

Gen Z, Democracy and the Changing Political Landscape: In Conversation with Prof. Vikas Sharma

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Namaskar. I am Shipra Bhargav, and today I am speaking with renowned novelist and academic Prof. Vikas Sharma, whose writings have often portrayed the changing realities of Indian society, during Prof. Sharma's academic visit to the Department of English at Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapeeth, Varanasi. In this city, tradition and modernity exist side by side.

Varanasi also proved an interesting setting for discussing his latest novel, *All Her Fires*, which explores a new generation of youth who are caught between inherited values and a rapidly changing world. One of the most striking aspects of his latest novel, *All Her Fires*, is Prof. Sharma's engagement with Generation Z. The novel not only portrays young people as rebellious or impatient; it also tries to understand their frustrations, ambitions, internal conflicts, and a deep desire to make established systems accountable and professional.

Against this background, I would like to begin with a recent Gen Z protest at Jantar Mantar, where young people raised concerns including examination irregularities and paper leaks. The protest drew worldwide attention not only because of the issues being raised, but also because of the language and manner in which some protesters expressed their anger.



Interviewee introduction:

Professor Vikas Sharma is an eminent author, poet, and researcher, recognised for his contributions to both Hindi and English literature. He serves as a Professor in the Department of English at Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut (UP). He wrote his debut novel Raah Ke Patthar (2021) in Hindi, which explores Hindu-Muslim unity and has received widespread appreciation from readers. He has written more than a dozen novels, the latest being All Her Fires: Every Flame She Lit Had a Cost, which has recently become his most appreciated literary work. Many of his novels have been included in the syllabi of undergraduate and postgraduate courses at various universities, and scholars are researching them. His novels have also been translated into various Indian languages, and fifteen critical books have been published on his literary contributions. Professor Vikas Sharma has successfully guided twenty-eight PhD scholars, with eight more currently under his supervision. He is also a member of the editorial board of three international academic journals. He has also been invited to various universities and colleges as a keynote speaker in National and International seminars. His expertise also encompasses literary criticism, as he has written seven notable books in the field: Treatment of History in Indian English Novels, Romantic Sensibility in the Prose Works, Essays, and Journals of Emerson and Thoreau, Novel as an Art Form: With Special Reference to Anglo-Indian Artists, Six Major Poets: A Critical Study, Female Gaze in Bollywood, and Beyond the Rainbow: The Shades of Queer Love. He has also compiled Indian Poetics: A Glance into Indian Aesthetics to further the Indian Knowledge Tradition. Additionally, he serves as the General Secretary of the Association for English Studies of India (AESI).

So, Professor Sharma, let me begin with that.

VS: Shipra ji, we should first understand Gen Z's anger. Gen Z has tremendous energy; they are full of passion and amazing new ideas. They are also well-informed, technologically connected, and, most importantly, they are openly willing to question what they believe is wrong.

Paper leaks happening all across the country are not a small issue. Students spend two or three years preparing for an examination while their parents invest their hard-earned money in coaching, books, rent and other expenses. For many families, these examinations offer hope for a better future. So, if there are paper leaks or serious irregularities, young people have every right to speak up and demand accountability.

All around the world, peaceful protests are an important part of democracy, but a protest must have a purpose. An angry crowd can draw public and media attention, but if you want lasting change, it requires facts, clarity, and constructive dialogue. I have also explored this in my latest novel, All Her Fires. Gen Z carries the fire of ambition, frustration, independence and change. That fire should not be suppressed; it should be given the right direction.

SB: While their concerns can be genuine, the language that they used against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his late mother was objectionable. As a novelist and academic, how do you see this?

VS: A Protest for a legitimate cause cannot become a platform to use abusive language. Political disagreement can lead to anger, but it cannot turn into personal attacks. And if abusive language is directed towards the Prime Minister's late mother, who was not even part of the political dispute, I find it not only objectionable but absolutely unacceptable. There is a difference between criticism and abuse. In a democracy, young people have every right to question the Prime Minister, the government, and the public institutions, but personal insults often weaken the real cause.

Being a novelist, I feel it is my duty to point this out. If I appreciate Gen Z's courage and energy, I must also question them when they cross a line. On the one hand, words can challenge power and inspire change, but on the other hand, they can also hurt and humiliate. My message to Gen Z is simple: Gen Z should protest, question and challenge—but they must not surrender their dignity. They should strengthen their cause with facts and arguments, because freedom of expression works best when it is accompanied by responsibility.

SB: Do these protests suggest that it is time to rethink our education and examination system? What reforms are needed to make it fairer, more transparent, and more accountable?

VS: Yes, we need to ask ourselves why students have to take to the streets every year. Students should be in classrooms, not on the streets. Students have already lost their precious time. I think that educational reform cannot be limited to changing the syllabus or introducing new policies. We need transparency and accountability in examinations, results, recruitment, and grievance redressal.

I also feel that our system has become too examination-centred. We cannot keep telling young people that one examination, one rank or one government job will decide their future. Education should develop independent thinking, communication, employability skills and the ability to create new opportunities.

Most importantly, institutions should reform themselves and learn to listen. When an examination is cancelled or delayed because of a paper leak, simply saying, “We will conduct it again,” is not enough. As a teacher and a novelist, I don't think this generation is asking for special treatment. Their demand is quite basic: “If we work hard and follow the rules, please make sure the system is fair to us.” Any meaningful educational reform must begin there.

SB: From JP's Sampoorna Kranti to Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement, India has witnessed several mass movements that began with great hope but later caused disappointment. Do you think people are gradually losing faith in such movements?

VS: I won't say that people have completely lost faith in mass movements, but yes, there is certainly a sense of disappointment.

As a student of political science at the graduate level, I have read how many movements all around the world began with tremendous enthusiasm. For example, take the Bihar movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan in 1974–75. It came three decades after Indian Independence, when people were extremely dissatisfied with corruption, unemployment, and the political system. JP spoke of Sampoorna Kranti—Total Revolution. It was not merely about changing one government. As a freedom fighter and social reformer, he meant a deeper transformation of politics and society. Young people responded to his call in large numbers, and hope was high.

But what happened afterwards is equally important. Many political leaders who emerged from that movement eventually formed their own political parties and became part of the same political system that JP had wanted to reform. Over the following decades, these leaders, or those associated with the movement, faced allegations or cases involving corruption and misuse of power.

That is what disappoints ordinary people. They begin to ask themselves: Was the movement really about changing the system, or did it eventually become a route for another group to enter it?

Even politically, the change did not last very long. The Janata Party experiment collapsed, and Mrs Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980, only a few years after the Emergency and the JP movement. So, we can see that movements can certainly remove governments or produce new leaders, but that does

not mean the political culture itself will change. I have discussed all these issues in my novel, “Hell for the People”.

SB: The Anti-Corruption movement led by Anna Hazare in 2011 eventually gave rise to AAP and Arvind Kejriwal as a politician, while Anna himself became sidelined. Fifteen years later, another generation is on the streets. Do you see history repeating itself?

VS: Yes, and I think that pattern is worth thinking about. In 2011, when Anna Hazare sat in protest against corruption, the country felt an extraordinary atmosphere. People genuinely believed that something new was happening. Young people came out in large numbers. People started talking about clean politics, accountability, and changing the overall system.

Then politics entered the movement. The Aam Aadmi Party emerged, and Arvind Kejriwal went on to win electoral success in Delhi. But over time, the political movement also became mired in controversy, including the Delhi excise-policy case and questions about political funding and Rajya Sabha nominations. We should, of course, distinguish between political allegations and guilt established by a court. But from the public's point of view, the larger irony is hard to ignore: a movement born around corruption eventually found some of its own prominent figures facing corruption allegations.

And somewhere along the way, Anna Hazare—the man whose moral authority had given the original movement its strength—was no longer at the centre of the political story. That should teach us something. Movement history shows that removing one set of leaders is much easier than changing a political culture.

Now, roughly fifteen years after the Anna movement, we are again seeing a younger generation raising questions about examinations, employment, accountability and institutions. Their issues may be different, and we should not mechanically equate one movement with another, but the historical lesson remains relevant.

My question to Gen Z would be: What happens the day after the protest succeeds? Who will represent you? Who will negotiate on your behalf? What values will those leaders follow when they themselves acquire power? How will you hold your own leaders accountable? A movement should not merely produce another politician. It should produce better political and social values. That is where young people need to learn from the JP movement and the Anna movement.

Protest can begin with anger, but real change requires institutions, patience, accountability and, above all, the courage to question even the people who once stood beside you. Otherwise, every fifteen or twenty years, another generation may find itself standing on the same street, asking the same question: What actually changed?

SB: Sir, every movement depends on its leadership. Do you find the leaders of the present Gen Z movement credible enough to sustain it?

VS: I have certain reservations here. Mass Movements are necessary in a democracy because they raise issues that institutions generally overlook. But as a movement grows, we must ask: Who is leading it, and how credible are they? I am not fully convinced that everyone should try to become a leader in these protests. I have considerable respect for environmentalist Sonam Wangchuk because his work in education, innovation and environmental issues gives him an independent public identity.

But we should ask questions about others with previous political associations. Although such associations do not discredit anyone, but transparency matters when someone claims to represent a spontaneous youth movement. We have seen this before. Arvind Kejriwal emerged from Anna Hazare's

Anti-Corruption movement with enormous moral appeal. He later achieved remarkable political success, but his political journey soon became mixed up in controversies and serious allegations. So, in my view, people will naturally ask whether anyone is trying to recreate the 2011 formula once again.

My advice to Gen Z is simple: don't let your genuine anger become somebody else's political tool. You must protest and demand answers, but you should also question the person holding the microphone. A movement becomes meaningful not only when its cause is genuine, but also when its methods are democratic, and its leadership is transparent.

SB: Sir, the term “cockroach” has become controversial during these protests and has also been linked to an earlier remark by the Chief Justice of India. Do you think the CJI’s remark has been taken out of context?

VS: I think we need to be fair and consider the full context. The Chief Justice's use of the word “cockroach” was certainly strong, and I understand why young people reacted.

However, he later clarified that he was not referring to India's youth generally. He made his remarks in the context of the legal profession and his concerns about people allegedly entering professions through fake or bogus degrees. He also clarified his respect for India's youth and their role in the country's future. Of course, given the dignity of the Chief Justice's office, people have every right to question whether such a strong expression should have been used. But we must also be intellectually fair. We cannot take one word out of a larger conversation and give it a completely different context.

That is a major problem in the age of fifteen-second clips—a sentence often travels faster than its explanation. As a novelist, I understand that words matter, but context matters equally. So, criticise the expression if you find it inappropriate, but criticise it in the context in which it was actually used.

The same principle applies to governments. If Gen Z raises genuine concerns about paper leaks, unemployment or education, listen to them. But appeasement cannot replace responsible leadership. A society where young people cannot question their elders is unhealthy, but a society where elders are afraid to guide the young is equally unhealthy. What we need is dialogue between generations, not appeasement of Gen Z.

SB: Sir, the BCI initially acted against NALSAR’s 2026 graduating batch after students opposed the CJI’s convocation invitation but later withdrew its order and apologised. Do you support the students in this case?

VS: Yes, absolutely. The Bar Council's initial action was completely wrong. If I criticise Gen Z when they cross a line, I must also stand with them when an institution crosses one.

These are law students. They are being educated to question, debate and challenge arguments. The right to disagree also includes the right to hold an opinion that others may consider wrong. What troubled me most was the decision to act against an entire graduating batch, including students who may not even have participated. Their education, livelihood and professional future should never become a punishment for campus disagreement.

I also appreciate Chief Justice Surya Kant's response. He called the Bar Council's intervention “totally uncalled for” and recognised the students' right to peaceful protest. The Bar Council later withdrew its direction, and its chairman apologised. Acknowledging and correcting a mistake is institutional maturity.

My position is simple: if Gen Z protests peacefully, protect their right to protest. If their argument is wrong, answer it. But if they resort to personal abuse, I will criticise that too. Freedom comes with responsibility, just as authority comes with restraint. That balance is essential in a democracy.

SB: Sir, allegations of irregularities in donations collected in the name of the Ram Mandir have raised concerns about faith and public trust. How do you view this controversy?

VS: In my view, whatever happened, if a proper investigation establishes the allegations, it is deeply unfortunate. When ordinary people contribute money for a religious or social cause, they do so with faith. Many people may have contributed only a small amount, but that amount carries enormous emotional value for them. So, if anyone misuses money collected in the name of faith, the issue is not simply financial—it is also a breach of public trust.

At the same time, we should be careful not to condemn an entire religious movement or organisation because of the alleged actions of particular individuals. Responsibility must be determined based on evidence.

If individuals collected donations improperly, diverted funds, or misused the name of the Ram Mandir, the perpetrators should be identified and punished under the law. And if any office-bearers were responsible for supervising the collection or handling of those funds, their role should also be investigated. A position of responsibility must come with accountability. What concerns me is that such incidents tarnish a much larger movement and hurt the sentiments of countless ordinary people who participated in it with genuine devotion.

Therefore, there should be complete transparency. Let the investigation establish what happened, who was responsible and where the money went. If wrongdoing is proved, action should follow irrespective of the person's position or affiliation.

For me, the principle is very simple: faith should never become a shield against accountability. In fact, when money is collected in the name of faith, the standard of honesty should be even higher because you are dealing not only with people's money, but also with their trust.

SB: Sir, the current Monsoon Session has witnessed repeated disruptions and a deadlock between the government and the Opposition. How do you view this situation in Parliament?

VS: I think it is unfortunate that a place where disagreements are supposed to be discussed is being avoided. In a functional democracy, the Opposition has every right and responsibility—to question the government. But there is a difference between protesting in Parliament and preventing Parliament from functioning.

At the same time, all the responsibility cannot be placed entirely on the Opposition. The government should also create space for genuine debate; it must answer difficult questions and allow the Opposition to be heard. What worries me is the growing attitude among government and opposition parties that “either you agree with me, or I will not listen to you.” This is dangerous from either side.

This is also a message for Gen Z. We teach students to debate, listen, and respect disagreement, but they should see the same behaviour from their elected representatives. So, the Opposition should allow Parliament to function, and the government should allow the Opposition to be heard. A healthy democracy does not require everyone to agree; it requires us to know how to disagree.

If we expect Gen Z to protest responsibly, Parliament itself must show what responsible disagreement looks like.

SB: Sir, the Leader of the Opposition's recent remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi have attracted criticism. Do you think political discourse in India is gradually losing its dignity?

VS: Yes, and I think this should concern all of us, irrespective of our political preferences. Politics has always involved disagreement. In fact, without disagreement there is no democracy. But political criticism differs from personal humiliation.

Look at our own political history. We have had leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Dr Manmohan Singh. They belonged to different periods and faced very different political circumstances, but there was generally an understanding that public life demanded a certain standard of language.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee is perhaps one of the finest examples. He could attack an argument very strongly and still make the other side smile. That is a political art we seem to be losing. Similarly, Dr Manmohan Singh faced severe criticism during his years in office, but you rarely saw him responding in the same language. Restraint should not be mistaken for weakness. Sometimes restraint is actually a sign of strength.

Today, unfortunately, the temptation is to make everything personal. And social media has made the situation worse. A thoughtful political argument may not become viral, but one insulting sentence certainly will. My concern is that politicians do not speak only for themselves. Their supporters imitate their language. Young people imitate them. What begins as one remark on a political stage eventually enters television debates, social media, universities and even ordinary conversations.

And I would apply the same standard to everyone. If objectionable language is used against Prime Minister Modi, I will object. If somebody from the ruling party uses objectionable language against an Opposition leader, I will object to that as well.

Dignity cannot change according to the political party of the person being insulted. Criticise policies. Question decisions. Challenge the government. Challenge the Opposition. But politics should never become a competition over who can insult the other person more effectively.

SB: Sir, Sandeep Dikshit's recent remarks involving Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni also sparked controversy. Do such remarks become more serious when they involve the leader of another country?

VS: I found that episode unnecessary. Giorgia Meloni is the elected Prime Minister of Italy, and a senior political leader should understand the difference between social-media humour and responsible public discourse. When you speak about another country's leader, you also bring a diplomatic dimension.

You can criticise Prime Minister Modi without bringing Giorgia Meloni into it, just as you can criticise Congress without making personal remarks about its leaders. A strong political argument should stand on its own. There is also a contradiction here. We tell Gen Z to control their language, respect boundaries, and learn how to disagree. But they can rightly ask us: "Are our political leaders following the same standards?"

Our rich political history is filled with strong disagreement, but dignified language has always been part of it. Pt. Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Vajpayee, and their opponents had major ideological differences, but their political debates always had dignity. Political leaders should learn to disagree strongly while respecting the dignity of the offices they hold and the democratic culture they represent. When language deteriorates at the top, it eventually trickles down into society, which can polarise the whole country.

SB: Sir, the RSS has completed over a century and today has considerable social and ideological influence. How do you assess the organisation and the challenges it faces in the present context?

VS: I broadly see the RSS as an organisation that has done significant work in areas such as social service, discipline, national consciousness and grassroots organisation. You may agree or disagree with its ideology, but you cannot easily ignore its organisational presence. My concern today is slightly different. When an organisation remains influential for a long period—especially when the political environment favours its broader ideological family—it naturally attracts people who want to associate themselves with that influence.

And that can become dangerous for any ideological organisation. There is a difference between someone who joins an organisation because he has studied its philosophy, believes in its values, and wants to contribute to society, and someone who joins simply because he sees proximity to power, position, or personal opportunity. I think the RSS needs to be much more careful about this.

When people without any ideology enter an organisation just because it has become influential, they can dilute the name and prestige of the organisation they have joined. Therefore, RSS should do greater internal scrutiny. It must ask people: What have you read? What do you believe? What have you contributed? Why are you here? RSS should encourage those who are genuinely committed, and it should not allow people to join who use the organisation only for personal vested interests, branding, and election tickets.

Power is a test of ideology. It is relatively easy to remain ideological when you are struggling. The real challenge begins when your ideas become influential. The RSS therefore needs periodic introspection. It should ask itself whether the people speaking in its name today actually possess the intellectual depth, discipline and commitment associated with the organisation's original ideological project.

SB: Sir, do you think the RSS now needs to focus more on building a strong intellectual and academic tradition capable of challenging dominant interpretations of Indian history?

VS: In fact, I would say this is one of the most important challenges for the RSS. You cannot always answer an intellectual argument with a slogan. For example, take historians such as Romila Thapar and Irfan Habib. I may disagree strongly with aspects of their interpretation of Indian history. Other scholars may argue that certain schools of post-Independence historiography gave disproportionate importance to particular Marxist, materialist or colonial frameworks.

But whatever my disagreement is with them, I have to recognise one thing: they built their influence through scholarship; they wrote books. They conducted research. They trained generations of students. Their interpretations became influential within universities. So, if I believe those interpretations are incomplete and biased, I cannot simply say, “Remove these historians.”

RSS should produce better historians. Produce scholars who know Sanskrit, Persian, as well as English. Produce historians who can read inscriptions, manuscripts and archival documents. Encourage and promote archaeologists, philosophers, literary scholars, and social scientists capable of publishing work that can withstand serious academic scrutiny. What the RSS needs today is not those people seeking attention because of their close links to an influential organisation. It needs outstanding, brilliant, independent, and intellectually fearless minds capable of sitting across the table from the strongest Marxist, liberal, conservative, or postcolonial scholar and challenging them with evidence.

SB: Sir, delimitation is in the news once again. Why are some states fearing loss of political representation? How do you view this debate?

VS: In my view, delimitation is necessary because of India's growing population. So, our representation in Parliament should reflect today's demographic reality rather than population figures from decades ago. But there is also a genuine concern. Southern states that successfully controlled their population

through better education, healthcare, and family planning should not be punished by losing political importance for their success in managing population growth.

So, I support delimitation, but it must be done fairly and keep our federal structure intact. The government has already assured that southern states will not be unfairly treated, and their concerns will be addressed properly. India is not just a big country with a large population; it is also a Union of States. We need fair representation for our growing population in all our states, and we must also protect and reward the states that have followed responsible population policies.

SB: Sir, before we conclude, your readers would certainly want to know—when can we expect your next novel, and what is it about?

VS: My next novel is titled Love, Faith & War: Where Hearts Collide with History, and I hope it will reach readers by November this year.

It is set against the backdrop of the recent conflict involving the US, Israel and Iran, but it is not simply a war novel. War provides the background; the real story is about people—their love, faith, relationships and choices when they are caught in events much larger than themselves.

That is why I call it Where Hearts Collide with History. I hope readers will connect with its very human story.