

An Interview with Professor Vikas Sharma on *All Her Fires* and the Realities of Generation Z

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INTRODUCTION: The contemporary world is witnessing a profound transformation in the way individuals think, learn, and relate to one another. At the centre of this change stands Generation Z—a generation shaped by digital immersion, rapid technological advancement, and an increasingly competitive social environment. Their lives are marked by anxiety, identity struggles, and a constant negotiation between aspiration and reality. Their experiences unfold not in isolation but within institutions—particularly universities—which serve as crucial spaces for intellectual, emotional, and social development. However, the modern university landscape is itself undergoing a complex transition. The introduction of reforms such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promises flexibility, interdisciplinary learning, and skill-based education. Yet, the gap between policy and practice often exposes systemic limitations, leaving students caught between idealism and disillusionment. Issues such as administrative inefficiency, corruption, and irregularities in teacher appointments further complicate this environment, raising serious questions about meritocracy, fairness, and the credibility of higher education.

Simultaneously, the rise of Artificial Intelligence has begun to redefine knowledge, creativity, and learning processes. While AI opens new avenues for innovation and accessibility, it also creates new challenges—blurring the boundaries between originality and automation and reshaping students' academic and personal lives. Within this rapidly evolving ecosystem, deeper social concerns such as emotional neglect and child abuse—often hidden beneath the surface—continue to influence the psychological development of young individuals, leaving lasting imprints on their identity and relationships. Prof. Vikas Sharma's latest campus novel, *All Her Fires* (2026), presents a powerful exploration of Gen Z consciousness, capturing the complexities of university life, the pressures of a transforming education system, and the ethical dilemmas of a digitized age. Through its realistic portrayal, it not only reflects the lived experiences of contemporary youth but also interrogates the structures that shape them.

The following interview with Professor Vikas Sharma engages with these critical themes, offering insights into the novel's vision while also illuminating broader questions about education, technology, and society in the twenty-first century.

Interviewer: Sir, your latest novel, *All Her Fires*, has been widely discussed for its portrayal of Generation Z. How do you define Gen Z through this novel?

Prof. Vikas Sharma: As I show in my novel *All Her Fires*, Gen-Z is a mixed and confusing generation. They are ambitious and want to achieve a lot, so they feel lost. They are always connected on their phones and social media, but they are lonely in their personal lives. The internet, everyday new trends, and digital life all heavily influence today's youth. In our days, identity came from family and society, but now it is shaped by screens, apps, and what people see online. This makes them strong in some ways, but it also makes them unstable and confused. In my opinion, Gen Z is not the same everywhere.

A student in a big city thinks very differently from someone in a small town or village. But one thing is common—they all want success very quickly. They don't have patience, and they don't like waiting. They want fast results.

I also feel that Gen Z is a very distracted and unfocused generation. There is too much information, too many apps, too many things happening at once. Because of this, their attention gets divided, and they find it hard to stay consistent or go deep into things. In my novel, through characters like Sanya, I show that although they want freedom and independence, they also struggle emotionally. They question everything around them—relationships, society, even morality—but they are still searching for meaning in life. So, I would say Gen Z is both strong and weak. They have great potential, but they are also confused and distracted. My novel, *All Her Fires*, shows them as they are—it doesn't judge them, it reflects their reality.

Interviewer: How does your novel reflect the university life of modern Gen Z students?

Prof. Vikas Sharma: In my novel, *All Her Fires*, the University of Maharashtra is not just a place for studies—it is like a small version of society. Everything is there: competition, ambition, friendships, pressure, and confusion about life. Today's Gen Z students live under a lot of pressure. They worry about marks, jobs, careers, and also about how they look and live compared to others. Social media plays a very big role in influencing them. Students are always online, always comparing themselves, which creates stress and insecurity. Even when friends surround them, many of them still feel alone. Nowadays, due to the semester system, University life has become very fast. Students want quick recognition; they don't want to concentrate deeply.

In my novel, I have shown that university life is not the same for everyone. Students from big cities have greater exposure and confidence, but those coming from small towns or villages face more challenges—like fewer opportunities, financial problems, language barriers, or family pressure. So, there is inequality even inside the campus. Another important part is the clash between generations. Characters like Sanya represent freedom and rebellion, while Professor Viren represents discipline and traditional values. Their conflict shows how today's students think very differently from older generations. So overall, the university in *All Her Fires* is a place where students grow, but also struggle a lot. It is not just about education—it is about handling pressure, finding identity, and learning how to survive in a complex world.

Interviewer: Your novel indirectly engages with NEP 2020. What is your perspective on this policy?

Prof. Vikas Sharma: In my view, NEP 2020 is a good and forward-looking policy. It discusses flexible learning, skill development, and allows students to study different subjects together. This is very useful for today's generation because Gen Z does not like fixed boundaries, like only science or only the arts, they think in a more open and connected way. This policy also tries to make education more practical and useful for real life, not just for exams. In that sense, it is a very positive step. But the real problem is not the policy—it is the implementation. On paper, everything looks perfect, but in reality, many colleges and universities are not ready. There is a lack of proper infrastructure, trained teachers, and resources. The personal life of teachers was completely disregarded. Students are being treated as VIPs, and the teachers are reduced to servants.

This land, which had been the "land of gurus", is now crumbling. I think that is why the system does not work as smoothly as it should. Some central universities are trying to follow the new system, but many, especially state universities, are still stuck in old methods. This creates confusion for students. They are told that education will be flexible and modern, but they still face rigid rules and outdated practices. In my opinion, a teacher's primary task is to teach, but the huge paperwork imposed on teachers by the NEP cuts their ability to do so. In my novel, *All Her Fires*, I have tried to show this

gap. Teachers and Students are caught between what they were promised and what they are actually experiencing, which creates frustration and disappointment. So, I believe NEP 2020 has great potential, but it will only succeed if it is implemented properly. Until then, students will continue to struggle between big ideas and ground reality—and that is exactly what I have tried to show in my novel.

Interviewer: What are your views on the present state of education in India, especially when it comes to higher education?

Prof. Vikas Sharma: I might sound harsh, but the present state of higher education in India is steadily deteriorating. Education has become a commodity; it is now simply a tool for earning money and enjoying worldly pleasures, because its quality depends on a person's financial condition. You can see this trend in the gap between private and government schools, even at the primary and secondary levels, where private institutions consistently produce more talented students than government schools. It is not because government teachers are less qualified; in fact, their recruitment process is tougher. This is because they are burdened with numerous non-teaching tasks. Government teachers are frequently assigned duties like election work and polio vaccination drives. How can they have the energy to actually teach in such a limited time, especially with inadequate infrastructure? Higher education is also not different. Professors and university staff are caught up in activities other than teaching.

Everyone wants to personally benefit from political involvement, which obviously compromises their role as educators and leaders. I playfully say that these “Vansajs of Chanakya” no longer stand for truth and only care for themselves. Our universities, which once were hubs of diverse ideologies and worldly wisdom, have now become monotonous & bootlicking places. 80% of students graduating from humanities colleges lack essential skills. There is also a severe lack of job opportunities, because completing a B.A. and M.A. in humanities and other traditional courses cannot guarantee you employment, which is why students prioritize jobs over academic learning and higher studies. For many female students, these graduation programs are a way to enhance their marriage prospects rather than to secure a career. Also, throughout the year, all these universities are occupied with conducting exams for various courses. Due to these numerous courses, exams are held continuously, which is why today's professors have become clerks, spending more time on administrative and examination duties than on actual classroom teaching. This has undoubtedly eroded the quality of education.

Interviewer: One of the striking aspects of your work is its portrayal of corruption in universities. Why did you choose to highlight this issue?

Prof. Vikas Sharma: Because it is real—and more importantly, it is dangerous. As a writer, I feel my job is not to hide reality but to show it honestly. Corruption in universities—whether in administration, evaluation, funding, the appointment of teachers, or even the highest position within the university, the Vice-Chancellor—directly affects the quality of education. It destroys merit, and it creates unfairness. It leaves both students and teachers disappointed. In my novel, *All Her Fires*, I have tried to show how such a system affects not only careers but also people's thinking and behaviour. This is not something new in my writing. Even in my earlier novel, *Media Revolution 2030*, I explored similar issues—how corruption and politics within universities damage the entire academic environment and how universities' focus has shifted from providing education to maintaining political connections.

Recently, a professor of JNU was caught accepting bribes to give good NAAC grades. The biggest problem is that corruption creates an ethical crisis in which people are forced to choose between honesty and survival. I think that when deserving candidates are ignored, and others are moved ahead because of connections or influence, young students start to lose faith in the system. They begin to feel that hard work does not matter. This slowly makes them cynical and disconnected. In the context of NEP 2020, this becomes even more serious. The policy talks about transparency, quality, and global standards. But if corruption continues, especially in recruitment and administration, then no policy can

succeed. In my novel, *All Her Fires*, I have portrayed the university as a place where studies are not the only challenge—through the character of Prof Viren, I have shown how teachers also face politics, pressure, and power struggles. Earlier, teachers were seen as moral guides, but today many are themselves under institutional pressure. I also think that the lack of an active teachers' association in universities is a factor in this crisis. This is worrying.

What concerns me most is the impact on Gen Z. When young people see injustice again and again, they either adjust to the system, fight against it, or become emotionally detached. None of these is a healthy outcome. So, I highlighted this issue not just to expose it, but to make people think. If our universities fail, the country's future is at risk.

Interviewer: In your novel, you have indicated that even the highest position within a university- the position of vice chancellor, is often secured through influence rather than merit. Could you please elaborate?

Prof. Vikas Sharma: I don't want to spill everything about my novel, but because it is an important issue, I'll share a story that I have also mentioned in the novel, and you will understand why I am raising the issue of corruption in my novel. Back in 2003, a professor of the university wrote a book on bribery-related issues. The book was named "Paanch Laakh ka Master", and it probed the psyche of those in the academic circle, showing how much, he was hurt by this bribe culture that played with the future of the country.

Everyone knew that the Vice Chancellor of his time, had set up rates for the employment of lecturers according to their category, where a general category candidate had to pay a lump sum of five lakhs to secure the position of a lecturer, an OBC candidate was given a discount out of pure humanity and rate was set at three lakhs and the candidate from SC category was given further relaxation, requiring to pay only 1lakh rupees. You can see for yourself how much the Vice Chancellor was concerned for the downtrodden. Who gives such generous discounts? The professor was so helpless that he could only resort to writing a book. In my view, no one can run away from the system. The only option left is to "when in Rome, do as the Romans do".

Interviewer: Sir, how do you interpret Inder's character in *All Her Fires*, especially his use of victimhood?

Prof. Vikas Sharma: Inder is a very complex character. He is not fully right, and he is not fully wrong either. He has suffered a lot in his life because of his background, poverty, and social conditions. So yes, in many ways, he is a real victim. But the problem is that he is not able to move on from that past. Even after becoming a professor and achieving success, he still thinks like a victim. And sometimes, he starts using that victim identity for his own benefit. At times, he genuinely feels hurt and insecure. But at other times, he uses that feeling to gain sympathy, power, or to attack others, especially people like Viren. So, you can see both sides in him—pain and manipulation.

I wanted to show that people are not simple. Someone can be a victim and still do wrong things. Inder represents that confusion. He is someone who has struggled, but instead of healing, he carries that struggle in a negative way. So, Inder is not just a villain. He is a reflection of how past experiences can shape a person—sometimes in a good way, and sometimes in a harmful way.

Interviewer: The rise of Artificial Intelligence is transforming education and human interaction. How does your novel engage with this theme?

Prof. Vikas Sharma: Through my novel, *All Her Fires*, I have argued that expecting creativity through AI is pure foolishness. I like to take a middle ground when it comes to using AI. While AI is useful in fields like science, in literature, however, it undermines individual creativity. Literature, as we all know,

is a flow of emotions, and AI-generated writings feel mechanical and lifeless. I strongly believe that expressiveness is a primary characteristic of human beings and that writers use it as a tool to connect with their audience. For instance, my novels reflect the wide range of experiences I have had over the years. AI can help me to mould statements into the structure of stories, but it cannot provide real-life experiences that are the core of any plot. So, basically, AI can help with writing, but it can never replace the original work. I have also observed, through my daily interactions with university students, how AI has completely changed the way students' study, write, and even think. Today, information is available instantly, but the real question is—are students really thinking deeply, or just getting quick answers?

In my novel, *All Her Fires*, you can clearly see its impact on students' behaviour. They want fast results, quick success, and easy solutions. They don't have the patience to go through long learning processes like we did in our student days. This shows how technology is slowly changing the way they think. I also feel that students are now becoming more like consumers of information rather than creators of ideas. They depend too much on ready-made content. Because of this, their focus, originality, and deep thinking are getting weaker day by day. At the same time, I am not against AI. It can be very useful if used properly. It can make education easier and more accessible for many people. But the problem is that when students depend on it too much, they stop thinking for themselves. So, in my novel *All Her Fires*, I have tried to show this balance—both the good side and the dangerous side. Technology can definitely help us, but it should not control us.

Interviewer: Your novel also touches upon sensitive issues like child abuse and emotional trauma. Why was it important to include this dimension?

Prof. Vikas Sharma: Because these are real issues, but most of the time they are hidden. I have analyzed that many problems that we see in young people today—like anxiety, anger, emotional distance, or even rebellious behaviour they don't start suddenly. They come from childhood experiences like neglect from parents, especially in the case of a female child, emotional hurt, or abuse from close family members. These things deeply affect a child's thinking and self-confidence. In my novel, *All Her Fires*, one serious problem is that of child abuse, which is often ignored or not talked about. Families are supposed to be safe spaces, but sometimes they become places of pressure, control, or neglect. Children grow up with these emotional wounds, and later in life, those wounds affect their behaviour in different ways. In my novel, the character Ruru reflects this emotional reality: she didn't know much about affection from her family, but the affection from her uncle seemed good to her, however, he began to molest her, and yet her mother never understood and labelled her as a difficult child. She represents many such individuals who appear normal on the outside but struggle internally.

Through her character, I have tried to highlight the gender bias. In our society, when a boy is born, people burst crackers and distribute sweets, but when a girl is born, the house stays dim as if a daughter were a wound that could be healed only by a son. I have seen that in many families, a male child is still given more importance than a female child. This creates a feeling of neglect and inferiority in girls from a very young age. When a child grows up feeling less valued, it affects her confidence, her decisions, and even her future relationships. Her experiences show how a child can silently carry pain and confusion. I think when we talk about Gen Z, we often see them as confident and outspoken, but we forget that many of them are carrying unresolved emotional struggles. Their behaviour—whether it is detachment, anger, or independence—can sometimes be a way of coping with their past. Without understanding these deeper issues, we cannot truly understand today's youth. In my novel *All Her Fires*, this theme is very important. It helps us look beyond behaviour and understand the real reasons behind it. And when we understand, we stop judging and start empathizing—and that is where real change begins.

Interviewer: Sir, we are witnessing a global rise of Gen Z movements—In Nepal, for instance, Gen Z protests even led to the fall of a government. Do you think such youth-led movements can bring about lasting change, and will Nepal's new government succeed?

Prof. Vikas Sharma: What we are seeing today is not just political change—it is a generational change. Gen Z across the world is no longer silent. They are asking questions and challenging their leaders. They want accountability. Nepal is a very strong example of this, where young people have taken to the streets to protest corruption, poor governance, nepotism, the display of wealth by politicians' children, and a lack of transparency. Their protests became so powerful that they forced the PM to resign, leading to the fresh elections and appointment of new leadership. We can also see this change in leaders like Balendra Shah, who represents a new kind of leadership supported by youth. His slow and steady rise from mayor of Kathmandu to the PM of Nepal shows that Gen Z wants honest, practical, and result-oriented leaders, not traditional political figures.

But the bigger question is—can this change last? We know that Protests can remove a government, but running a government is much more difficult. It requires patience, planning, and long-term vision because governance does not work that fast. It needs discussion, compromise, and time. This is where the real challenge begins. In Nepal, the new government has a lot of expectations on it. People want transparency, fairness, and real change. If leaders like Balen Shah and others can stay honest and focused on public issues, then there is hope. But if they fall back into the same old patterns of corruption and inefficiency, the youth will protest again. So yes, Gen Z can definitely bring change—but whether that change stays depends on how responsibly the new leader's work. This generation will not accept failure easily. In many ways, this is also what *All Her Fires* explores—a restless generation that questions everything and searches for meaning, justice, and a better system.

Interviewer: Finally, what is the central message you want readers to take away from *All Her Fires*?

Prof. Vikas Sharma: I do not believe in giving direct messages. For me, literature should not tell people what to think—it should make them think. If a reader, after reading *All Her Fires*, reflects on their own life, relationships, education system, and society, the novel's purpose is fulfilled. In the novel, I have tried to show reality as it is, which is complex, confusing, and full of contradictions. Today's world is changing very fast, and Generation Z is at the centre of this change. Through my characters, I have tried to show how they are constantly struggling with identity, pressure, relationships, and expectations. The novel also highlights important issues such as the reality of university life, institutional corruption, the gap between policies like NEP 2020 and their actual implementation, the impact of technology and Artificial Intelligence, and deeper emotional issues like trauma and neglect. All these things together shape the mindset of today's youth.

If there is one thing the novel offers, it is a mirror. It reflects not just individuals, but the system around them—education, society, and changing values. It also makes us question whether we are truly progressing or just moving faster without direction. In the end, my novel, *All Her Fires*, is about understanding this generation, not judging it. It is about seeing the struggles behind their behaviour and the pressure behind their choices. If the novel makes readers think for a moment deeply and understand the world and themselves a little better, then it has done its job.



About the Interviewee: Prof. Vikas Sharma is a distinguished academician, poet, novelist, and literary critic. He has been serving as a professor in the Department of English at CCS University, Meerut. Professor Sharma is a prolific writer with a remarkable body of work in both Hindi and English. His Hindi novel *Raah Ke Patthar* (2021) marked his entry into fiction writing and gained wide recognition. In English, he has authored several novels, including - *Love's Not Time's Fool*, *I.A.S. Today*, *Sana*, *498A: Fears and Dreams*, *Ashes and Fire*, *Ideas and Events*, *Hope Against Hope*, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, *Never Together Never Apart*, *Media Revolution 2030*, *Love and*

Ego, *Honey-Trap*, *Hell for the People*, and the latest *All Her Fires* (2026) among others.

In addition to fiction, he has made notable contributions to literary criticism through his seven critical works, such as - *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*, *Six Major Poets*, *Female Gaze in Bollywood*, *Beyond the Rainbow*, and *Indian Poetics- A Glance into Indian Aesthetics*. His writings reflect deep engagement with literary theory, culture, and society. He has actively contributed to academic administration and research development.

His academic influence extends beyond writing. More than fifteen critical books have been authored/edited on his works. Twelve PhD degrees have been awarded for his works, and thirty-eight research scholars are currently pursuing doctoral research on various aspects of his writings. Notably, his books have been included in the syllabi of more than a dozen universities, further establishing his stature as a major contemporary literary figure. Importantly, he serves as the General Secretary of the Association for English Studies of India, reflecting his active involvement in national-level academic communities.



About the Interviewer: Tushar Kumar is a Research Scholar in English at the Department of English, Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut. He completed his B.A. English (Hons.) from Patna College, Patna University and M.A. in English from the Department of English, Patna University, securing the University Gold Medal in both degrees. He has also served as an Assistant Professor of English, Communication, and Soft Skills at IIMT Group of Colleges, Greater Noida. He has qualified for the NTA-UGC NET (2023, 2024) and GATE (2021, 2022) examinations with notable ranks. His research focuses on Ecocriticism, Posthumanism, contemporary Indian English fiction, and generational studies, with publications and presentations in emerging literary domains. He is also a lifetime member of the Association for English Studies of India.

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