

Swabhimaan

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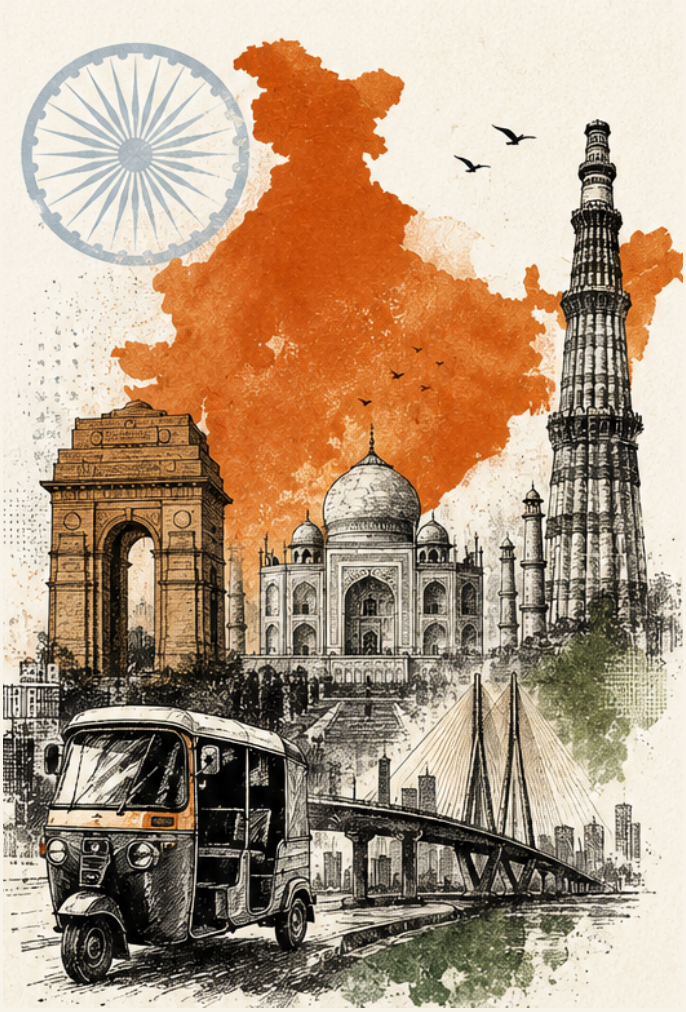

> *It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. It is, therefore, in the palm of our hands. But such Swaraj has to be experienced, by each one for himself. One drowning man will never save another.*
>
> — M. K. GANDHI, HIND SWARAJ, 1909

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The Most Expensive Feedback Form in India

BY AVNEESH KASTURE

The Cockroach Janta Party won every demand it made, then handed the government a five-point charter that would make the next leak worse. The trouble was never that the entrance exam is badly run. It is that there is only one.

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The Cockroach Janta Party is named for an insult. In May the Chief Justice of India compared jobless young Indians to cockroaches in open court. Within a day, Abhijeet Dipke, a thirty-year-old political-communications strategist, had turned the remark into a party name that parodies the ruling party's, under the slogan "Voice of the Lazy and Unemployed". Volunteers marched in cockroach costumes. When the government banned the party's account on X, Dipke opened a new one and observed that cockroaches don't die.

By July the parody had more Instagram followers than the BJP. Over seven weeks of monsoon at Jantar Mantar, it survived tear gas and lathi charges and became the first student protest of the BJP era to win everything it asked for; then it disbanded. Sonam Wangchuk ended his 26-day hunger strike on 23 July, once the government put its assurances in writing; Dharmendra Pradhan resigned as Education Minister two days later; the government agreed to pay ₹1 crore to the family of each student who died by suicide after the paper leak, and to withdraw cases against peaceful protesters.

Before disbanding, the CJP handed the government a five-point reform charter and promised to return in three weeks to check on it. It asks for ten-year sentences for leak syndicates, a National Testing Commission set up by law to replace the NTA, annual CAG audits, fee caps on private colleges, and a permanent welfare fund for bereaved families. Every demand assumes the problem is poor administration, and every remedy is more state: a stiffer law, a new commission, another audit, a price control, another fund. The mistake, though, was to concentrate so much power in one place, which is why passing the charter would do more harm than rejecting it.

The students were right to protest. They spent years preparing for exams the state could not keep secure, and protest was the only way left to make themselves heard. Parents brought ten-year-olds to the sit-in and told Dipke they wanted the system fixed before their children's turn came. Yet look at the cure on offer: the centralised exam system failed, so the country will build a better-run centralised exam system. Each failure of a government monopoly becomes the case for giving it more power.

Thirty small single points of failure would serve us as badly as one large one.

EXIT, VOICE AND THE PRICE OF BEING HEARD

India ran this experiment before, for forty years. My generation knows it only from stories; readers older than me lived inside it. A family waited eight years for a telephone line, and once the line came, a trunk call to another city joined the queue at breakfast and came through, if it came through, by night. The same family booked a Bajaj scooter for a child not yet engaged. You could complain to the Posts and Telegraphs Department, but you could never take your money elsewhere, so your complaint cost the department nothing.

The economist Albert Hirschman named the two ways customers keep a seller honest: **exit** — walking out to a rival — and **voice**, meaning complaint and protest. Where exit is impossible, voice is all that remains, and *voice is costly*. Jantar Mantar is the most expensive feedback form in the country: it took a nationwide movement and a hunger strike to send a message that a market sends free every time a customer changes shops.

A SINGLE POINT OF FAILURE

The exam monopoly has the same design, with higher stakes. A leaked university paper inconveniences one university. A leaked NEET paper upends more than twenty lakh lives, because entry to a whole profession funnels through one exam held on one day. Engineers call this a single point of failure: one part whose breakdown stops the whole machine. That design also sets the prize for crooks: middlemen priced this year's stolen paper at ₹30 to ₹50 lakh a candidate, and a client list at those rates adds up to hundreds of crores. The crisis has two causes, and each needs its own repair: **one exam** guards the gate, and **too few** seats lie behind it.

> ### THE ARITHMETIC OF THE GATE
>
> **20 lakh** Candidates sitting NEET, against roughly one lakh MBBS seats
>
> **₹30–50 lakh** Reported price of a leaked paper, per candidate
>
> **26 days** Length of Sonam Wangchuk's hunger strike
>
> **5 demands** in the charter — each asking the government to do more

MANY EXAMS, NOT MERELY BETTER ONES

Fix the exam first. The state has already tried guarding harder: this year's paper travelled with GPS trackers, past 5G jammers and AI cameras, and it leaked anyway. The charter's ten-year sentences will do no better, because they aim at the wrong number. A man running a hundred-crore racket weighs the odds of getting caught; those odds sit near zero, and a harsher sentence he never expects to serve does not change his arithmetic. Handing exams back to the states merely restores the world before NEET, whose record is Vyapam: Madhya Pradesh's decade-long bazaar of rigged papers and bought government jobs. Thirty small single points of failure would serve us as badly as one large one.

The real repair is competition inside the system. Let universities accept scores from rival testing bodies, and let each body hold its exam several times a year. Junior colleges already work this way: they admit students from CBSE, ICSE and the state boards, because each board's certificate carries a known reputation. A testing body whose paper leaked would lose universities and candidates to its rivals within a season, so security would become its livelihood. Private exams already operate at this scale at the exit gate of Indian education, where AMCAT, eLitmus and the TCS National Qualifier Test screen millions of job-seekers a year across repeated sittings. A mishap at any of them stays small, because each sitting is one of many.

The common objection is that rival examiners will compete by setting easy papers. The examiner's customer, though, is the university, and a university learns within a year whether the scores it bought predicted first-year results. An examiner that inflates marks sells a broken instrument and destroys its own product.

AND MANY MORE SEATS

Now consider the seats. A NEET paper is worth stealing because more than twenty lakh aspirants chase roughly one lakh MBBS seats, and the government made that ratio. India rations medical seats through licences and quotas, and it bans for-profit colleges outright: a college must register as a trust and declare that it earns nothing. The money still moved, in secret, as the "donation". A capitation fee is what profit looks like where profit is banned.

Legalise for-profit colleges, let investors build seats in the open, and the ratio of aspirants to seats falls. As it falls, the value of any one paper collapses, and the syndicates leave the trade for the same reason burglars skip empty houses. This makes the charter's fee caps its most dangerous demand: a price cap on a supply-starved market is the machine that produced capitation fees the first time, and the charter wants to switch it on again.

The stock reply is that for-profit colleges will become degree mills. India's own record answers this, because our great degree mills all flourished under the state's stamp. Many of Madhya Pradesh's nursing colleges were fake, yet inspectors certified them; in 2024 the CBI arrested its own officers for taking bribes to do so. A college could buy approval in an afternoon, while a reputation takes decades to build. Where employers paid the price of being wrong, the market shut the mills on its own: the shoddy engineering colleges of the 2000s boom died of empty seats once TCS and Infosys learned to filter by campus and re-test every hire, and AICTE spent the next decade processing their closure applications.

WHO WILL GUARD THE GUARDS?

Two thousand years ago the Roman poet Juvenal asked: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Who will guard the guards?

The charter piles guard upon guard and leaves him waiting for an answer. The braver reform shrinks the need for guards — many exams, so a leaked paper becomes one key among many, and many more seats, so a seat stops being worth a crime.

The Prime Minister Who Wept on Independence Day

BY HIMANSHU KUMAR

Singapore turns 61 this week richer than the empire that once governed it. The secret of the small rich state is not tax, and it is not luck. It is a government that knows its people can leave.

Singapore, present day.

On the morning of August 9, 1965, Lee Kuan Yew went on television to tell Singaporeans that their country was now independent, and he cried. New nations usually celebrate their birth. Singapore's first prime minister grieved his, because the country he now led was a swampy island with no oil, no farmland, and no drinking water it could call its own. This Sunday that island turns 61. The country whose own leader mourned its independence now earns about $99,000 per person each year, by the International Monetary Fund's count, nearly double the figure for Britain, which once governed it as a colony.

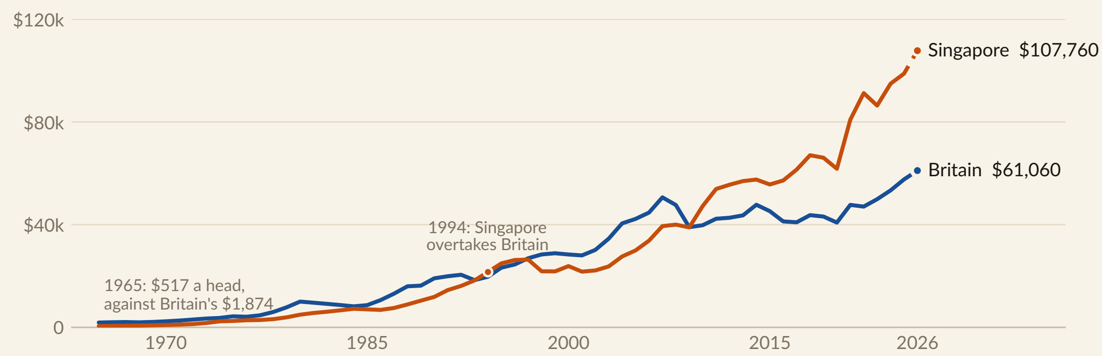
SMALL, RICH, AND NO ACCIDENT

That result should embarrass the theory of wealth most of us grew up with. Wealth is supposed to come from size: from farmland and oil, and from a home market big enough to buy whatever you make. By that theory, an island you can drive across in an hour was supposed to stay poor. Singapore turns out to be the rule. Liechtenstein, an Alpine state whose entire population could sit in Wembley Stadium with half the seats still empty, has the highest income per person on earth. Luxembourg, with fewer residents than a mid-sized city, is just behind it.

Tax shelters, you might say: money with a mailbox. For a few micro-states that is fair, and worth saying plainly. It cannot cover Singapore, which hosts one of the busiest ports on earth and one of the world's great oil-refining centers without pumping a single barrel of its own. The tax story also arrives about twenty-five centuries too late. Athens, a single quarrelsome city, produced ideas that still shape modern constitutions. Venice, built on mud flats in a lagoon, ran the trade between Europe and the East for centuries, and elected its rulers while the rest of the continent crowned them.

The colony overtook the crown

GDP per person, current US dollars. World Bank; dashed segment is the IMF's 2026 estimate.



EXIT IS THE SECRET

What these places share is a government that could lose its people. A merchant who disliked Venice could sail for Genoa, and a craftsman squeezed by one Greek city could walk to the next. That exit is the secret. A government that can lose its people has no choice except to protect and serve them, and a government whose land holds no oil and no mines has nothing left to invest in except those same people.

The contrast explains a darker pattern as well. A state with oil under its feet can afford to neglect the people standing on it, because the oil pays the government either way; a state with nothing underfoot has to build schools. Smallness sharpens the effect. A leader ten kilometers from a broken drain hears about it; a capital a thousand kilometers away reads a report about it, eventually. Singapore built housing and schools at a pace big countries still study, partly because its voters lived down the road and its rivals were an hour's flight away.

The strongest witness for this idea is the largest country on earth. In 1978 Deng Xiaoping toured Singapore, went home, and opened zones where a few Chinese coastal cities could trade under looser rules and behave, in effect, like little Singapores. Those zones became the engines of China's rise.

THE LESSON, CUT TO SIZE

The honest case against all this deserves a hearing. Small states live under the protection of warships they do not pay for, and they can be swallowed whole; Japan needed one week in 1942 to take Singapore. And nobody has shown how to govern three hundred million people like a harbor town. Every one of those objections stands. Together they shrink the lesson to a size a careful reader can carry: this is a story about what competition does to the people who govern us, wherever they govern.

So the next time a tiny state tops an income table, read the number as information about how a government behaves when its residents can leave, and then ask of your own government what it would do differently if you could. Most of us cannot leave, which is exactly what makes the question worth asking. Sixty-one years ago a prime minister wept on camera because everything of value had been stripped from his country except its people. A government left with nothing but its people learns to take very good care of them.

The Padlock on the Schoolhouse Door

BY ATTHARV BANAITKAR

Sixteen years on, judge the Right to Education Act by its results. The results are damning.

Rajesh Malhotra runs a small private school in Tigri Extension, a slum colony in Delhi. His father opened it twenty years ago; it teaches the colony's children up to Class 8 for a few hundred rupees a month. Malhotra is frank about what it lacks: water runs short, so dry days mean two or three buckets, and the fire hose on the wall has nothing behind it. The parents have never complained. They pay for schooling the state hands out free nearby, which tells you what they make of the free alternative. The Right to Education Act gives a school like his 3 years to produce an all-weather building, a library, a playground of the prescribed size, and teacher salaries at government rates, or lose recognition and close. Malhotra's school has held on.

In 2015 Parliament was handed a tally of 2,173 schools closed; and the padlocking has continued since then; this year Haryana barred 1,107 schools. The offence in nearly every case was physical: a playground too small, a corridor too narrow. Government schools with worse teaching records absorbed the displaced children and faced no reckoning.

THE AUDIT THE ACT IS OWED

The law behind the padlocks is called, without irony, the Right to Education. It came into force in 2010 promising every child aged 6 to 14 a free seat. Sixteen years on, those children are owed more than applause; they are owed an audit, and three of its findings should trouble every Indian.

First, the Act closed schools that poor parents chose. A rickshaw driver who puts a third of his income into his daughter's schooling knows what he is doing: he has weighed both schools and voted with his wallet. The Act overruled him and shut the classroom where she was learning to read.

Second, the learning crisis stayed put. The Annual Status of Education Report returns the same verdict at every round: roughly half of Class 5 children cannot read a Class 2 text, there has been no meaningful improvement in learning. The Act counted toilets and boundary walls; reading comprehension appears nowhere in its text.

Third, the government confessed. Parliament wrote automatic promotion until Class 8 into the law as compassion; the policy taught pupils and teachers that results were optional. In 2019 the same Parliament amended the Act to let states scrap it. A government that reverses the flagship provision of its own landmark law has printed a confession in the Gazette of India.

WHAT THE ACT GOT RIGHT, WITH AN ASTERISK

The Act has real achievements. Enrolment, girls' above all, is near universal, and the 25 per cent quota for disadvantaged children in private schools ranks among the largest school-integration experiments on earth. Each carries an asterisk: enrolment had passed ninety per cent before the Act arrived, and the state hollows its own quota by paying reimbursements late or never, which shrinks the seats on offer. The state also taxes the right it proclaims. Coaching classes, the survival kit of millions of pupils, carry 18 per cent GST; notebooks are taxed too. The vote goes untaxed. A fair trial goes untaxed. Education, declared a right of the same rank, funds the treasury, and the government should decide which claim it believes.

FUND CHILDREN, NOT BUILDINGS

A better way exists, and it abandons no child. Fund children rather than buildings: let public money follow the pupil, by voucher or direct transfer, to whichever school her parents choose. Judge every school, government schools included, by one standard, whether its children can read, write and count, and publish the results. Close schools for failed teaching alone. The rickshaw driver knows his daughter's school better than an inspector with a measuring tape.

The padlocks went on in the name of protecting children, and someone should ask the pupils who lost their seats what they were protected from. Sixteen years of this Act have given India's children the right to an education. They are still waiting for the education.