The Disruption Generation: How Indian Gen Z is Challenging Hierarchies of Caste, Gender, and Authority

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Abstract

This article examines Indian Generation Z as a formidable, digitally-native force actively deconstructing India's entrenched social hierarchies. Born into a paradoxical era of deep-seated tradition and hyper-globalized digital connectivity, this cohort leverages technology, cultural production, and new forms of sociality to mount unprecedented challenges to the pillars of caste, gender, and institutional authority. Moving beyond generational analysis as mere demographic trend, this study argues that Gen Z's interventions represent a systemic "disruption"—characterized by platform-enabled mobilization, the personal-as-political discourse, and the strategic subversion of dominant narratives. Through interdisciplinary analysis spanning sociology, media studies, and political science, the paper explores the tactics, terrains, and tensions of this disruption. It investigates how digital spaces serve as both arsenals and arenas for caste assertion and feminist critique; how new linguistic and cultural codes bypass traditional gatekeepers of authority; and how the ontology of the self is being reconceived outside inherited hierarchies. Crucially, the article also critically engages with the limitations and contradictions of this disruption, including the risks of digital fracture, performative activism, and the potential co-option of dissent by market and political forces. Ultimately, it posits that Indian Gen Z is not merely navigating a changing India but is actively—and irreversibly—rewriting its social grammar through tactical interventions that simultaneously challenge and reproduce the very structures they seek to transform.

Keywords: Generation Z, India, Social Hierarchy, Caste, Gender, Authority, Digital Activism, Social Disruption, Networked Politics, Identity Formation

1. Introduction: A Cohort at the Confluence

Indian Generation Z, comprising those born approximately between 1997 and 2012, represents the first demographic cohort to come of age entirely in the 21st century's technological and ideological milieu. This generation has matured during a period of profound transformation characterized by three intersecting forces: the consolidation of economic liberalization's effects, the ubiquity of digital connectivity, and a resurgent, often contentious reimagining of national identity (Jodhka & Naudet, 2020). Unlike their predecessors, Gen Z has never experienced a pre-internet India, nor have they known an economy untouched by globalization's dual promises of

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opportunity and precarity. They are both products of and agents within what has been termed "New India"—a construct that simultaneously celebrates technological modernity and cultural resurgence while grappling with persistent structural inequalities (Deshpande, 2021).

The central proposition of this article is that Indian Gen Z functions as a "Disruption Generation." Adapting Christensen's (1997) concept of market disruption to social structures, we argue that this cohort introduces new social technologies—novel modes of communication, organization, and identity formation—that systematically destabilize established hierarchies. Their disruption operates not as frontal assault but as tactical insurgency, deploying digital tools to create counter-publics, subvert dominant narratives, and renegotiate the terms of social engagement. This process is inherently dialectical, simultaneously challenging hierarchies while often reproducing them in modified forms.

As digital natives (Prensky, 2001), Gen Z experiences the internet not as external technology but as constitutive environment. This fundamentally alters the architecture of social hierarchy. Traditional mechanisms of caste and gender control relied on spatial segregation, controlled knowledge transmission, and face-to-face enforcement within bounded communities (Guru, 2009). The digital sphere, despite its own exclusions and biases, enables unprecedented forms of connection, knowledge democratization, and identity experimentation (Udupa, 2018). A student from a historically marginalized caste in rural Uttar Pradesh can access transnational anti-caste discourse on Twitter; a queer adolescent in a conservative small town can explore non-binary identities through YouTube creators; young women across class divides can collectively organize against sexual harassment via WhatsApp groups (Phadke et al., 2011).

However, this disruptive potential coexists with significant constraints. Digital spaces themselves reproduce social hierarchies through algorithmic bias, surveillance, and platform capitalism (Nakamura, 2015). Moreover, Gen Z's engagement with hierarchy is marked by profound contradiction: they may critique caste online while participating in caste-based matrimonial networks; challenge patriarchal norms digitally while conforming to traditional gender roles within family settings (Jodhka, 2015). This ambivalence reflects both the depth of social conditioning and the tactical nature of their interventions—disruption as negotiation rather than revolution.

This article analyzes this complex terrain through three interconnected domains of hierarchy: caste, gender/sexuality, and institutional authority. Each section examines how Gen Z's digital practices reconfigure these hierarchies while being reconfigured by them. We begin by exploring anti-caste assertion in digital spaces, focusing on knowledge reclamation, identity performance, and the paradoxes of online activism. We then analyze the reconfiguration of gender and sexuality through digital feminism, queer visibility, and embodied politics. Subsequently, we examine challenges to political, educational, and familial authority through practices of verification, critique, and renegotiation. Finally, we critically assess the fault lines of this disruption: its susceptibility to co-option by market and political forces, its internal contradictions, and its uneven geographic and social reach. Through this analysis, we argue that Gen Z's interventions, while incomplete and contested, have permanently altered India's social landscape by normalizing critique and expanding the boundaries of political imagination.

2. Disrupting Caste's Digital Manifestations

Epistemological Insurgency: Digital Counter-Publics and Knowledge Reclamation

The caste system's resilience historically depended on controlling epistemic resources—determining what counts as knowledge, who produces it, and how it circulates (Ambedkar, 1936). Gen Z's digital anti-caste assertion represents a direct challenge to this epistemic monopoly. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have facilitated the emergence of vibrant counter-public spheres where marginalized caste perspectives gain unprecedented visibility and circulation (Fraser, 1990). This represents more than protest; it constitutes systematic knowledge reclamation.

The digital landscape enables new forms of pedagogical activism. Young anti-caste scholars and creators produce accessible content that deconstructs hegemonic narratives. Instagram accounts like @dalithistory and @ambedkarite_archive translate complex theoretical concepts into visual carousels, reaching audiences that traditional academia cannot. YouTube channels document caste atrocities with evidentiary rigor, bypassing mainstream media gatekeeping. During the 2020 Hathras case, digital activists created detailed timelines, forensic analyses of official statements, and multilingual explainers that sustained national attention when institutional media moved on (Teltumbde, 2020).

This digital ecosystem serves crucial psychosocial functions. For isolated Dalit-Bahujan students in elite educational institutions—often spaces of profound epistemic violence—online communities provide validation, resources, and solidarity. WhatsApp groups become support networks where experiences of microaggressions are shared and strategies for resistance developed (Sukumar, 2022). This represents a fundamental shift: where caste hierarchy traditionally operated through isolation and shame, digital connectivity enables collective identity affirmation and resistance.

Performing Caste: Digital Identity Politics and Subversive Humor

Gen Z engages with caste identity through performative strategies that differ significantly from previous generations' approaches. Digital platforms enable both strategic concealment and hyper-visible assertion, creating complex identity performances. The practice of "caste coming out"—declaring one's caste position as political statement—takes multiple forms. For anti-caste activists, this represents reclaiming stigmatized identity as source of pride and political power. Conversely, some caste-privileged youth engage in "privilege confessionals," publicly acknowledging their structural advantages (Kapur et al., 2021). While criticized as performative guilt, these declarations attempt to disrupt the unmarked normalcy of dominant caste identity, forcing visibility onto historically invisible privilege.

Perhaps the most culturally significant disruption occurs through humor and memes. Gen Z has developed a sophisticated meme culture that weaponizes irony against casteist tropes. Popular formats include juxtaposing Brahmanical ritual practices with mundane contemporary situations, satirizing caste-based matrimonial advertisements, and creating parody accounts of caste-privileged influencers. During the 2021 controversy surrounding celebrity chef Kunal Kapur's "begun bharta" recipe—criticized for appropriating and misrepresenting Dalit cuisine—memes became primary vehicles for political critique, reaching audiences far beyond traditional activist circles (Udupa & Venkatraman, 2021).

This cultural production extends to music, where anti-caste rap and hip-hop have emerged as powerful artistic movements. Artists like Arivu ("Enjoy Enjaami"), Sumeet Samos, and Madara transform personal experience into political critique, their music circulating through Spotify playlists and YouTube videos. The 2022 controversy surrounding Spotify's alleged censorship of anti-caste content ironically amplified these artists' reach, demonstrating how attempts at suppression can fuel digital circulation (Maitra, 2022).

Digital Paradoxes: Cyber-Casteism, Algorithmic Bias, and Internal Contradictions

Despite its disruptive potential, digital anti-casteism operates within significant constraints. Caste hierarchies replicate online through practices scholars term "cyber-casteism" (Chaudhry, 2020). Social media platforms enable new forms of caste-based segregation through private groups, while comment sections become spaces for casteist abuse. Algorithmic recommendation systems often reinforce caste homophily, creating echo chambers that limit cross-caste dialogue (Noble, 2018).

The Indian state's digital surveillance apparatus presents another challenge. Anti-caste activists face sophisticated online harassment campaigns, often coordinated by right-wing groups using automated bots and coordinated reporting to silence dissent. Legal instruments like the Information Technology Act's Section 66A (before being struck down) and subsequent amendments have been weaponized against digital activists, with caste-privileged individuals using their social capital to mobilize state repression (Nielsen & Sen, 2022).

Within Gen Z itself, significant contradictions persist. While some engage in radical anti-caste politics, others embrace "caste-blind" universalism that effectively maintains privilege by refusing to acknowledge structural inequality. Urban, English-educated, caste-privileged youth often perform progressive politics online while maintaining caste endogamy in marriage choices and social networks. This disparity highlights how digital disruption operates unevenly across different segments of Gen Z, with class and linguistic privilege mediating access to and engagement with anti-caste discourses.

3. Reconfiguring Gender and Sexuality

Platform Feminism: Digital Pedagogies and Networked Accountability

Indian feminism's "fourth wave" is distinctly digital in character, with Gen Z women and allies using social media platforms for consciousness-raising, mobilization, and accountability (Gangoli, 2021). Instagram has emerged as a primary site of feminist pedagogy, with accounts like @feminisminindia and @the.indian.feminist creating accessible visual content on topics ranging from intersectionality to reproductive justice. This represents a democratization of feminist knowledge production, bypassing academic and media gatekeepers to reach audiences across geographic and educational divides.

Digital platforms enable new forms of collective action and accountability. The MeToo movement in India gained momentum through Twitter threads and Google spreadsheets where survivors anonymously documented experiences of harassment. This decentralized approach circumvented institutional failures while creating visible patterns of abuse across industries (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Similarly, Instagram campaigns like WhyLoiter reclaim public space by documenting women's

presence in traditionally male-dominated areas, transforming individual acts into collective political statements.

Call-out culture represents a particularly contentious but significant form of digital gender politics. While criticized for lacking due process and enabling mob justice, call-outs function as alternative accountability mechanisms when institutional ones fail. The 2019 "Bois Locker Room" incident—where Delhi schoolboys shared sexually violent content in a private Instagram group—demonstrated how digital call-outs could force institutional action where traditional complaints might have been ignored. Survivors used screenshots as evidence, creating public pressure that led to police investigation and school disciplinary measures.

Queer Digital Ecologies: Visibility, Community, and Commercialization

The transformation in LGBTQ+ visibility among Indian Gen Z represents one of the most dramatic social shifts of recent years. While Section 377's decriminalization provided legal foundation, the social revolution unfolds primarily on digital platforms. Young queer Indians document transitions, relationships, and daily experiences on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, creating what Ghosh (2021) terms "digital kinship networks." These platforms enable identity exploration and community formation for individuals in geographically isolated or socially conservative environments.

Digital spaces have facilitated the development of sophisticated queer vocabularies that transcend earlier binary categories. Terms like "non-binary," "pansexual," and "aromantic," adapted from global queer discourse but localized through Indian languages and contexts, provide precise tools for self-identification. Instagram accounts like @gaysifamily and @queer.bengali create educational content in multiple Indian languages, addressing linguistic barriers that previously limited queer discourse to English-speaking urban elites.

However, queer digital visibility operates within commercial and political constraints. Corporate "rainbow capitalism" markets Pride merchandise while often maintaining discriminatory workplace policies. OTT platforms increasingly feature queer characters but frequently reproduce caste and class privilege in their representations, centering upper-caste, urban, English-speaking experiences (Shahani, 2022). This commercialization risks depoliticizing queer identity while reinforcing existing social hierarchies within LGBTQ+ communities.

Embodied Politics: Digital Negotiations of Beauty, Autonomy, and Morality

Gen Z's gender disruption extends to intimate negotiations of bodily autonomy and aesthetic norms. Social media campaigns challenge traditional beauty standards perpetuated by both Bollywood and global media. Hashtags like BodyPositivityIndia and DarkIsBeautiful contest colorism and fatphobia, while influencers with disabilities, scars, and non-normative bodies gain visibility. This represents a significant departure from previous generations' beauty ideals, though it coexists with persistent market pressures toward conformity.

The body becomes a site of political contestation around reproductive rights and sexual autonomy. Digital organizing played crucial roles in campaigns for menstrual equity (leading to tax-free sanitary products) and against regressive abortion laws. During the 2021 "love jihad" moral panics,

young interfaith couples used Instagram and YouTube to document their relationships, resisting state surveillance and social stigma through public visibility.

Yet this embodied politics remains fraught with contradiction. The same platforms promoting body positivity host influencers selling skin-whitening creams and weight-loss teas. Young women advocating feminist politics online often face intense moral policing regarding their clothing choices, social behavior, and digital self-presentation. This tension highlights how digital platforms simultaneously enable resistance against and reproduction of patriarchal control over women's bodies.

4. Challenging Institutional Authority

Political Authority: From Deference to Digital Verification

Gen Z's relationship with political authority is characterized by fundamental skepticism toward traditional sources of legitimacy. Unlike previous generations that often exhibited party loyalty based on familial or community ties, Gen Z evaluates political actors through frameworks of performance, transparency, and impact (Lokniti-CSDS, 2023). This represents a shift from identity-based to issue-based politics, with digital platforms enabling new forms of political engagement and critique.

Digital tools have transformed protest and political mobilization. During the 2019-2020 anti-CAA/NRC protests, Gen Z activists used encrypted messaging apps for coordination, social media for real-time documentation, and crowdfunding platforms for resource mobilization. They created parallel information ecosystems through fact-checking initiatives and alternative media, countering state-controlled narratives (Roychowdhury, 2021). This decentralized, networked approach proved resilient against state repression, though it also faced challenges of sustainability and coordination.

Political satire and meme culture represent significant forms of authority critique. Meme pages on Instagram and Twitter systematically deconstruct political rhetoric, expose contradictions, and reduce powerful figures to objects of ridicule. During election campaigns, meme wars between supporters of different parties become sites of political socialization for digitally-native youth. While sometimes dismissed as trivial, this satirical engagement represents a profound democratization of political discourse, allowing ordinary citizens to participate in meaning-making about power (Udupa, 2022).

Educational Authority: Demanding Relevance and Redistribution

Educational institutions—traditional bastions of hierarchical knowledge transmission—face unprecedented challenges from Gen Z's demands for relevance, diversity, and participation. Students use digital platforms to organize for curriculum reform, demanding inclusion of marginalized perspectives and decolonization of syllabi. The 2020 online campaign SavarnaSyllabus, initiated by Dalit-Bahujan students, systematically documented caste bias in university reading lists and proposed alternative resources, gaining national attention (Sukumar, 2022).

Digital connectivity enables new forms of pedagogical resistance and alternative learning. Students facing caste or gender discrimination from faculty members increasingly bypass internal grievance mechanisms—often perceived as ineffective—to document and publicize incidents on social media. While controversial, this approach has forced institutions to address systemic issues they previously ignored. Simultaneously, platforms like YouTube and Coursera provide access to knowledge beyond institutional boundaries, challenging universities' monopoly on legitimate knowledge (Watters, 2021).

This digital educational activism operates within significant constraints. Elite institutions with digitally-savvy student populations see more robust challenges to authority than regional colleges with limited digital access. Furthermore, online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities, with many students from marginalized communities lacking devices or reliable internet. This digital divide highlights how challenges to educational authority remain uneven across class and geographic lines.

Familial Authority: Digital Renegotiation of Private Spheres

The family, as primary site of socialization into caste, gender, and religious norms, undergoes significant renegotiation through Gen Z's digital practices. Young people use online resources to challenge traditional expectations regarding career choices, marriage partners, and lifestyle decisions. Digital media provides both scripts for this negotiation—through relatable content about intergenerational conflict—and spaces of respite from familial pressure.

Arranged marriage practices face particular digital scrutiny. Matrimonial apps and websites, while ostensibly modernizing matchmaking, often reinforce caste endogamy and colorism through search filters and preference algorithms. In response, Gen Z has created alternative platforms like "Two Birds, One Stone" (focusing on progressive matchmaking) and social media campaigns critiquing casteist matrimonial advertisements. These interventions attempt to leverage digital tools to subvert rather than reinforce traditional hierarchies (Donner, 2016).

Yet familial renegotiation remains constrained by economic dependence and emotional bonds. Many young people engage in what Chowdhry (2007) terms "strategic conformity"—complying with familial expectations in person while maintaining alternative identities online. This digital dualism reflects both the persistence of traditional authority and Gen Z's tactical navigation between rebellion and accommodation. The outcome varies significantly by gender, with young women facing greater surveillance and restriction of digital access as families attempt to control their mobility and relationships.

5. Fault Lines and Contradictions

Co-option and Commercialization: From Resistance to Brand

Gen Z's disruptive practices face systematic co-option by market and political forces. Neoliberal capitalism demonstrates remarkable capacity to absorb dissent into marketable identities (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Feminist slogans appear on fast-fashion t-shirts; Pride merchandise generates profits for corporations with poor LGBTQ+ records; anti-caste aesthetics get appropriated by dominant caste influencers. This "woke-washing" transforms radical politics into consumable lifestyle choices, depoliticizing demands for structural change.

Political majoritarianism has developed sophisticated strategies for mobilizing Gen Z through digital means. The creation of "Hindutva cool"—blending religious nationalism with modern design aesthetics and meme culture—appeals to youth seeking rooted identities in globalized contexts (Udupa, 2022). Influencer networks promote majoritarian politics through relatable content, while algorithmic amplification ensures visibility. This represents a paradoxical outcome: the very digital tools that enable progressive disruption also facilitate conservative consolidation.

The platform economy itself shapes the form and reach of dissent. Social media algorithms reward engagement through controversy and simplification, potentially distorting complex political issues into polarizing binaries. Activists must navigate platform governance policies that often reflect corporate interests rather than democratic values. The 2021 farmers' protest saw TikTok banned precisely when it became crucial for mobilization, demonstrating how platform vulnerability constrains digital activism (Roychowdhury, 2021).

The Digital Divide: Geography, Language, and Class

Gen Z's digital disruption remains geographically and socially uneven. English-educated, urban, middle-class youth dominate visible online activism, while those from rural backgrounds, regional language speakers, and economically marginalized communities remain underrepresented (Ragnedda, 2017). This creates what could be termed a "representation gap"—where the most visible forms of disruption reflect particular caste, class, and linguistic privileges.

Language represents a particularly significant barrier. While Hindi and English dominate mainstream digital discourse, India's linguistic diversity remains poorly represented on most platforms. Activism in regional languages often operates in separate digital ecosystems with limited cross-pollination. This linguistic segregation mirrors and potentially reinforces existing social divisions, limiting the development of broad-based solidarity across regional and linguistic lines.

Economic precarity further constrains digital participation. Smartphones and data plans remain unaffordable for significant segments of youth, particularly in rural areas and informal urban settlements. Even among those with access, the need for digital labor—whether in platform gig work or content creation for livelihood—can limit capacity for political engagement. This economic dimension highlights how digital disruption operates within, rather than outside, existing structures of inequality.

Internal Contradictions: Between Ideals and Practices

Gen Z's disruption is marked by significant internal contradictions between professed ideals and actual practices. Progressive politics online often coexists with traditional biases offline. Surveys indicate persistent caste endogamy in friendship and marriage choices even among digitally-active youth (Ghai, 2022). Similarly, performative feminism on social media sometimes accompanies sexist behavior in personal relationships.

The pressure to conform to progressive ideals online creates new forms of anxiety and social policing. "Cancel culture"—while holding powerful figures accountable—can also foster environments of fear where minor mistakes lead to disproportionate consequences (Clark, 2020). This can discourage honest dialogue and learning, particularly for those newly engaging with social

justice issues. The resulting perfectionism may ironically limit the very inclusivity that digital activism seeks to promote.

These contradictions reflect the transitional nature of Gen Z's position—simultaneously shaped by traditional socialization and exposed to global progressive discourses. Their digital practices represent ongoing negotiations between these influences rather than complete transformation. Recognizing these contradictions is crucial for understanding both the possibilities and limits of generational disruption.

6. Conclusion: An Unfinished Revolution

Indian Gen Z's disruption of social hierarchies represents a historical process in its early, formative stages—less a completed revolution than a fundamental reorientation of political possibility. Through tactical digital interventions, this generation has achieved what decades of institutional reform often failed to accomplish: making critique of caste, gender, and authority part of everyday public discourse. By creating counter-publics, subverting dominant narratives, and building transnational solidarities, they have ensured that social hierarchies can no longer function through silent consensus but must constantly justify themselves in the digital arena.

The most significant impact may be epistemological. Gen Z has democratized knowledge production about inequality, creating accessible resources that bypass traditional gatekeepers. Where caste and gender hierarchies once relied on controlled transmission of legitimizing narratives, digital platforms enable alternative histories, counter-discourses, and subversive reinterpretations. This represents a fundamental shift in how power operates: from control over information to contestation over meaning.

Yet this disruption remains profoundly uneven and contradictory. Digital divides along lines of class, language, and geography limit its reach. Co-option by market and political forces constantly threatens to depoliticize radical demands. Internal contradictions between online ideals and offline practices reveal the persistent power of socialization. The very platforms enabling disruption also create new forms of surveillance, polarization, and commercial exploitation.

The critical question moving forward is whether online solidarities can translate into sustained offline organizing capable of institutional transformation. Digital activism excels at rapid mobilization and visibility but often struggles with long-term strategy and coalition-building across difference. The energy of networked outrage must be complemented by the patient work of organizational development, policy advocacy, and cross-movement solidarity.

Gen Z stands at a threshold between two Indias: one shaped by centuries of hierarchy, another imagined through digital networks of solidarity and critique. Their project is necessarily incomplete, contested, and marked by the contradictions of their historical moment. But in their refusal to accept inherited scripts of power, they have irrevocably altered India's social landscape. Whether they can build more equitable structures remains uncertain, but they have ensured that the journey toward justice, however difficult, can no longer be deferred. The disruption has begun, and there is no returning to silence.

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