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The Widening Gap: Demographic Dividend and What Young Indians Actually Get

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SOCIAL ISSUES**POLITY****ECONOMY****GS2****GS3****GS1**

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The Widening Gap: Demographic Dividend and What Young Indians Actually Get

 The Indian Express

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GS2

GS3

GS1



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"A cancelled examination protects merit for the cohort as a whole and destroys a year for every candidate who prepared honestly. If you were the regulator, what would you need to know before choosing between cancellation and partial remediation, and how would you communicate the decision to the people it costs the most?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

The examination is where a country tells a young person that effort is the route. When the paper leaks, what is lost is not a test date. It is the sentence the whole system had been saying.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Demographic dividend answers usually recite the dependency ratio, the median age and the window closing around 2055, then assert that skilling is the answer. This editorial supplies the conditionality argument, that the dividend is contingent on institutional conversion, and gives it a concrete failure point. It also carries a genuine counter-position, which most treatments of this topic lack entirely.

GS Paper 2: Issues relating to development and management of social sector services relating to education and human resources; government policies and interventions; mechanisms for protection of vulnerable sections.

GS Paper 3: Inclusive growth and issues arising from it; employment; human capital.

GS Paper 1: Population and associated issues; social empowerment.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Demographic dividend	Growth potential arising from a rising share of working-age population relative to dependants	Conditional on employment and skill, not automatic
Dependency ratio	Ratio of dependants, below 15 and above 64, to the working-age population	The mechanism through which the dividend operates
Employability gap	The distance between formal qualification and the skills employers require	Why enrolment expansion does not translate directly into employment
Informality	Employment without written contract, social security or regulatory coverage	The composition problem behind headline employment figures
Labour force participation rate	Share of working-age population working or seeking work	Often more revealing than the unemployment rate, particularly for women

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The examination-integrity crisis of 2026 is now several months old, and getting the sequence right matters, because much commentary treats it as a single continuing event when it was two.

DATE	EVENT
3 May 2026	NEET-UG 2026 held, with roughly 2.27 million candidates
12 May 2026	The National Testing Agency cancels the examination, after reviewing investigative inputs from law-enforcement agencies; investigators had found substantial overlap, reported at up to 120 of 180 questions, with material circulating in advance through coaching-centre messaging networks. A CBI inquiry follows
6 June to 25 July 2026	Protests at Jantar Mantar, driven by the NEET-UG leak and by irregularities in CBSE on-screen marking
21 June 2026	Re-examination conducted
16 July 2026	Results declared
20 July 2026	Police action at the “Sansad Chalo” march: tear gas, water cannon, lathi charge and, it is alleged, pellet guns
20 to 23 July 2026	Both Houses disrupted; the Opposition demands the Education Minister’s resignation
25 July 2026	The Education Minister resigns; the protests conclude

By early August the examination itself had been re-held and its results declared. What remains live, and what stalled both Houses through the first week of August, is a **different** demand: that the **Home Minister** address Parliament on the police action of 20 July, and specifically on whether the Ministry of Home Affairs authorised the use of pellet guns against student protesters, alongside a separate demand concerning the handling of donations at the Ayodhya Ram Temple.

That distinction is the point at which this editorial begins. One ministerial resignation has already been extracted over the failure itself. The unresolved question is no longer whether the examination was compromised, which is established, but how the state responded to the people who protested about it.

The wider frame is the demographic transition. India's working-age share is at or near its peak, and the window in which a favourable age structure can be converted into growth is finite. That window is not extended by policy. It closes on schedule.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Why an examination failure lands harder than its scale suggests

There is a temptation to treat a leaked paper as an administrative failure of ordinary kind: a process broke, it will be fixed, the examination will be held again. That description is accurate and it misses what is being protested.

For a substantial part of the Indian population, the competitive examination performs a specific social function. It is the mechanism through which a household without capital, professional networks or inherited position can convert **effort** into **position**. It is, in principle, the most meritocratic institution such a household will ever encounter, precisely because it does not ask who the candidate's parents are.

That is why the investment made in it is so large: years of a young person's life, and a share of household income that is frequently financed by borrowing against land or gold. The investment is rational only if the mechanism is honest.

A leak does not just delay the outcome. It **falsifies the premise**, and it does so for people who cannot recover the years or the money. The scale of the reaction is not **disproportionate** to the loss; it is proportionate to a loss that is being measured differently by the people bearing it.

The employment side of the same compact

DIMENSION	THE DIFFICULTY
Composition rather than level	PLFS 2023-24: about 58 per cent of salaried workers have no written contract and roughly 53 per cent no social-security benefit ; the unemployment rate alone does not capture this
Employability	India Skills Report 2026: overall employability 56.35 per cent, up from 54.81 per cent in 2025 . By discipline, Computer Science 80 per cent, BE and BTech 70 per cent, but Polytechnic 32.9 per cent . Women's employability, at 54 per cent, exceeded men's 51.5 per cent for the first time in five years
Aspiration mismatch	Expansion of higher education has raised expectations of formal, salaried employment faster than such employment has been created
Female participation	Female labour force participation has risen sharply, from 23.3 per cent in 2017-18 to 41.7 per cent in 2023-24 on PLFS figures, though it still trails China, Vietnam and Indonesia. The gap is narrowing rather than static, and this is the clearest evidence in the data that conversion can work

The examination failure and the employment shortfall are the same institutional problem observed at two distances. One is visible on a single day and produces a protest; the other unfolds over years and produces resignation.

The response to protest is part of the story

Where mobilisation over examination integrity meets a coercive response, a second message is transmitted alongside the first. The original failure said that the institution could not be relied on. The response says that the channel for complaining about it cannot be relied on either.

This is the mechanism by which a specific grievance generalises. A student protesting a leaked paper is making a narrow and remediable claim. A student who concludes that protesting is itself dangerous has moved to a much broader position, and that movement is produced by the handling rather than by the original failure.

India's history of student movements, from the anti-Emergency mobilisation to the movements over reservation policy, indicates that this constituency is politically consequential and that coercive containment has a poor record of resolving what it suppresses.

Why the counter-argument must be stated honestly

An answer that registers only the failures describes a country that does not exist.

Higher education enrolment has expanded substantially, and the figures are recent enough to be worth quoting exactly. On AISHE 2023-24, released in July 2026, total enrolment rose from **3.42 crore in 2014-15 to about 4.50 crore in 2023-24**, with a gross enrolment ratio near **30 per cent**. Female enrolment rose **42.2 per cent** to 2.24 crore, and the **Gender Parity Index stands at 1.08**, meaning more women are

enrolled relative to the eligible female population than men are relative to theirs. Since 2014-15, Scheduled Caste enrolment is up **51.4 per cent**, Scheduled Tribe enrolment up **75.7 per cent** and Other Backward Class enrolment up **60.2 per cent**.

On the same evidence, female labour force participation has moved from 23.3 per cent in 2017-18 to **41.7 per cent in 2023-24**, one of the largest recorded shifts in any major economy. India also operates one of the largest scholarship and skilling architectures anywhere, and formalisation has advanced on several margins, through digital payments, GST registration and the extension of social security to previously uncovered categories, though the PLFS contract and social-security figures above show how far that process still has to run.

These are real achievements. An account of the demographic dividend that registers only the failures is not a more rigorous account; it is a less accurate one.

There is also a specific defence of the regulator that is rarely made, and it is worth making, though not in the strong form. A leak that results in **cancellation** is at least a leak that was **found**, and cancellation is enormously costly to the institution's reputation. The failure worth condemning most is the leak that is never detected, and by construction that failure is invisible.

But the defence should not be pushed further than the record supports, and here it will not go far. The cancellation of 12 May followed **investigative inputs from law-enforcement agencies**, not detection by the testing agency's own controls. An overlap reported at up to 120 of 180 questions indicates a collapse of the question-paper custody chain rather than a marginal breach. The political system did not treat the decision as a defensible exercise of discretion: a CBI inquiry followed and the Education Minister resigned on 25 July. And this is a recurrence, since NEET-UG 2024 had already produced a leak, arrests, a CBI investigation and Supreme Court proceedings.

The honest version of the argument is therefore narrower: the **asymmetry** between detected and undetected leaks is real and is usually ignored, but it does not license the conclusion that this cancellation reflects a functioning integrity system.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

When a resource is described as a dividend, identify the conversion mechanism, because the dividend is a property of the mechanism and not of the resource. A young population converts to growth through education, skilling, employment creation and credible allocation of opportunity; a mineral deposit converts to value through extraction and refining; a data holding converts to insight through analytical capacity. In each case the resource is counted and celebrated while the conversion mechanism is under-examined, because the resource is a stock that can be measured today and the mechanism is a process whose failure appears only later. The diagnostic question for any dividend claim is: what has to work for this to pay out, and is anyone measuring whether it is working?

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture a very long staircase with a door at the top. Families at the bottom are told, correctly, that anyone who climbs it may go through, and that nothing else is required, not a name, not a connection, not money. So they climb, and the climbing takes years, and many of them borrow to keep a child on the stairs rather than at work. Then one day it emerges that some people were let in through a side entrance without climbing. The staircase is still there. The door still opens. But the thing that made the climb worth its cost was never the staircase; it was the belief that the staircase was the only way in. That belief is what leaked, and it cannot be reprinted and rescheduled.

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Treat examination integrity as critical public infrastructure**, with the security architecture that implies: technologically secured question-paper custody rather than procedural safeguards dependent on individual honesty at every handling point.
- 2 **Establish an independent statutory testing regulator** with audit powers and published incident reporting, so that integrity failures are counted rather than managed case by case.
- 3 **Publish a remediation protocol in advance**, specifying what happens to candidates when a paper is compromised, so that the cost of a cancellation is known rather than improvised.
- 4 **Shift skilling and higher education metrics to verified placement and earnings outcomes**, since enrolment and certification measure the input to a promise rather than its fulfilment.
- 5 **Address the composition of employment, not only its level**, through social-security extension, formalisation incentives and support for productivity in the sectors where most young people actually work.
- 6 **Preserve the space for lawful protest**, on the practical reasoning that a functioning grievance channel converts a general loss of confidence back into a specific and answerable claim.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has tested the demographic dividend, employability, skill development, education-sector governance and the right to protest across GS1, GS2 and GS3. This editorial supplies the connective argument, that the dividend is conditional on institutional credibility, which allows those separate threads to be written as one.

Practice question: “A demographic dividend is a property of institutions rather than of population structure.” Examine this claim with reference to India’s education and employment architecture, and assess what recurrent failures of examination integrity indicate about the conversion mechanism. (250 words, 15 marks)

Interview angle: A cancelled examination protects merit for the cohort as a whole and destroys a year for every candidate who prepared honestly. If you were the regulator, what would you need to know before choosing between cancellation and partial remediation, and how would you communicate the decision to the people it costs the most?

Sources: The Indian Express, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship

Source: The Widening Gap: Demographic Dividend and What Young Indians Actually Get — Ujjari.com | Free
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• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

India's demographic advantage is a conditional asset rather than an automatic one: it converts into growth only through institutions that turn education into employable skill and effort into opportunity, and recurrent failures of examination integrity strike precisely at that conversion point, which is why they generate a response disproportionate to any single incident.



SUPPORTING

- A competitive examination is, for most Indian families without capital or connections, the principal mechanism by which effort is meant to convert into position. When that mechanism is compromised, the injury is not only to the candidates in that cycle but to the credibility of the proposition that effort is the route, and that proposition is what sustains years of costly preparation.
- The employment side of the compact is under equal strain: the difficulty is less the headline unemployment rate than the composition of what is available, since PLFS 2023-24 finds roughly 58 per cent of salaried workers without a written contract and about 53 per cent without any social-security benefit, alongside a gap between formal qualification and employable skill that employability surveys have tracked for over a decade, though that gap is narrowing rather than widening, with overall employability at 56.35 per cent in 2026 against 54.81 per cent in 2025.
- The state's response to student mobilisation is itself part of the problem being protested. Coercive handling of protests over examination integrity compounds the original institutional failure, because it communicates that the grievance mechanism is as unreliable as the institution that generated the grievance.



COUNTER

The demographic-dividend framing can be pushed too far in the other direction. India has expanded higher education enrolment from 3.42 crore in 2014-15 to about 4.50 crore in 2023-24, with female enrolment up 42.2 per cent and a Gender Parity Index of 1.08, has raised female labour force participation from 23.3 to 41.7 per cent between 2017-18 and 2023-24, and operates one of the largest scholarship and skilling architectures in the world; the gap between promise and delivery is real, but it coexists with genuine and measurable expansion, and an account that registers only the failure describes a country that does not exist. Nor is a cancellation by itself evidence of state indifference, since the leak that is never found is worse than the one that is; but that defence is limited here, because detection came from law-enforcement inputs rather than from the testing agency's own controls, and the political

system responded with a CBI inquiry and a ministerial resignation rather than by treating the cancellation as a defensible exercise of discretion.



WAY FORWARD

Treat examination integrity as critical public infrastructure with the security posture that implies, including a statutory testing regulator with independent audit, question-paper custody chains that are technologically rather than procedurally secured, and a published remediation protocol so that candidates know in advance what happens if a paper is compromised; and on the employment side, shift the metric from enrolment and certification to verified placement and earnings outcomes, so that skilling is accountable for the conversion it promises.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Examine the proposition that India's demographic dividend is conditional on institutional delivery rather than on population structure alone, and assess the implications of recurrent examination-integrity failures for that conversion. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

India's demographic structure is routinely described as a dividend, which implies that it pays out. It does not pay out automatically.

A young population is an input; the return depends on institutions that convert schooling into skill, skill into work, and effort into position. Recurrent failures of examination integrity are significant because they occur at the last of those conversions, which is the one most visible to the people depending on it.

BODY

Consider what a competitive examination does in the Indian opportunity structure. For a family without capital, professional networks or inherited position, it is the principal mechanism by which sustained effort is meant to produce access to medicine, engineering, public employment or higher study.

That is why preparation absorbs years of a young life and a substantial share of household income, often financed by borrowing. A compromised paper does not merely disadvantage a cohort.

It falsifies the proposition on which the entire investment rested, and the reaction it produces is properly understood as a response to that falsification rather than to the inconvenience of a rescheduled test. The employment side compounds it.

The salient difficulty is not principally the headline unemployment rate but composition: PLFS 2023-24 finds roughly 58 per cent of salaried workers without a written contract and about 53 per cent without any social-security benefit, and employability surveys have for more than a decade recorded a gap between formal qualification and the skills employers require, though that gap is closing, with overall employability at 56.35 per cent in 2026 against 54.81 per cent the year before. A degree that does not convert is itself a broken promise, arriving later and less visibly than a leaked paper but from the same institutional failure. The state's handling of protest closes the loop. Where mobilisation over examination integrity meets a coercive response, the message received is that the channel for redressing institutional failure is itself unreliable, which converts a specific grievance into a general one.

Against this, the record is not uniformly negative: higher education enrolment rose from 3.42 crore in 2014-15 to about 4.50 crore in 2023-24 with a Gender Parity Index of 1.08, female labour force participation rose from 23.3 per cent in 2017-18 to 41.7 per cent in 2023-24, and the scholarship and skilling architecture is among the largest anywhere, so an honest account weighs expansion alongside shortfall.

CONCLUSION

The corrective runs in two directions. Examination integrity should be treated as critical public infrastructure, with an independent statutory testing regulator, technologically secured custody of question papers, and a published remediation protocol so that candidates know in advance what a compromise will cost them.

On the employment side, skilling and higher education should be measured by verified placement and earnings outcomes rather than by enrolment and certification, since the promise made to a young person is about conversion, and only the outcome measures whether conversion occurred.

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