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செருக்குஞ் சினமும் சிறுமையும் இல்லார்
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இறுமாப்பு, ஆத்திரம், இழிவான நடத்தை இவைகள்
இல்லாதவர்களுடைய செல்வாக்குதான் மதிக்கத் தக்கதாகும்
— மு. கருணாநிதி



A 100-year journey as the guardian of meritocracy

The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) marks a century of its establishment on October 1. Envisioned by the nation's founders as a guardian of meritocracy, the UPSC has played a pivotal role in the recruitment, the promotion and the disciplining of officials of the Central Civil Services. Its journey over the past 100 years is not just an institutional history but also a testament to India's enduring faith in fairness, trust and integrity in governance.

The idea of an independent commission to recruit higher civil servants took root well before Independence. The Government of India Act, 1919, first provided for such a body, and in October 1926, the Public Service Commission was set up, following the recommendations of the Lee Commission (1924) which observed, "Wherever democratic institutions exist, experience has shown that to secure an efficient civil service it is essential to protect it as far as possible from political or personal influences and give it that position of stability and security which is vital to its successful working as the impartial and efficient instrument by which Governments, of whatever political complexion may give effect to their policies."

Headed by Sir Ross Barker, it began with limited powers, as an experiment under colonial rule. The Government of India Act, 1935 elevated it to the Federal Public Service Commission, giving Indians a greater role in administration. With the adoption of the Constitution in 1950, it assumed its present status as the UPSC. From conducting a handful of examinations in its early years, the UPSC has grown into a premier institution overseeing recruitment for diverse services ranging from the civil services to engineering, forest, medical, and statistical cadres. Its scope has expanded with the Republic, yet its mandate remains unchanged – to select the finest talent for public service.

The foundation and pillars

If the history of the UPSC is its foundation, the principles of trust, integrity and fairness are its pillars. Over the decades, millions of aspirants have placed their faith in the Commission, assured that success or failure depends solely on merit. This trust is no accident. It has been built painstakingly through transparency in procedure, impartiality in evaluation, and an uncompromising stance against malpractice.

Integrity, meanwhile, has meant protecting the institution from political or external pressures, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring that those who succeed are genuinely among the most competent. Fairness has also meant providing equal opportunity to candidates from every background, urban or rural, privileged or underprivileged, fluent in English or not. In a country as diverse as India, where inequalities persist, the fact that the UPSC examinations are



Ajay Kumar

is Chairman, Union Public Service Commission (UPSC)

Over the decades, millions of aspirants have reposed faith and confidence in the Union Public Service Commission, assured that success is based on merit alone

regarded as a true "level playing field" is itself one of independent India's proudest achievements.

This philosophy finds echo in the timeless wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, where what Lord Krishna says, "*Tasmadsakt statam karyam karma Samachar. Asakto haracharkarm paramapnoti purushah*" can be translated as '... without attachment, constantly perform your duty as it ought to be done'.

The UPSC embodies this principle: it performs its duty with rigour and fairness, without attachment to outcomes.

The 'Indian Dream', the complexities

At the heart of the UPSC's recruitment journey are the thousands of aspiring youngsters who come forward year after year, driven by dedication, perseverance and a dream to serve the nation. Once dominated by a select few from elite urban centres, today, the civil services examination attracts candidates from nearly every district of India, including the remotest and most underprivileged regions. This extraordinary diversity reflects the true spirit of the 'Indian Dream' – the aspiration that talent, hard work and commitment can open the doors of opportunity to all.

The UPSC salutes these courageous aspirants and remains committed to reaching every corner of the country, ensuring that every aspiring citizen has the chance to contribute to the nation's service and progress.

The UPSC takes immense pride in conducting the world's biggest and most sophisticated competitive examination, the civil service examination, with remarkable precision and consistency year after year. Starting with nearly between 10 lakh to 12 lakh applicants for the preliminary examination, candidates for the mains examination have the option of choosing from among 48 subjects and writing their answers in English or any of the 22 languages recognised under the Constitution of India. The UPSC then evaluates these multiple-subject candidates into a single merit-based ranking – a feat that is unique in its scale and sophistication anywhere in the world. The logistics of the civil services examinations are truly extraordinary.

The preliminary examination is held across more than 2,500 venues nationwide. For the mains examination, the task becomes an intricate challenge in ensuring that each candidate at different centres across the country receives the question paper for the subject they have chosen.

This complexity is further compounded by the special arrangements made for differently-abled candidates. After the examination, answer sheets are evaluated anonymously by top experts in the 48 disciplines, with proficiency in the language in which the answers are written. All of this is completed within a defined timeline, without disruption, even during events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

This seamless, time-bound orchestration typifies the UPSC – its ability to manage complexity and diversity with efficiency, fairness, and equity.

As we celebrate a century of the UPSC, it is equally fitting to honour the unsung heroes behind its remarkable success – the paper-setters and evaluators who form the faceless backbone of the Commission. These are some of the finest academics and experts in the country, each a master in their own discipline. Yet they serve with quiet dedication, without seeking recognition or the limelight. This writer thanks every one of them for their selfless service, which ensures that the dreams and the aspirations of thousands of candidates are judged with fairness, rigour and integrity.

Across decades, the UPSC has given the nation civil servants who have administered during crises, managed the economy through reforms, overseen infrastructure and environmental challenges, and contributed in countless invisible ways to nation-building. Their work touches every Indian, even if the hand behind the service remains unseen.

A series of reforms

As the UPSC enters its centenary year, this moment calls not just for celebration but also for reflection. As India marches toward reclaiming old glory as a leading light of the world, the challenges emanating from global competition and technology advancements are disrupting existing models of governance. As an institution, the UPSC will continuously strive and adapt to these changes to remain current.

As a part of this, the UPSC has already initiated many reforms. The UPSC has a new online application portal for greater ease of application and new face-recognition technology to ensure zero impersonation. Its reforms with examination and recruitment processes are in line with the changing needs of time. The UPSC's Professional Resource And Talent Integration Bridge for Hiring Aspirants (PRATIBHA) Setu initiative, is facilitating employment opportunities for those who reach the interview stage but are unable to make it in the final list. PRATIBHA Setu has already helped many. Going forward, the UPSC proposes to use digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence, for its efficient and effective working, without compromising on the integrity of the processes and practices.

As Chairman, along with my fellow members of the Commission, celebrating the centenary year at the UPSC, we are humbled and inspired by the strength of our legacy and the faith reposed in the institution by the society at large.

We reaffirm our resolve to uphold and carry forward this gold standard of integrity, fairness and excellence, ensuring that the UPSC continues to serve the nation with the same trust and distinction in the years to come.

Context

On **October 1, 2025**, the **Union Public Service Commission (UPSC)** marks **100 years** of its establishment. Envisioned by India's founders as a **guardian of meritocracy**, the UPSC has been central to ensuring fairness, transparency, and integrity in the recruitment and promotion of India's civil services. From its modest beginnings under colonial rule in 1926 as the **Public Service Commission**, to its present role as the **premier constitutional body** under Article 315 of the Indian Constitution, UPSC has evolved into one of the world's most sophisticated recruitment institutions.

The centenary is not just a celebration of institutional history but also a reaffirmation of India's faith in fairness, equality of opportunity, and the principle that success depends solely on **merit**.

About UPSC

Origin & History

- The idea of an independent body for recruitment emerged with the **Government of India Act, 1919**.
- In **1926**, the **Public Service Commission** was set up, headed by Sir Ross Barker, following the recommendations of the **Lee Commission (1924)**.
- The **Government of India Act, 1935** elevated it to the **Federal Public Service Commission**, giving Indians more say in administration.
- After Independence, with the **adoption of the Constitution in 1950**, it became the **Union Public Service Commission (UPSC)**.

UPSC as a Constitutional Body

Constitutional Status

- The **Union Public Service Commission (UPSC)** is a **constitutional body** in India.
- It derives its authority from **Part XIV of the Indian Constitution** (titled *Services under the Union and the States*).

Relevant Articles

Article 315 – Establishes Public Service Commissions for the Union (UPSC) and for each State (SPSC).

Article 316 – Deals with appointment and tenure of the Chairman and other members of the Commission.

Article 317 – Removal and suspension of a member of the Commission.

Article 318 – Power of the President to determine the number of members and service conditions of the Commission.

Article 319 – Provisions regarding restrictions on re-employment of Chairman and members.

Article 320 – Functions of Public Service Commissions (e.g., conducting exams, recruitment, disciplinary matters).

Article 321 – Extension of functions of the Commission by an Act of Parliament.

Article 322 – Expenses of the Commission charged on the Consolidated Fund of India.

Article 323 – Reports of the Commission, to be submitted annually to the President.

Nature of UPSC

- It is an **independent constitutional body**, not a statutory body (like SEBI, TRAI) or an executive body.

- Its independence is ensured by:
 - Fixed tenure for members (6 years or until age 65).
 - Removal only through a process similar to that of judges of the Supreme Court.
 - Expenses charged on the **Consolidated Fund of India**, not subject to Parliament's vote.

Labour of care

Women who facilitate rural health care
should get better wages

For decades, the women who serve as Anshakalin Stri Parichars (ASPs) in Maharashtra have been performing some of the hardest, yet least acknowledged, labour in the rural health system. For a wide breadth of responsibility, their monthly wage has stagnated at ₹3,000 since 2016, decades behind inflation. They also lack job security, pensions, safety gear and travel allowance. In 2023, a labour court in Nagpur acknowledged that they deserved at least the protection of the Minimum Wages Act but left the decision to the State. In keeping with its verbal-only assurances, the State has even now only promised them ₹6,000 a month by December 2025 – much less than what multi-purpose health workers receive. The indifference is not accidental: ASPs, who predate Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) and anganwadi workers, have been easy to ignore because they are poor, rural women. Their neglect reveals a gendered and caste-inflected hierarchy of labour within public health, where skilled work is low status and devalued because of who performs it. Their ongoing protests are part of an arc of agitation following similar sit-ins in Kolhapur, Nagpur, Ratnagiri and Yavatmal. In this regard, their plight resonates with that of ASHAs in other States. ASHAs, created under the National Rural Health Mission in 2005, are the community's first link to the health system and are also officially classified as "volunteers" rather than employees, compensated only through oft-delayed incentives, amounting to less than subsistence. Across States, ASHAs have repeatedly agitated for fixed honoraria, recognition as government staff and social security, and, like the ASPs' protests, have borne the same refrain: States cannot continue to build their health systems on the underpaid labour of women.

These struggles highlight a structural contradiction. While India relies heavily on women community health workers and attendants to deliver maternal and child health care, immunisation and disease surveillance, especially in rural areas, it refuses to recognise them as workers entitled to minimum benefits and dignity. The reliance is often framed as offering rural women "opportunities" for public service. Yet, in practice, it is exploitation. These women risk snakebite while clearing hospital grounds and death in accidents en route to vaccination duty without insurance or compensation. A health system that does not value the people who keep it functional and link its margins to formal care is bound to sabotage itself. To secure rural health is to secure the rights of those women through living wages, safe working conditions and stable employment.

Context

For decades, **Anshakalin Stri Parichars (ASPs)** in Maharashtra — women frontline health workers — have been the backbone of the rural health system. Despite their wide responsibilities in maternal health, immunisation, and disease surveillance, their wages have stagnated at **₹3,000 per month since 2016**, without job security, pensions, or safety measures. A labour court ruling in 2023 recognised their right to minimum wages, but the State's promise of ₹6,000 by 2025 still undervalues their work compared to multi-purpose health workers.

Their plight echoes that of **ASHA workers** nationwide, who face delayed incentives, lack of fixed honoraria, and no recognition as government staff. This reveals a **gendered and caste-inflected hierarchy** in India's public health system — where women's skilled labour is treated as low status and underpaid.

Mains Focus Points

Status of Rural Women Health Workers

- ASPs and ASHAs form the **first link between communities and formal health care**.
- Classified as “volunteers,” not employees → excluded from job security, social security, or fair wages.

Wages & Exploitation

- ASPs' wage: stagnant at ₹3,000/month (2016–present).
- State promise: only ₹6,000/month by Dec 2025.
- ASHAs: dependent on **delayed, incentive-based payments**.
- Both groups → underpaid despite critical services.

Structural Inequality

- Gendered and caste-inflected devaluation of labour.
- Rural women's work framed as “service opportunities” → actually institutionalised exploitation.

Occupational Risks

- ASPs face hazards: snakebites, unsafe travel, lack of safety gear.
- No **insurance or compensation** for work-related risks.

Legal & Policy Gaps

- 2023 Nagpur labour court → acknowledged ASPs deserve Minimum Wages Act protection, but implementation left to State.
- Verbal assurances by State not translating into action.

Protests & Demands

- ASPs' ongoing agitations across Maharashtra (Kolhapur, Nagpur, Ratnagiri, Yavatmal).
- ASHAs nationwide: demand for fixed honoraria, recognition as government staff, and social security.

Implications for Rural Health

- India's rural health system **depends on women community workers**.
- Undervaluing them risks weakening maternal care, immunisation, and disease surveillance.
- A sustainable health system requires **living wages, safe working conditions, and recognition**.

Swim to safety

Engagement with fishers can help with marine conservation

Once widespread across the Gulf of Mannar, Palk Bay, the Gulf of Kutch and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India's dugongs dwindled to a few hundred individuals as poaching, by-catch, habitat loss and pollution compounded the animals' slow rate of reproduction. But, in the last decade, a series of initiatives have signalled a serious, if still inchoate, effort to reverse this decline. The most visible step was the notification of the Dugong Conservation Reserve in Palk Bay in 2022 under the Wildlife (Protection) Act. Protecting over 12,000 hectares of seagrass meadows, it has become a model of integrated marine conservation. Tamil Nadu's stewardship, bolstered by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and local community participation, has mitigated poaching and encouraged fishers to release dugongs caught as by-catch. Now, the International Union for Conservation of Nature has recognised the reserve as an exemplar, lauding its ecological significance and innovative restoration techniques. WII surveys suggest that the population here numbers over 200, fragile but encouraging progress from the fear of extinction voiced two decades ago. India has also experimented with technologies that widen conservation options, which include drone platforms and acoustic and satellite-based mapping of seagrass beds.

Yet, much remains to be done. Even in the reserve, mechanised fishing, port construction, dredging and pollution from agriculture and industry threaten seagrass meadows. Dugongs continue to die in fishing nets. Rising sea temperatures, acidification and storms threaten restoration gains. Populations in Gujarat and the Andamans are also smaller and less protected than in Tamil Nadu. Experts have stressed the importance of cross-border collaboration, particularly with Sri Lanka, since dugongs traverse the narrow Palk Strait. Without shared protection, the recovery will remain local. Funding, too, has been inconsistent: while allocations from the compensatory afforestation fund have helped, the long gestation of dugong populations requires decades of steady investment. These efforts and shortcomings hold broader lessons for the conservation of other marine species that demand intact ecosystems while being directly threatened by human activity. The Palk Bay reserve demonstrates that community engagement with fishers as partners can mitigate by-catch and create local constituencies for conservation. The IUCN recognition underscores how international endorsement can amplify domestic efforts, offering legitimacy and opportunities for knowledge exchange. Likewise, blending traditional ecological knowledge with technologies such as drones and echosounders shows how conservation can bridge tradition with modernity.

Context

India's **dugongs (sea cows)**, once common across the **Gulf of Mannar, Palk Bay, Gulf of Kutch, and Andaman & Nicobar Islands**, have declined to just a few hundred due to poaching, by-catch, habitat loss, and pollution. Recognising the crisis, Tamil Nadu established the **Dugong Conservation Reserve in Palk Bay (2022)** under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, protecting over **12,000 hectares of seagrass meadows**. This initiative — involving **local fishers, the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), and community stewardship** — has reduced poaching and encouraged release of dugongs caught accidentally.

The **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)** has now recognised this reserve as a global model, citing its ecological value and innovative restoration. Still, challenges remain: mechanised fishing, industrial pollution, climate change, and inadequate cross-border collaboration (especially with Sri Lanka). The dugong case underscores how **community engagement, steady funding, cross-border efforts, and blending traditional and modern methods** are critical for marine conservation in India.

Mains Focus Points

Status of Dugongs in India

- Populations reduced to a few hundred; fragile recovery in Palk Bay (~200 individuals).
- Once widespread, now restricted and vulnerable.

Conservation Efforts

- **2022 Dugong Conservation Reserve, Palk Bay** – protects 12,000 ha of seagrass meadows.
- Community participation → fishers releasing by-catch.
- Backed by **Wildlife Institute of India (WII)** research and monitoring.
- Recognised by **IUCN** for ecological importance and restoration model.
- Use of new technologies: drones, acoustic mapping, satellite tracking.

Challenges

- **Local threats:** mechanised fishing, dredging, port projects, agriculture & industrial pollution.
- **Climate threats:** rising sea temperature, acidification, storms.
- Mortality from by-catch persists.
- Populations in **Gujarat & Andamans** are smaller, less protected.
- **Funding** inconsistent, despite compensatory afforestation support.

Cross-Border Cooperation

- Dugongs move across **Palk Strait (India–Sri Lanka)**.
- Need for bilateral conservation frameworks → without which, recovery stays localised.

Broader Lessons for Marine Conservation

- Community engagement with fishers = crucial for reducing by-catch.
- Local stewardship builds **constituencies for conservation**.
- International recognition (IUCN) gives **legitimacy, visibility, and exchange of best practices**.
- Integration of **traditional ecological knowledge with modern technology** (drones, echosounders).
- Need for **long-term, stable investment** due to dugongs' slow reproductive cycle.

Dugong (Sea Cow)

- Dugong (*Dugong dugon*) is a **marine herbivorous mammal**, often called the “**sea cow**” because it grazes exclusively on **seagrass meadows**.
- It is the **only herbivorous marine mammal** found in Indian waters and the **only extant species** of the family *Dugongidae*.
- Closely related to manatees, dugongs are found in warm coastal waters of the **Indian and Pacific Oceans**.

Dugongs in India

- Historically found in **Gulf of Mannar, Palk Bay, Gulf of Kutch, and Andaman & Nicobar Islands.**
- Current population: **few hundred individuals only.**
- Tamil Nadu hosts the **largest surviving population (~200 dugongs)**, especially in **Palk Bay.**
- **Dugong Conservation Reserve** established in 2022 in Palk Bay (12,000 hectares of seagrass meadows).



Reclaim the district as a democratic commons

Across the world, public life feels increasingly fragmented and polarised, even as technological, ecological, and demographic upheavals gather pace. India's greatest opportunity – and challenge – in this moment lies with its youth. With 65% of the population under the age of 35 years, an aging global population, and profound changes in the nature of work, the question before us is stark. Can India's leaders ensure that our young people are mainstreamed economically and democratically?

Doing so will require shifting our gaze from metropolitan hubs to the districts where most Indians live. Nearly 85% of Indians remain in the district of their birth, yet cities that cover just 3% of the country's land account for over 60% of GDP. This concentration of growth, both social and geographic, has left much of the nation's talent under-utilised. Even as corporate profits have risen to record highs, wages have stagnated. That has dampened domestic consumption – the main pillar of the Indian economy – because purchasing power remains concentrated among a narrow segment. In a global order marked by volatility, India's next wave of growth cannot rely on exports or elite consumption alone. While governments have tried to put more money in people's hands, mass youth opportunity needs broad-based participation in production, consumption and innovation.

The problem is centralisation

Such participation cannot be engineered only from above. A central problem with India's governance is its deep centralisation. Successive policy paradigms have prioritised administrative efficiency, technocratic schemes and digital service delivery. These are all important. But their top-down nature has narrowed political agency at the local level. Elected representatives, meant to act as conduits between citizen aspirations and state capacity, have been reduced to mediators of individual entitlements rather



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It is a crucial step to revive national development and the fundamental principles of democratic engagement

than shapers of developmental direction and conveners of public good.

This model is showing strain. Electoral politics has increasingly pivoted to welfare through cash transfers in the absence of meaningful employment. But this approach is yielding diminishing returns as promises multiply while structural transformation remains elusive.

Beneath the surface, there is growing political fatigue, among citizens and representatives, with a system that is struggling to deliver opportunity and ownership. This fatigue is most evident among young people, for whom the promise of mobility collides with the reality of limited opportunity.

Re-engaging youth, creating opportunity

To truly transform India, we must start from where Indian youth actually live – its districts. Administratively, India has long been district-led but this dominance of bureaucracy means that citizens experience the state primarily as subjects of delivery, not civic participants. To re-engage our youth and create opportunity, we must reclaim the district as a democratic commons rather than just an administrative unit.

If districts were placed at the centre of our civic imagination, opaque national schemes could be disaggregated, silos broken, and outcomes tracked locally. This would make accountability tangible, showing where districts are creating opportunity for youth and where course correction is needed. It would also bring into focus the stark disparities in investment, opportunity and outcomes across districts, enabling more equitable allocation of resources.

This vision builds on India's democratic structure. Districts already anchor administration, and Members of Parliament (MP) chair committees overseeing central schemes. Linking outcomes more directly to MPs' constituencies would bring governance closer to the people, incentivise locally tailored solutions and deepen civic engagement. Measurement and

accountability cannot by themselves overcome deficits of capacity or political will, but they can clarify problems, surface local innovations and create transparency. Done well, they can build a constituency for reform by connecting elected representatives, civil society and private actors around shared developmental priorities.

Shared responsibility for inclusive growth

This transformation also demands visible and meaningful participation from India's top 10% – political leaders, corporate executives and intellectuals. While many profess a commitment to inclusion, translating principle into practice requires specific and targeted interventions.

A district-first civic framework provides a way to do just that. It offers a tangible route for elites to translate good intentions into local action. It reclaims governance as a deeply democratic, grounded process: redistributing power to communities, fostering collective accountability, and bridging the persistent gap between policy design and lived impact. India's future will not be determined only by economic indicators, but by whether its democracy is responsive to the needs of youth outside urban and elite centres. We already have a district-first bureaucracy. What we need now is a district-first democracy. A district-first approach offers a framework to rebuild that engagement – by reconnecting local political leadership with development outcomes, and placing districts at the heart of democratic participation and economic progress. Most importantly, this framework of local collaboration offers a chance to build tangible common ground that is rooted in a shared love for the country, rather than being drawn into performative or polarising partisanship.

By focusing on India's districts, we can revive both national development and the fundamental principles of democratic engagement. If we fail to reimagine districts as democratic spaces, we risk not only wasting our demographic dividend but also hollowing out democracy itself.

Context

- India stands at a critical juncture: **youth make up 65% of the population**, but centralised governance and unequal economic growth have left much of this talent under-utilised.
- Growth is concentrated in cities (3% of land → 60% of GDP), leaving **districts under-developed** where most Indians still live (85% stay in their birth district).
- Current welfare-heavy, top-down policies give short-term relief but fail to create **broad-based opportunity, local empowerment, or democratic engagement**.
- A **district-first approach** is proposed to strengthen democracy, enhance youth participation, and make governance responsive at the grassroots.

Mains Focus Points

Demographic Dividend

- India's youth bulge = opportunity + risk.
- Without local opportunities, the demographic dividend may turn into a **demographic burden**.

Problems with Current Governance Model

- **Over-centralisation**: decisions made at the top, local leaders reduced to entitlement mediators.
- **Stagnant wages + corporate profit concentration** → weak domestic demand.
- **Welfare-heavy politics**: cash transfers replacing structural reforms, leading to political fatigue.

District-Centric Approach

- Districts are already administrative units → need to make them **democratic commons**, not just bureaucratic spaces.
- Local disaggregation of schemes → transparent tracking of outcomes.

- MPs can be linked more directly to **constituency outcomes**, enhancing accountability.
- Encourages **locally tailored solutions** and recognition of disparities across districts.

Role of Youth

- Youth engagement requires moving governance closer to where they live.
- District-first democracy enables **ownership, participation, innovation, and accountability**.

Role of Elites (Top 10%)

- Leaders, corporate executives, and intellectuals must **translate commitments to inclusion into local action**.
- District-first framework allows targeted interventions and collective responsibility.

Way Forward

- Reclaim governance as a **democratic, participatory, bottom-up process**.
- Link development outcomes with democratic accountability.
- Use **district-first democracy** to bridge policy–practice gaps and ensure **inclusive growth**.