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UPSC Completes 100 Years: From Colonial Public Service Commission to Constitutional Guardian of Merit and Fair Recruitment

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Recent Developments:

- The **Union Public Service Commission (UPSC)** completed 100 years of institutional existence on **1 October 2026**, marking a century since the establishment of the first Public Service Commission in India in 1926. The centenary celebrations culminated at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi, with the release of a commemorative coin, stamp and a compilation of 100 landmark judgments concerning UPSC and Public Service Commissions.
- The two-day '**Manthan**' programme focused on the future of civil services, constitutional values, examination reforms, public-service innovation and the use of technology. UPSC Chairman Dr. Ajay Kumar identified **Trust, Transparency and Technology** as important principles for the Commission's next phase.
- Recent reforms include **Universal Registration Number**, randomised interview-board allocation, digital e-admit cards, the QPRep portal, expanded examination centres, AI-based facial authentication and the development of a paperless Online DPC system.

Historical Evolution of Public Service Recruitment:

From Patronage to Competitive Examination:

- Before competitive recruitment, the **East India Company** largely relied on nomination and patronage for selecting civil servants.
- The **Indian Civil Service examination** was introduced in London in 1855 following the shift towards competitive recruitment. However, the examination remained structurally difficult for Indians because it was conducted in England, in English, and included subjects such as Greek and Latin.
- **Satyendranath Tagore** became the first Indian to qualify for the ICS examination in 1863, demonstrating the gradual entry of Indians into the higher colonial bureaucracy.
- The British administration also reduced the upper age limit for the examination, creating additional barriers for Indian aspirants.

Institutional Foundations of UPSC:

- The **Government of India Act, 1919** provided the statutory basis for establishing a Public Service Commission.
- The ICS examination was conducted in India for the first time at **Allahabad in 1922**, reducing the geographical barrier associated with examinations held exclusively in London.
- The **Lee Commission of 1924**, chaired by Arthur Hamilton Lee, recommended the establishment of a permanent Public Service Commission.
- On **1 October 1926**, the first Public Service Commission was established with **Sir Ross Barker as its first Chairman**. It initially functioned as an advisory body under the colonial administrative framework.

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Evolution from Public Service Commission to UPSC:

Federal Public Service Commission:

- The **Government of India Act, 1935** reorganised the institution as the **Federal Public Service Commission**, which became operational from 1 April 1937.
- Its responsibilities expanded beyond examinations to include consultation on recruitment rules, service matters and disciplinary cases.
- By 1940, Indians outnumbered Europeans in the ICS, reflecting the gradual Indianisation of the higher civil services.

Post-Independence Transformation:

- **H.K. Kripalani** became the first Indian Chairman of the Commission in 1947.
- Following the adoption of the Constitution, the Federal Public Service Commission became the **Union Public Service Commission on 26 January 1950**.
- The Constitution transformed the institution from a colonial recruitment mechanism into an **independent constitutional body** responsible for maintaining standards of merit and fairness in Union-level public recruitment.

Constitutional Status and Safeguards:

Part XIV: Articles 315–323:

- **Article 315:** Provides for Public Service Commissions for the Union and the States and permits a Joint State Public Service Commission for two or more States.
- **Article 316:** Provides for the appointment of the Chairman and Members of UPSC by the President.
- **Article 317:** Provides safeguards concerning removal and suspension of Members, including the requirement of a Supreme Court inquiry in specified cases.
- **Article 318:** Empowers the President to regulate conditions of service and staff matters through regulations.
- **Article 319:** Restricts further government employment after completion of tenure, particularly for the Chairman.
- **Article 320:** Specifies core functions, including conducting examinations and advising on recruitment methods, appointments, promotions, transfers and disciplinary matters.
- **Article 321:** Allows Parliament to extend the functions of UPSC through legislation.
- **Article 322:** Charges UPSC expenses on the **Consolidated Fund of India**, strengthening financial autonomy.
- **Article 323:** Requires UPSC to submit an **Annual Report to the President**, with cases of non-acceptance of its advice placed before Parliament along with explanations.

Why Constitutional Independence Matters:

Merit, Impartiality and Institutional Autonomy:

- Constitutional protection reduces the possibility of recruitment being dominated by **patronage, nepotism or political favouritism**.
- Security of tenure, restrictions on post-tenure employment and financial autonomy strengthen the Commission's institutional independence.
- UPSC is therefore an important component of **constitutional governance**, where recruitment to public institutions is separated from direct political discretion.
- Its advisory role also extends beyond examinations to **Recruitment Rules, promotions, Departmental Promotion Committees, induction into All-India Services and disciplinary matters**. During 2023–24, the Commission processed records relating to 24,581 officers for promotion and 532 officers were inducted into

the All-India Services.

Major Reforms in the Civil Services Examination:

Kothari Committee and Three-Stage Examination:

- The **D.S. Kothari Committee** examined the structure of civil-service recruitment and recommended a comprehensive examination framework.
- In **1979**, the modern three-stage system of **Preliminary Examination, Main Examination and Interview** was introduced.
- Subsequent reforms modified question formats, evaluation methods, language options and the relative weight of different components.

Satish Chandra and Later Reforms:

- Reforms during the late 1980s and early 1990s introduced measures such as **negative marking, OMR-based examination processes, a separate Essay paper and changes in Personality Test weightage**.
- **CSAT** was introduced in 2011 and subsequently made a qualifying paper with a 33% threshold.
- The **2013 examination reform** introduced four General Studies papers, including **Ethics, Integrity and Aptitude**, and reduced the number of optional subjects to one.
- Women became eligible for the **NDA and Naval Academy Examination** from 2021, expanding the scope of competitive recruitment into defence services.

Scale and Social Inclusion:

Expansion of Examination Infrastructure:

- UPSC's workload has expanded dramatically with the growth of India's population, higher education and demand for public-sector careers.
- Applications across examinations and recruitment by selection increased from **42,727 in 1950–51 to 45,10,044 in 2022–23**, representing more than a hundredfold increase.
- Examination centres expanded from **8 in 1950 to 86 in 2026**, reflecting the geographical expansion of the recruitment system.

Greater Representation:

- Women constituted **299 of the 958 candidates recommended in CSE 2025**, compared with only 3 of 83 recommended candidates in 1952.
- SC recommendations increased from **9 in 1955 to 158 in 2025**, while ST recommendations increased from **2 in 1956–57 to 73 in 2025**.
- Recommendations of **Persons with Benchmark Disabilities** increased from 3 in 2002 to 42 in 2025.
- Since 1980–81, candidates have been permitted to use an Indian language during the Personality Test with an official interpreter, strengthening linguistic accessibility.

Technology and Examination Integrity:

Digital Transformation:

- UPSC's technological modernisation has progressed from computerisation introduced in **1978** to contemporary digital examination and recruitment systems.
- The **Universal Registration Number**, introduced in 2025, provides candidates with a persistent profile across examinations.
- Randomised interview-board allocation and digital examination processes seek to reduce procedural discretion and improve transparency.

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- The **QPrep portal** allows candidates to submit time-bound representations concerning Preliminary Examination question papers.
- A paperless **Online DPC system** is being developed for proposals across around 101 Ministries, Departments and organisations.

AI-Based Facial Authentication:

- AI-based facial authentication was piloted during defence examinations in 2025 and implemented at scale during the **Civil Services Preliminary Examination on 24 May 2026**.
- Approximately **5.50 lakh candidates** were covered, with authentication conducted through invigilators' mobile phones.
- The process takes approximately **6–8 seconds per candidate**, strengthening safeguards against impersonation and identity fraud.

UPSC and Good Governance:

Merit-Based State Capacity:

- UPSC contributes to the creation of **professional administrative capacity** by selecting personnel through competitive and standardised procedures.
- A merit-based recruitment system supports administrative continuity across changes in political leadership.
- Civil servants selected through national-level examinations contribute to policy implementation, regulatory administration, public-service delivery and crisis management.

Accountability and Citizen-Centric Administration:

- The centenary discussions emphasised a transition from **authority-oriented administration towards accountability and outcomes**.
- The future civil service requires not only knowledge but also reasoning, judgment, ethical conduct, adaptability and the ability to operate under ambiguity.

Contemporary Challenges and Way Forward:

Key Institutional Challenges:

- **Examination integrity:** Large-scale examinations require continuous protection against impersonation, cheating, fraudulent credentials and cyber threats.
- **Technological governance:** AI-based systems must maintain accuracy, privacy, cybersecurity and procedural fairness.
- **Accessibility:** Expansion of examination centres, language support and digital services must continue to reduce geographical and socio-economic barriers.
- **Changing administrative requirements:** Recruitment mechanisms must identify candidates capable of handling technological disruption, climate risks, complex regulation and increasingly data-driven governance.
- **Transparency:** Greater use of technology should remain accompanied by explainable procedures, effective grievance redressal and institutional accountability.

Way Forward:

- Strengthen **secure digital examination architecture** while maintaining human oversight.
- Expand multilingual and accessible examination infrastructure without compromising uniform evaluation standards.
- Modernise competency assessment to test **analytical reasoning, ethical judgment, problem-solving and public-service orientation**.

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- Institutionalise regular review of examination patterns in response to changing governance requirements.
- Continue strengthening coordination among **UPSC, State PSCs and administrative training institutions**.
- Develop institutional repositories and best-practice platforms to improve public-service recruitment and administration across jurisdictions.

Value Addition for UPSC:

- **GS-II – Polity:** UPSC as a constitutional body; Articles 315–323; independence and accountability of constitutional institutions.
- **GS-II – Governance:** Merit-based recruitment, transparency, institutional autonomy, citizen-centric administration and public-service delivery.
- **GS-II – Social Justice:** Representation of women, SCs, STs and PwBD candidates in public services.
- **GS-IV – Ethics:** Integrity, impartiality, objectivity, accountability, public-service values and avoidance of nepotism.
- **Essay:** The evolution of UPSC illustrates the transition from colonial administrative recruitment to constitutional, competitive and increasingly technology-enabled public-service selection.
- **Prelims Facts:** **1 October 1926 – Public Service Commission established; Sir Ross Barker – first Chairman; 1937 – Federal Public Service Commission; 1950 – UPSC acquired constitutional status; Articles 315–323 – constitutional framework.**
- **Core Concept:** UPSC’s institutional significance lies not merely in conducting examinations but in protecting the **integrity, impartiality and professional capacity of the higher civil services**.