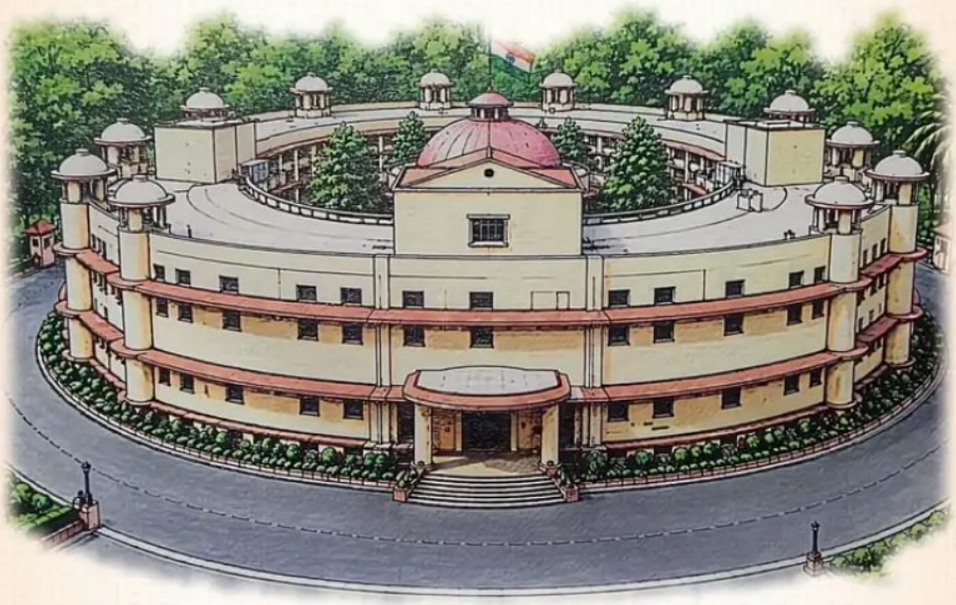
UNION PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS "MANTHAN"

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS – UPSC@100

Dr. Ajay Kumar, Hon'ble Chairman, UPSC



UPSC@100

Distinguished Members of the Union Public Service Commission, Chairpersons and Members of State Public Service Commissions, former Chairpersons, Members of the Commission, senior officers, Professors and Experts, officers of UPSC and dear friends,

It is a privilege, and a profound responsibility, to stand before you today as we commence this two-day celebration of a momentous milestone: the completion of a century of the Union Public Service Commission's service to the nation.

A hundred years is a long time in the life of an institution.
Constitution of India has been amended 106 times. Society has changed. Technology has transformed the way we live and work. India itself has been transformed beyond recognition towards Viksit Bharat.

And yet, through all these changes, UPSC's commitment has remained remarkably consistent.

Over a century, UPSC has earned that trust and credibility through the unflinching integrity of its processes. It is reflected in the confidence of governments, the faith of millions of candidates, and the reliance placed on the Commission by the judiciary.

The centenary of UPSC is therefore not merely a history of what it has achieved over the years. It is the history of an institution that has made **merit, fairness and impartiality the foundation of public trust.**
That is what we celebrate today.

I. A CENTURY OF TRUST

Let me begin with the most important word in the history of UPSC: **Trust.**
The Commission does not command authority because it is powerful. Its authority comes from something more fundamental: the confidence that when it is entrusted with the task, it will discharge that responsibility fairly.

That trust has been built over the years, examination after examination, interview after interview, recommendation after recommendation.

It has been built quietly.

There are few public institutions whose most important achievement is that when they do their work well, very little is said about it. UPSC is one such institution.

The Civil Services Examination is the most visible face of the Commission. But it is only one part of a much larger constitutional responsibility. The Commission conducts nearly 250 recruitment processes every year. That means, on an average, UPSC is handling almost one recruitment process for every working day of the year. It recruits not only administrators, but engineers, doctors, scientists, economists, statisticians, geoscientists, academics and officers for the Armed Forces, among many other services. Most institutions are built around a particular discipline, sector or area of expertise. The Commission, by contrast, must bring together expertise spanning an extraordinary range of disciplines and professions. This breadth of mandate, and the institutional capacity required to assess talent across such diverse fields, is a distinctive feature of the Commission. Few institutions anywhere in the world can match it.

The scale and complexity at which the Commission operates today would have been difficult to imagine in its early years. Few institutions anywhere in the world handle such a breadth and volume of responsibilities. Over the decades, the number of candidates has grown from lakhs to millions, the range of disciplines has expanded, the examination architecture has become increasingly sophisticated, and public expectations have risen enormously.

And yet, the fundamental responsibility remains unchanged: **to give every candidate a fair opportunity and to select on merit through impartial process.**
That is easier said than done!

Fairness in public recruitment is not simply the absence of discrimination. It requires consistency. It requires procedural discipline. It requires confidentiality where confidentiality is necessary. It requires transparency where transparency is appropriate. The real achievement of UPSC is not simply that it conducts examinations. It is that generations of Indians have come to believe that the examination system is fundamentally fair.

A young person from a remote district and a young person from a metropolitan city may begin their preparation with very different circumstances. They may come from different schools, different universities, different social and economic backgrounds. But when they enter the examination process, they expect one thing: **that the institution before them will judge them impartially.**
That expectation is precious. It must never be taken for granted. Trust, once established, might be invisible but it is not indestructible. It has to be renewed every day. Every examination is therefore not merely an examination. And we in UPSC believe that it is another test of the institution itself.

II. THE CONSTITUTIONAL IDEA: MERIT NEEDS INDEPENDENCE

The second foundation of this institution lies in our Constitution. The framers of our Constitution understood something of extraordinary importance. Times change, Policies will change, Priorities will change. But the civil services must implement lawful decisions of successive governments with equal professionalism. They must serve citizens irrespective of their political, social or economic circumstances.

This is why the constitutional position of UPSC matters. If the civil services are to be professional and impartial, the process to enter into these services must itself enjoy a measure of independence. This is particularly important in a country where government service has long been regarded as one of the most sought-after and prestigious career choices, making fairness and impartiality in recruitment matters of profound public interest.

The forefathers of the Constitution of India, in their wisdom, recognised that this could not be left to administrative arrangements and gave Public Service Commissions a constitutional status. To give an institution entrusted with the selection of public servants such a distinctive constitutional position is, arguably, unique among the major democracies of the world.

This is more than an administrative provision. It is one of the most important instrumentalities safeguarding the State itself.

The Commission's work also extends far beyond recruitment. Its role in appointments, promotions and disciplinary matters contributes to the larger objective of maintaining professionalism and integrity in public services.

Much of this work is not visible to the public. There are no headlines when a consultation is completed correctly. There is no public celebration when a process is concluded fairly. But these quiet processes contribute over time to the independence and autonomy of the civil services.

But the way I see it that the independence of UPSC is not a privilege of the Commission. **It is a responsibility owed to the Constitution and to the citizens of India.**
When the Supreme Court was considering the difficult question of the selection of Directors General of Police in the States, UPSC was entrusted with an important role in that process.

That trust is significant. It reflects a larger principle: **When a decision is too important involving wider public interest, institutions of proven impartiality become essential.**
And it places an obligation on UPSC. It must protect the independence of the Commission not merely in letter, but in spirit. It must also ensure that independence never becomes isolation. And it must ensure that impartiality never becomes indifference.

The Commission must remain connected to the changing needs of the nation while remaining independent of pressures that could compromise its judgment. That balance is central to our constitutional role.

III. THE INVISIBLE ARCHITECTURE OF EXCELLENCE

People often ask the question why UPSC has been able to do what it does without a single blemish? Let me share some lesser known facts of UPSC functioning.

There is a great deal that is visible about UPSC. There are examination notifications. There are question papers. There are results. There are appointments. But beneath these visible events much of the real architecture is invisible.

Take the **UPSC examination calendar**. It is prepared nearly a year and a half in advance. This is not simply about fixing dates. It is a commitment to candidates, giving them certainty so that they can plan their preparation well in advance.
It is also a commitment made by the Commission before it has full knowledge of what the future may bring. Circumstances can change, but the Commission works to honour the commitment it has made. What appears to be a simple calendar is therefore the product of extraordinary advance planning, coordination and institutional discipline.

Over time, this predictability has made the UPSC calendar an important national dateline. Other major national activities, including elections, other major examinations, and large-scale public exercises, take the UPSC schedule into account while planning their own calendars.

Another characteristic of UPSC that is not so well known is **our respect for the Standard Operating Procedure.**
In many organisations, an SOP is a document. At UPSC, adherence to procedure has become part of institutional culture. Even when a shortcut may appear attractive, the instinct is to ask: What does the established procedure require?

Consistency is one of the foundations of fairness.

A process that is followed correctly once is one thing. A process that is followed correctly thousands of times, year after year, despite changes in personnel and circumstances, becomes the character of the institution.

Much of the work at UPSC is repetitive. Some of it is even monotonous. But that is precisely why institutional culture matters. The institution cannot depend on whether one particular person happens to be conscientious on a particular day. The process has to make the right thing the only possible thing. That is one of the great strengths of UPSC.

Officers and employees come here from different organisations and different parts of government. But once they become part of the Commission, there is a remarkable alignment with its constitutional responsibility. There is a sense of ownership. There is pride in saying: **"I work for UPSC."**
That pride is not about an organisation. It is about being entrusted with a constitutional responsibility. And I want to use this occasion to acknowledge all those who make UPSC work. Not only Members and senior officers. But also the officers and staff who prepare files, manage examinations, scrutinise documents, maintain records, secure question papers, coordinate centres, process applications, support interview boards, manage technology, handle correspondence and perform hundreds of other tasks that candidates never see.

The country sees the result. It does not see the thousands of careful actions that make that result possible.

There is yet another lesser known truth about UPSC: its **Responsiveness.**
When national circumstances have required additional recruitment, the Commission has responded. In the early years after Independence, recruitment had to expand rapidly to meet the needs of a new nation. After the expansion of the Armed Forces following the events of 1962, the Commission responded to new requirements. In the 1960s, interview boards were even sent abroad to identify scientists and technocrat Indians living outside the country and attract them into national service.

This effort continues even today. Recently, when the requirements of Ladakh required us to take the selection process closer to candidates, UPSC has again demonstrated that responsiveness.

Responsiveness is not only about responding to the needs of the State. UPSC believes that a constitutional institution must also be responsive to the needs of the candidates who place their trust in it. When candidates need more time to complete their applications, the Commission extends the deadline wherever feasible. When a candidate is unable to appear for an interview on the scheduled date because of genuine circumstances such as illness, an alternative date is provided. And to ensure that recruitment opportunities reach the widest possible pool of eligible candidates, the Commission has built a large network of organisations and institutions to which its recruitment notices are directly disseminated. The unsaid institutional principle is: **Every Aspirant. A Fair Chance.** Every genuine request deserves to be heard. Every difficulty deserves to be considered. And wherever the rules permit accommodation, the Commission makes every effort to provide it.
Because fairness is not only about selecting on merit. **It is also about ensuring that every eligible aspirant gets a genuine opportunity to compete.**
State Public Service Commissions are an integral part of the constitutional family of Public Service Commissions. As we mark the centenary of UPSC, it is also an opportunity to reflect on how the experience and institutional practices that have evolved at UPSC can be shared more widely across this family. State PSCs operate in different administrative, social and institutional contexts, and many have developed strong practices of their own. The objective is not to create uniformity, but to learn from one another, share what works, and help every Commission strengthen its capacity where there is scope for improvement.

The Standing Committee of State PSCs and UPSC has long recognised the value of closer engagement and greater opportunities to exchange experience and best practices. **An architecture of excellence becomes stronger when the institutions within it learn from and strengthen one another.**
This is one reason why the proposed Centre of Excellence within UPSC assumes importance. It creates a platform where institutions can learn from one another. Where successful practices can be documented. Where research can inform PSC functioning. Where emerging technologies can be examined. Where legal experience can be shared. And where the collective capacity of Public Service Commissions across the country can be strengthened.

IV. A CHANGING INDIA AND A NEW GENERATION

The country is changing fast. India today is a fundamentally different society from the India in which the constitutional framework of public recruitment evolved. The societal changes call upon the UPSC and the PSCs to adapt themselves to these massive changes.

Over the last twenty-five years, the internet, smartphones and social media have fundamentally changed the information environment. Information that once took days to travel can now reach millions in seconds. A candidate in a remote district can access lectures, study material, discussions and expertise from anywhere in the world. Technology has therefore democratised access to knowledge in ways earlier generations could scarcely have imagined.

But the transformation goes much deeper. Candidates and members of the public are no longer merely recipients of information. They can create it, comment on it, amplify it and build narratives around it. A question paper, an examination centre experience, a rumour or even an individual grievance can become a national conversation within minutes.

This creates a new challenge. Information can be incomplete, inaccurate or manipulated. Perception can sometimes travel faster than facts, and a narrative can acquire momentum before an institution has had an opportunity to establish the facts.

This does not diminish the importance of transparency. It makes transparency more demanding. The challenge today is not simply to make information available, but to make it timely, authentic, comprehensible and accessible, while ensuring that the integrity and confidentiality of the examination process are protected.

Second important change is generational. Young candidates today come from a more confident and self-assured India, without the colonial legacy and deference to authority that influenced earlier generations. They are better informed, willing to ask questions and more comfortable challenging established assumptions. Having grown up with smartphones, social media and instant access to information, they expect institutions to communicate clearly and explain their decisions. Their expectations of efficiency, transparency, accessibility and correctness are legitimate.

This has changed not only what candidates expect from UPSC, but also how the Commission must engage with them.

The Commission has responded in several ways. The application process has become increasingly digital, making it possible for candidates to apply and access information anytime, anywhere. We send eAdmit cards to candidates email boxes even if they fail to download them. Face authentication and other technology-enabled measures are being used to strengthen the integrity of examinations. The Commission is also making greater use of digital communication to provide timely information, clarify issues and respond to representations.

These are illustrations which reflect a larger shift: the Commission is using technology not merely to make its own processes more efficient, but to make the experience of engaging with a constitutional institution more transparent, accessible and responsive to the expectations of a new generation.

The changing legal environment is another significant societal transformation that PSCs must navigate. Decisions and processes of public institutions today face far greater judicial scrutiny than in earlier decades. This places a greater responsibility on the PSCs to ensure that their processes are procedurally rigorous, decisions are properly documented, and actions are capable of withstanding judicial scrutiny.

A constitutional institution whose decisions cannot withstand judicial scrutiny cannot command lasting public confidence. Judicial scrutiny, therefore, is not merely a challenge to be managed; it is also an opportunity to continually strengthen institutional processes and decision-making.
It is therefore UPSC has taken the lead to prepare, in collaboration with NALSAR Hyderabad, and with the help of State PSCs, a compendium of one hundred landmark judgements which can inform Public Service Commission functioning. This is more than a centenary publication. It is an investment in institutional memory, ensuring that each generation can build on the legal understanding and experience of those who came before it.

Another major change which is impacting the PSCs and all other recruiting bodies is the **huge information availability/explosion** and their impact on the nature of preparation.
The growth of coaching has undoubtedly helped many candidates access structured preparation. But it also raises a question for all institutions of selection: Are we selecting people for their ability to reproduce what they have been taught, or for their ability to think when there is no prepared answer? This is an important distinction. In an examination-oriented ecosystem, there is always a risk that preparation becomes increasingly focused on predicting the examination.

But public administration is not a model-answer exercise. A civil servant will routinely encounter problems for which there is no model answer. There will be incomplete information. Conflicting objectives. Competing interests. Unexpected crises.

And decisions that cannot simply be looked up in a preparation manual.

The challenge before public recruitment in the coming decades is therefore not merely to identify those who are well prepared. It is to identify those who are **deeply capable**. People who can exercise judgement in ambiguity. People who can exercise judgment. People who can lead teams. People who can build trust. People who can solve problems creatively. People who can learn when the answer is not known.

And there are distortions that simply did not exist earlier. A question asked by an expert in an interview can now be circulated through messaging groups within minutes. Patterns are analysed, likely questions identified and model answers prepared and widely shared. By the time the next candidates appear, what was intended to be an assessment of spontaneous thinking may already have become a rehearsed exercise. Experts are therefore increasingly required to ask fresh, unfamiliar questions, simply to ensure that each candidate is assessed on their own ability to think, reason and respond.

UPSC must continuously adapt to this changing environment. The objective is not to make examinations more difficult or to stay ahead of tutoring/coaching, but to ensure that they remain **balanced, relevant and capable of testing genuine understanding, reasoning and judgment.**

V. THE FUTURE

This brings me to what I believe should guide the next phase of UPSC:

Trust, Transparency and Technology. Three Ts. Trust must remain the foundation. Transparency must strengthen confidence. And Technology must enable us to make processes more secure, efficient, accessible and accurate.
The centenary therefore gives us an opportunity not simply to look back with satisfaction, but to look forward with humility.

The future will present challenges that we cannot fully predict. Artificial intelligence will transform the nature of work. Technology will change how governments function. Citizens will expect faster and more personalised public services. The boundaries between disciplines will become less clear.

The challenges facing administrators will increasingly cut across traditional departmental boundaries. And public institutions will operate in an environment of unprecedented scrutiny.

UPSC must therefore continue to evolve. But there is an important principle that should guide that evolution: **We must change what needs to change so that what must never change can be preserved.**
Technology can change. Examination formats can change. Administrative processes can change. Methods of evaluation can change. The way we communicate with candidates can change. But the fundamental principles cannot change: **merit, fairness, impartiality, integrity and equal opportunity.** That is the constitutional core.

VI. CONCLUSION

Ladies and gentlemen,

A hundred years ago, the institution we now know as UPSC began its journey in a very different India. A hundred years from now, I hope it will be said that UPSC evolved with India without losing its character; embraced technology without surrendering judgment; and remained faithful to the constitutional trust placed in it.

The first century established a tradition of trust. The second must renew that trust, every day.

That is the responsibility of UPSC.

That is the responsibility of all of us who serve it.

And that is, to me, the true meaning of a hundred years of UPSC.

Thank you.