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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Vivekananda's Challenge to Modern India — Youth, Education, and the Wasted Dividend

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GS1

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MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 1

GS Paper 2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India celebrates National Youth Day every January 12 but faces high youth unemployment. What would Swami Vivekananda's vision of education and human development look like as a policy framework today?"

WHY IN NEWS

National Youth Day 2026 (January 12) — the 163rd birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda — arrives as India debates the quality and relevance of its education system, the employability gap in its large youth cohort, and the risk that the demographic dividend becomes a demographic disaster if not supported by adequate human capital investment.

THE VIVEKANANDA PARADOX

Swami Vivekananda believed in India with an intensity that bordered on prophetic. In his Chicago addresses of 1893, he described Vedanta as the most scientific and universal of all philosophical systems. In his letters to friends and disciples, he was equally fierce: "Do you know India has only two great problems — ignorance and poverty? The solution is education."

Yet he meant a particular kind of education — not the colonial model that produced what he called "machines for making clerks," but education that produced character, physical courage, and the ability to think independently. He wanted Indians who could simultaneously hold the spiritual depth of the Vedanta and the productive energy of the modern 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."

On National Youth Day 2026, the paradox is difficult to avoid. India has the world's largest youth population — 65 crore people under 35 years — and a genuine window of demographic dividend that educational economists estimate will last until approximately 2040. Yet youth unemployment (15–24 years) hovers around

16–17 percent by the Periodic Labour Force Survey, and graduate unemployment is even higher. The gap between the education system’s output and the economy’s needs is one of India’s most discussed and least-resolved structural problems.

THREE DEFICITS THAT VIVEKANANDA WOULD RECOGNISE

The character deficit in education. Vivekananda repeatedly argued that the purpose of education was the “manifestation of the perfection already in man.” He meant by this: education should develop the whole person — ethical clarity, physical health, intellectual precision, and spiritual rootedness. He was scathing about education that produced people who could pass examinations but could not think. India’s Board examination culture — where rote learning, tuition dependency, and examination pressure dominate the school experience — is almost precisely the system he would have critiqued.

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) acknowledges this problem: its emphasis on critical thinking, the arts, and holistic development is theoretically aligned with a Vivekananda-inspired vision. But implementation has been uneven. The stress on rote learning in CBSE and state board examinations has not structurally changed; JEE/NEET coaching culture has if anything intensified. The gap between NEP’s vision and examination room reality remains large.

The skilling gap. India’s vocational training system — theoretically managed through Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), the NSDC (National Skill Development Corporation), and PMKVY (Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana) — continues to underperform. PMKVY, launched in 2015 and currently in its fourth iteration, has trained crores of youth but is repeatedly criticised for low placement rates and poor wage outcomes for trainees. Certification does not translate into employment. The recognition of prior learning (RPL) pathway for workers with informal skills remains underutilised.

Vivekananda would perhaps have found this familiar. He argued for manual labour as morally equivalent to intellectual work — not a lower form of activity but a different expression of the same human energy. India’s residual disdain for vocational paths (visible in the social stigma around ITI graduates vs. engineering degree holders) is a cultural inheritance that policy has not overcome.

The rural-urban learning divide. Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) data continues to show that a significant proportion of children in government schools cannot read a simple paragraph or do basic arithmetic, even after several years of schooling. The Right to Education Act (2009) succeeded in achieving near-universal enrollment — over 95 percent of children aged 6–14 are in school. But learning outcomes have not kept pace with enrollment. India’s students rank near the bottom on international learning assessments (PISA, when India participates) in reading comprehension and mathematical reasoning. Infrastructure enrollment without intellectual formation is exactly what Vivekananda called education in name only.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC WINDOW AND THE RISK OF WASTE

India's demographic dividend — the period when the working-age population (15–64) is large relative to dependents — is a window that opens once in a country's history. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan converted this window into rapid economic growth in the second half of the 20th century through massive investment in human capital: universal quality secondary education, technical and engineering training, and targeted industrial policy that created employment for skilled workers.

India's window is narrowing. The fertility rate has been falling across all states; the southern states (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka) are already approaching sub-replacement fertility. The northern states (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan) still have higher fertility rates, meaning the youth bulge in these states will continue for another decade. But the most labour-demanding sectors for low-skilled workers — textiles, garments, electronics assembly, leather goods — are being rapidly captured by Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Ethiopia, not India.

The structural question is whether India can generate quality employment at the scale and speed required to absorb approximately 7–8 million young people entering the labour force every year. Manufacturing employment has not grown proportionally with the economy; services employment has grown but is concentrated in high-skill workers. The middle of the skill distribution — workers with some secondary education and vocational training — is precisely where the employment gap is largest.

WHAT A VIVEKANANDA-INSPIRED YOUTH POLICY MIGHT LOOK LIKE

Re-centre education on capability, not certification. The NEP 2020's foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) framework — implemented as NIPUN Bharat — is the most important educational policy change in decades because it focuses on actual learning rather than progression. Universal FLN by Grade 3 is the prerequisite for everything else. Every other educational outcome depends on whether children can read and do arithmetic. This should receive more political attention than any other educational priority.

Make vocational training socially legitimate. South Korea and Germany succeeded in vocational education partly through institutional design (dual apprenticeship systems, industry partnerships, respected qualifications) and partly by changing social attitudes toward skilled trades. India needs both. The ITI system needs curriculum modernisation, industry linkage, and graduation pathways to higher technical education. But government needs to lead the cultural change — ministers and chief ministers should visit ITIs and frame vocational excellence as national achievement, not consolation for those who failed engineering entrance tests.

Harness the Ramakrishna Mission model. The Mission's educational institutions — Vivekananda University, Narendrapur Ramakrishna Mission school, and dozens of schools and colleges across India and Northeast India — consistently outperform comparable government institutions on learning outcomes while charging affordable fees. The model works: residential or semi-residential education, emphasis on character alongside academics, physical activity, service-learning, and a culture of discipline and aspiration. Scaling the

Mission model is not about Hinduism; it is about what works in education. Government residential school programs (like the Eklavya Model Residential Schools for tribal children, or Navodaya Vidyalayas) have shown that residential quality education can transform outcomes even for the most disadvantaged populations.

Employment data as policy accountability. Currently, India lacks a comprehensive, real-time employment tracking system. The Quarterly Employment Survey (QES) covers only establishments with 10 or more workers; the informal economy — where 90 percent of India’s workers are employed — is poorly tracked. A genuine youth employment dashboard, tracking graduates’ employment outcomes by institution, district, and sector, would create the data infrastructure for accountability that currently does not exist.

THE DEEPER LEGACY

Vivekananda died at 39, leaving behind not a systematic policy programme but an orientation — toward the poor, toward education, toward the dignity of labour, toward the combination of spiritual depth and worldly energy. The Ramakrishna Mission has quietly operationalised this orientation for over a century.

On National Youth Day, the honest question is not whether India honours Vivekananda sufficiently. It is whether India has the political patience and institutional capacity to build an education and employment system worthy of the youth who will determine whether the demographic dividend is a gift or a burden. Vivekananda’s answer would likely be the same as his answer to every challenge: you already have everything you need. The question is whether you have the will to use it.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA
EDUCATION POLICY:

NEP 2020: National Education Policy 2020 — holistic, multidisciplinary, critical thinking emphasis

NIPUN Bharat: National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy — FLN by Grade 3

Right to Education Act (2009): free and compulsory education for children 6–14 years; Article 21A

Navodaya Vidyalayas: residential quality schools for rural meritorious students; under NVS

Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS): for Scheduled Tribe children; Ministry of Tribal Affairs

SKILL DEVELOPMENT:

PMKVY (Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana): launched 2015; short-term skill training; 4th iteration ongoing

NSDC: National Skill Development Corporation; PPP model

ITI: Industrial Training Institutes; vocational training for trades

National Skill Development Mission: 2015; target 40 crore trained by 2022 (largely unmet)

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT DATA:

Youth unemployment (15–24): approximately 16–17% (Periodic Labour Force Survey)

QES: Quarterly Employment Survey; covers establishments with 10+ workers

ASER: Annual Status of Education Report; documents learning outcome gaps in government schools

DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND:

India's working-age population: peaking in the 2030s

Demographic dividend window: estimated until ~2040–2045

New entrants to labour force: approximately 7–8 million per year

Southern states: approaching sub-replacement fertility (TFR ~1.5–1.8)

RAMAKRISHNA MISSION:

Founded: May 1, 1897, Belur Math, Howrah

Over 200 centres; schools, hospitals, colleges, disaster relief

Vivekananda University: Coimbatore (deemed university)

Narendrapur: flagship school complex near Kolkata

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment; India withdrew after poor 2009 results; re-participated in pilot

Human Development Index 2025: India ranked 130 out of 193 (UNDP HDR 2025)

India fertility rate: National TFR ~2.0 (2019–21 NFHS-5); below replacement in 5 southern states

Sources: Ministry of Education, The Hindu, PIB

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