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Swami Vivekananda — National Youth Day and India's Philosophical Legacy

12 January 2026

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WHY IN NEWS

India observes National Youth Day on January 12 — the 163rd birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda (born 1863). The occasion is marked by the National Youth Festival organised by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, and by national discourse on youth potential, education, and the demographic dividend in the Viksit Bharat context.

WHO WAS SWAMI VIVEKANANDA?

Swami Vivekananda (January 12, 1863 – July 4, 1902) was born **Narendranath Datta** in Calcutta to a lawyer father, Vishwanath Datta, and a devout mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi. He was brilliant from childhood — sharp intellect combined with physical vitality, wrestling, and rowing alongside serious study of Western philosophy (Hume, Kant, Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill) and Indian scriptures.

His encounter with **Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa** (1836–1886) at Dakshineswar Kali Temple around 1881 transformed him. Ramakrishna's direct spiritual experience — his assertion that all religious paths lead to the same ultimate truth — became the foundation of Vivekananda's later philosophy.

After Ramakrishna's death in 1886, Narendranath (now Swami Vivekananda) spent years as a wandering monk crossing India from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari. At **Kanyakumari** (Cape Comorin), the southernmost tip of mainland India, he meditated on a rock for three days in December 1892 — a site now known as the **Vivekananda Rock Memorial** (built 1970). It was here that he resolved to carry India's spiritual message to the West.

THE PARLIAMENT OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS, CHICAGO (1893)

In 1893, Swami Vivekananda travelled to the United States to attend the **Parliament of the World's Religions** in Chicago, held September 11–27, 1893, as part of the World's Columbian Exposition.

His opening address, beginning with "**Sisters and Brothers of America**" — departing from the formal convention of "Ladies and Gentlemen" — drew a two-minute standing ovation from an audience of approximately 7,000 people. His message was simple but radical for Western audiences of the time: Hinduism does not merely tolerate other religions; it accepts all paths as valid routes to the same divine truth.

Key arguments from his Chicago speeches:

Universal brotherhood and the rejection of sectarianism

Vedantic philosophy as the scientific basis of all religions

Critique of religious conversion and proselytisation: “I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance”

The concept of **ishta devata** — freedom of the individual to choose their form of spiritual practice

His success at Chicago made him famous across the United States and Europe. He toured the West multiple times (1893–1896; 1899–1900), lecturing at universities, drawing rooms, and public halls.

RAMAKRISHNA MISSION AND MATH

Ramakrishna Math (monastic order) and **Ramakrishna Mission** (charitable organisation) were established by Swami Vivekananda at **Belur Math**, Howrah, on May 1, 1897.

Organisation	Purpose
Ramakrishna Math	Monastic order; spiritual and philosophical training of monks
Ramakrishna Mission	Charitable and humanitarian work — schools, hospitals, disaster relief

Headquarters: **Belur Math**, Howrah, West Bengal (on the banks of the Ganga).

The Mission operates:

Over 200 centres across India and internationally

Hospitals, schools, colleges, and rural development centres

Relief operations during floods, earthquakes, and pandemics

The Mission’s motto: “**Atmano Mokshartham Jagad Hitaya Cha**” — For one’s own liberation and for the welfare of the world.

VIVEKANANDA’S PHILOSOPHY — NEO-VEDANTA

Vivekananda’s philosophical contribution is called **Neo-Vedanta** — a reinterpretation of Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism) for the modern era.

Core elements:

- 1. Advaita Vedanta:** Reality is one (Brahman). The appearance of individual selves (Atman) and the material world is maya (illusion). The Atman and Brahman are identical — “Aham Brahmasmi” (I am Brahman). Vivekananda popularised this across Western audiences.
- 2. Practical Vedanta:** Vivekananda departed from purely contemplative Vedanta by insisting on social service as spiritual practice. “He who serves the poor serves God.” This made social work a religious duty, not merely philanthropy — a philosophically significant move that influenced figures from Mahatma Gandhi to B.R. Ambedkar (though Ambedkar critiqued certain aspects of Hindu social organisation).
- 3. Universal Religion:** No single religion has a monopoly on truth. The Vedanta’s acceptance of multiple paths — **Jnana** (knowledge), **Bhakti** (devotion), **Karma** (action), **Raja** (meditation) — corresponds to different psychological temperaments and provides a framework for religious pluralism.
- 4. The Sleeping Giant:** Vivekananda believed India’s poverty and social degradation were not the result of Hindu philosophy but its betrayal. He wanted Indians to combine spiritual depth with the organisational efficiency and material progress he observed in the West. “I want muscles of iron and nerves of steel, inside which dwells a mind of the same material as that of which the thunderbolt is made.”

NATIONAL YOUTH DAY AND INDIA’S YOUTH POLICY

The Government of India declared January 12 as **National Youth Day** in 1984 on the recommendation of the National Youth Policy Committee. The **National Youth Festival** is held annually around this date by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports.

India’s major youth-focused schemes and policies:

Scheme	Details
Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS)	Mass youth organisation under Ministry of Youth Affairs; 13 lakh volunteers
National Service Scheme (NSS)	Voluntary community service for students; under Ministry of Youth Affairs
Pradhan Mantri Yuva Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)	Skill training; Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship
Atal Innovation Mission (AIM)	Innovation hubs (Atal Tinkering Labs) in schools; NITI Aayog
National Youth Policy 2014	Defines youth as 15–29 years; five priority areas: education, employability, entrepreneurship, health, social values
PM Yuva 2.0	Mentorship for aspiring young writers; Ministry of Education

India’s demographic dividend:

India has the world's largest youth population — approximately 65 crore under 35 years

The demographic dividend window (dependency ratio falling, working-age population rising) is estimated to last until approximately 2040–2045

Realising this dividend requires: quality education, vocational training, employment generation, and healthcare

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims:

National Youth Day: January 12; Vivekananda's birthday; declared 1984

Parliament of the World's Religions: Chicago; September 11, 1893

Ramakrishna Mission: founded May 1, 1897; Belur Math, Howrah

Vivekananda Rock Memorial: Kanyakumari (built 1970)

Philosophy: Neo-Vedanta; Practical Vedanta; four yogas (Jnana/Bhakti/Karma/Raja)

National Youth Policy 2014: youth defined as 15–29 years

NSS: National Service Scheme; NYKS: Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan

Mains GS-1: Swami Vivekananda's contribution to Indian philosophy; Neo-Vedanta; religious pluralism. **GS-2:** India's youth policy; demographic dividend; National Youth Policy 2014.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA
SWAMI VIVEKANANDA — KEY DATA:

Birth name: Narendranath Datta

Born: January 12, 1863, Simla Street, Calcutta

Father: Vishwanath Datta (lawyer); Mother: Bhuvaneshwari Devi

Guru: Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (met ~1881, Dakshineswar)

Kanyakumari meditation: December 1892 — 3 days on a rock (now Vivekananda Rock Memorial, built 1970)

Chicago Parliament: September 11, 1893; opened with “Sisters and Brothers of America”

Ramakrishna Math + Mission: established May 1, 1897, Belur Math, Howrah

Mission motto: “Atmano Mokshartham Jagad Hitaya Cha”

Died: July 4, 1902, Belur Math (aged 39)

PHILOSOPHY:

School: Neo-Vedanta (reinterpretation of Advaita Vedanta for modern era)

Practical Vedanta: social service = worship of God

Four Yogas: Jnana (knowledge), Bhakti (devotion), Karma (action), Raja (meditation)

Advaita: Atman = Brahman; maya = illusion of separateness

NATIONAL YOUTH DAY:

Date: January 12 (Vivekananda’s birthday)

Declared: 1984 by Government of India

National Youth Festival: Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports

INDIA’S YOUTH STATISTICS:

Population under 35: ~65 crore (650 million)

Median age: ~28 years

Youth (15–29 years): defined by National Youth Policy 2014

NYKS: Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan; ~13 lakh volunteers; Ministry of Youth Affairs

NSS: National Service Scheme; voluntary community service; students in colleges

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Belur Math: on the Ganga, Howrah; headquarters of Ramakrishna Math and Mission

Narendrapur Ramakrishna Mission: school/college complex near Kolkata — one of Mission’s flagship educational institutions

Ramakrishna Paramahansa: mystic; Dakshineswar Kali Temple, North Calcutta; died 1886

Chicago World’s Fair (1893): World’s Columbian Exposition — marking 400 years of Columbus’s arrival in America

Vivekananda’s books: Raja Yoga (1896), Jnana Yoga (1899), Bhakti Yoga (1896), Karma Yoga (1896)

Sources: Ramakrishna Mission, PIB, Ministry of Youth Affairs

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