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A 100-Year Journey as the Guardian of Meritocracy

Context

- On October 1, 2024, the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) marked a hundred years of its **establishment**, completing a journey that mirrors India's own evolution as a democracy.
- Founded to safeguard fairness, integrity, and merit in public recruitment, **the Commission has grown into one of the most respected institutions** in independent India.
- **Its history is not merely institutional but symbolic** of the nation's enduring faith in justice, equal opportunity, and service to the people.

Origins and Evolution

- The concept of an independent recruitment body **predates India's independence**.
- It was **the Government of India Act of 1919 that first laid the groundwork**, leading to the establishment of the Public Service Commission in October 1926, based on the recommendations of the Lee Commission.
- The Commission, under its **first chairman Sir Ross Barker**, began with limited powers during colonial rule.
- Later, **the Government of India Act of 1935 expanded its scope**, elevating it to the Federal Public Service Commission and granting Indians a greater role in governance.
- **With the adoption of the Constitution in 1950, the institution was reconstituted as the UPSC.**
- From conducting a handful of examinations in its early years, **it has evolved into a premier body managing recruitment for civil, engineering, forest, medical, and other specialised services.**
- Despite this expansion, **its central mandate remains unchanged: the impartial selection of the finest talent for public service.**

The Pillars of the UPSC: Trust, Integrity, and Fairness

- The **UPSC's credibility rests on three pillars: trust, integrity, and fairness.**
- Over decades, **millions of aspirants have trusted the Commission** to evaluate them purely on merit, without political or personal bias.
- This **trust has been cultivated through transparent processes, impartial evaluation**, and an unwavering stand against malpractice.
- **Integrity has meant resisting external pressures** and maintaining confidentiality in examination systems.

- **Fairness has ensured that candidates from diverse socio-economic**, linguistic, and regional backgrounds **compete on equal terms**.
- In a country as heterogeneous as India, **this level playing field is one of the proudest achievements of Indian democracy**.
- The **Commission's ethos echoes the wisdom of the Bhagavad Gītā**, which advises duty without attachment to outcomes, a philosophy the UPSC has faithfully embodied.

The Indian Dream and Aspirants' Role

- At the heart of the UPSC's journey lies **the aspiration of countless candidates** who, **year after year, prepare to serve the nation**.
- Once dominated by elites from urban centres, **today the examination attracts aspirants from the remotest districts**, reflecting the inclusivity of modern India.
- This **diversity underscores the Indian Dream**, the belief that talent and hard work, not privilege, determine success.
- Conducting the Civil Services Examination, **often described as the world's most sophisticated competitive exam**, is itself a remarkable feat.
- With over **10 to 12 lakh applicants annually**, examinations are conducted across 2,500 venues, covering 48 optional subjects in 22 Indian languages.
- The **logistics, from distributing papers to ensuring anonymous evaluation** by subject experts, demonstrate the Commission's extraordinary capacity to manage scale, complexity, and diversity with precision and fairness.

Unsung Heroes Behind the Commission, Reforms and Future Directions

• Unsung Heroes Behind the Commission

- The UPSC's **efficiency is made possible by the tireless efforts** of paper-setters, evaluators, and administrators who remain unseen.
- **Their selfless dedication ensures that the institution upholds its values** of fairness and rigor.
- By shaping civil servants who have steered India through crises, reforms, and nation-building, **these contributors have had a profound, though often invisible, impact** on Indian society.

• Reforms and Future Directions

- As the UPSC enters its second century, **it faces new challenges from global competition**, technological disruptions, and evolving governance needs.
- In response, **the Commission has initiated reforms**, such as online application portals, facial-**recognition technology to curb impersonation**, and **PRATIBHA Setu**, a program connecting near-finalist aspirants with employment opportunities.
- Looking forward, **the UPSC intends to harness digital tools and artificial intelligence to enhance efficiency** while safeguarding integrity.

Conclusion

- The centenary of the UPSC is both a celebration of its legacy and a call for renewal and, **for a hundred years, it has stood as a guardian of meritocracy**, trust, and fairness in Indian governance.
- As India aspires to global leadership, **the UPSC must adapt while preserving its gold standard of impartiality and excellence**.
- The institution's **strength lies not only in its systems but in the faith, it commands from citizens**.
- Upholding this faith will ensure **that the UPSC continues to serve as a cornerstone of Indian democracy** for generations to come.

A 100-Year Journey as the Guardian of Meritocracy FAQs

Q1. When was the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) established?

Ans. The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) was first established in October 1926.

Q2. What are the three key pillars of the UPSC?

Ans. The three key pillars of the UPSC are trust, integrity, and fairness.

Q3. Why is the UPSC Civil Services Examination considered unique?

Ans. The UPSC Civil Services Examination is considered unique because it is the world's largest and most sophisticated competitive exam, conducted across thousands of centres in multiple languages and subjects.

Q4. What initiative has the UPSC introduced to support candidates who reach the interview stage but do not make the final list?

Ans. The UPSC has introduced the PRATIBHA Setu initiative to provide employment opportunities for candidates who reach the interview stage but do not make the final list.

Q5. What does the UPSC's centenary celebration symbolize?

Ans. The UPSC's centenary celebration symbolizes both a recognition of its legacy as a guardian of meritocracy and a commitment to adapt to future challenges while upholding integrity and fairness.

Source: **The Hindu**

Reclaim the District as a Democratic Commons

Context

- Across the world, **societies are becoming increasingly fragmented and polarised** at the very moment when technological, ecological, and demographic upheavals are reshaping human life.
- **For India, this global turbulence presents both an opportunity and a challenge.** With nearly 65 percent of its population under the age of 35, India holds a demographic advantage unmatched by most other nations.
- At the same time, **the country faces the urgent question of whether its young people can be integrated meaningfully** into economic and democratic life.

- The **answer will determine not only India's growth trajectory but also the vitality of its democracy.**

Key Barriers to Inclusive Growth of India

• The Unequal Geography of Growth

- Despite the nation's aspirations, **India's growth remains strikingly uneven.**
- **Cities, which occupy a mere 3 percent of the country's land, account for more than 60 percent of GDP.**
- Meanwhile, **nearly 85 percent of Indians live in the district of their birth**, often in semi-urban or rural areas far removed from metropolitan opportunity.
- This **concentration of growth and wealth has led to a dual crisis**: the underutilisation of talent and the stagnation of wages.
- **While corporate profits soar, domestic consumption, long India's economic backbone, remains dampened** by low purchasing power across the majority of citizens.
- In a volatile global order, **India cannot rely solely on exports or elite consumption.**
- The **next wave of development requires broad-based participation** in production, consumption, and innovation, especially from young people outside metropolitan centres.

• Centralisation and its Discontents

- A key barrier to inclusive growth lies in **India's heavily centralised model of governance.**
- **Policy has long prioritised administrative efficiency**, technocratic interventions, and digital service delivery.
- While these mechanisms improve distribution, **they often come at the cost of local political agency.**
- **Elected representatives**, instead of being leaders shaping developmental direction, **are reduced to mediators of entitlements.**
- Electoral politics has **increasingly pivoted to welfare through cash transfers**, substituting long-term structural transformation with short-term handouts.
- As a result, **both citizens and their representatives are experiencing political fatigue, particularly the youth**, whose aspirations for mobility clash with a reality of limited opportunities.

The Path Forward

• Reimagining Districts as Democratic Commons

- **Districts have long anchored India's administrative system**, but this structure has tended to cast citizens as passive recipients of state services.
- A **democratic transformation would shift this orientation**, making districts not just administrative units but civic spaces where governance is accountable, transparent, and locally

responsive.

- **A district-first framework** would allow national schemes to be disaggregated and outcomes tracked locally, illuminating disparities in investment and opportunity.
- This would **deepen accountability, enabling course correction** where progress lags.
- Moreover, **it would tie governance more directly to elected representatives**, encouraging them to deliver locally relevant solutions and fostering civic engagement.
- **Measurement alone cannot overcome deficits of capacity or political will**, but it can create transparency, surface local innovations, and build coalitions for reform across political leaders, civil society, and private actors.

• Shared Responsibility for Inclusive Growth

- For such a transformation to succeed, **India's top 10 percent, its political leaders, corporate executives**, and intellectuals, **must take visible responsibility**.
- Too often, **commitments to inclusion remain abstract principles**.
- A district-first civic framework provides a tangible path for elites to translate good intentions into local action, bridging the persistent gap between policy design and lived reality.
- **By redistributing power to communities and nurturing collective accountability**, this approach **can create common ground rooted in shared national purpose** rather than polarising partisanship.

Conclusion

- **India stands at a crossroads and the youth represent its greatest strength**, but their potential will remain stifled unless governance and opportunity extend beyond urban centres.
- **By reimagining districts as democratic commons, India can revitalise both its economic model and its democratic ethos.**
- This **district-first vision is not merely an administrative reform**; it is a political and moral project that seeks to rebuild trust, expand opportunity, and anchor democracy where citizens actually live.
- **If India fails to act, it risks squandering its demographic dividend** and eroding the very foundations of its democracy.

Reclaim the District as a Democratic Commons FAQs

Q1. What is India's greatest opportunity and challenge today?

Ans. India's greatest opportunity and challenge lie in ensuring that its large youth population is meaningfully integrated into economic and democratic life.

Q2. Why is India's current growth model considered uneven?

Ans. India's growth is uneven because cities generate over 60 percent of GDP while most people live in districts with far fewer opportunities.

Q3. What problem does centralisation create in governance?

Ans. Centralisation reduces elected representatives to distributors of welfare rather than leaders shaping

development, weakening local political agency.

Q4. How can districts strengthen democracy and development?

Ans. Districts can strengthen democracy and development by becoming civic commons where policies are locally tracked, accountable, and responsive to youth needs.

Q5. Why must elites play a role in this transformation?

Ans. Elites must play a role because their active participation can bridge the gap between policy design and lived realities, ensuring inclusive growth.

Source: **The Hindu**

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