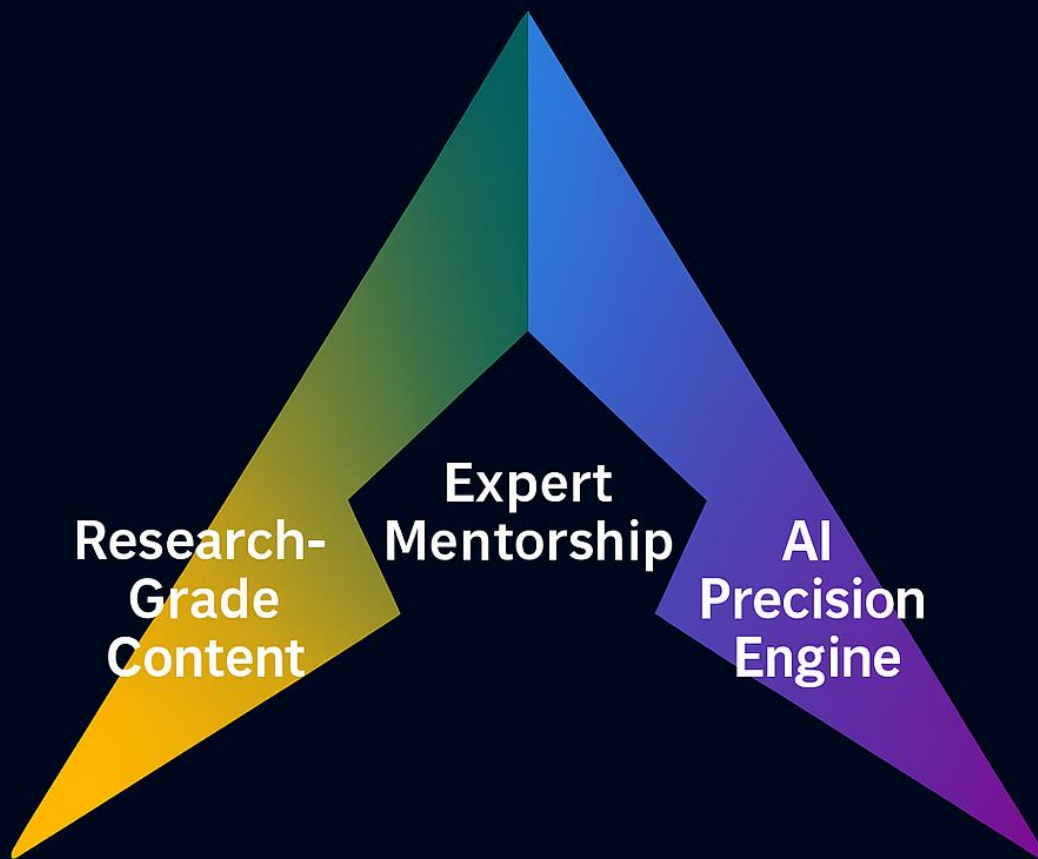


PrepAlpine

The Next-Generation UPSC Institution

Where Research Meets Mentorship & Precision



Preparation Meets Precision

A Next-Generation Learning Institution

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For permission requests, please write to:

PrepAlpine

Email: PrepAlpine2025@gmail.com

Website: PrepAlpine.com

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First Edition: November 2025

Printed and published by PrepAlpine

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PrepAlpine is India's next-generation UPSC institution — built by educationists, retired bureaucrats, IITians, and experienced educators, and powered by a 500+-member technology firm specialising in AI-driven education infrastructure.

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PrepAlpine — From Aspirant to Authority. Lead the State, Not the Struggle.

DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS DATED 27.11.2025

GS Paper II: Current Affairs

1. Towards a Single Higher Education Regulator: Understanding the HECI Bill 2025

a. Introduction

India's higher education system is currently governed by three major bodies. The University Grants Commission allocates funds and regulates universities; the All India Council for Technical Education governs professional and technical institutions; and the National Council for Teacher Education oversees teacher training programmes. Each regulator emerged to meet specific sectoral needs, but together they have created overlaps, inconsistent standards, and frequent delays in approvals. Institutions often follow parallel rules on the same issue, resulting in confusion and administrative burden.

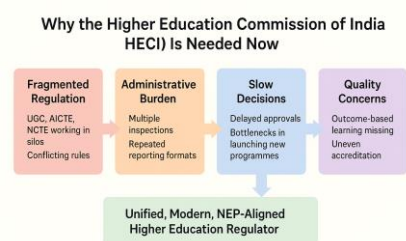
The proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) aims to replace this fragmented structure with a single regulatory authority. By simplifying compliance and unifying academic norms, the HECI Bill 2025 is set to become the most wide-ranging governance reform in higher education since Independence.

b. The Core Idea: What HECI Is Expected to Do

HECI is envisioned as the central regulator for all higher education—except medical and legal studies. It would:

- Set academic norms and learning standards
- Approve new institutions and programmes
- Oversee quality in teaching, learning, and curriculum
- Supervise accreditation and maintain transparency
- Shift the system from rigid inspections to a performance- and outcomes-based framework

By merging the functions of UGC, AICTE and NCTE, HECI intends to create a single window for regulatory engagement, making compliance more predictable and reducing unnecessary bureaucracy.



c. The Rationale: Why Reform Is Needed Now

The National Education Policy 2020 highlighted that India's regulatory architecture had become fragmented, burdensome and outdated. Multiple regulators have resulted in:

- A maze of approvals and inspections
- Inconsistent reporting formats
- Rules that conflict across authorities
- Slow decision-making that affects academic planning

The policy also noted that excessive concentration of powers had encouraged routine enforcement rather than quality improvement. Consolidation under HECI is therefore seen as a way to restore coherence, enhance accountability and support innovation.

d. Learning from the 2018 Attempt

A similar proposal from 2018 had been withdrawn due to extensive criticism. Its weaknesses included:

i. Over-centralisation

- Limited role for state governments despite education being in the Concurrent List
- Inadequate consultation mechanisms

ii. Poor Representation

- Insufficient participation of women
- Limited presence of members from marginalised communities

iii. Partial Reform Scope

- AICTE and NCTE were not fully integrated
- Funding powers remained with the Ministry, weakening the regulator's authority

The 2025 proposal attempts to rectify these issues by widening representation, deepening integration and designing a more comprehensive governance framework.

e. Structural Design: How HECI Would Be Organised

The proposed Commission consists of four specialised verticals, each with a distinct role:

i. National Higher Education Regulatory Council

- Frames norms
- Oversees institutional regulation
- Ensures compliance with academic standards

ii. National Accreditation Council

- Evaluates institutions
- Assigns quality grades
- Creates credible benchmarks for performance

iii. General Education Council

- Articulates learning outcomes
- Designs academic standards across disciplines
- Ensures consistency in curriculum structures

iv. Higher Education Grants Council

- Manages allocation of financial support
- Links funding to quality and performance
- Final division of funding powers with government still under discussion

Each vertical is expected to be staffed by domain experts, ensuring that academic judgment—not routine bureaucracy—guides the system.

f. Anticipated Benefits of the Reform

i. Simplification of Compliance

- One regulator instead of three
- Standardised norms across disciplines
- Reduced administrative burden

ii. Improvement in Quality

- Clear, uniform academic benchmarks
- Transparent accreditation processes
- Incentives for institutions to enhance performance

iii. Alignment with NEP 2020 Vision

- More autonomy for well-performing institutions
- Better governance and accountability
- Greater focus on innovation, research and equitable access

These benefits reflect the broader objective of building a modern, learner-centred and globally credible higher education system.

g. Critical Concerns and Emerging Debates

i. Federal Balance and State Autonomy

- States fear reduced influence over higher education
- Centralisation may weaken India's federal structure

ii. Representation and Inclusivity

- Need for gender-balanced representation
- Inclusion of historically marginalised communities
- Ensuring diverse perspectives in regulatory decision-making

iii. Funding Authority

- If HECI lacks direct funding power, it may struggle to enforce standards
- Clear division of roles between regulator and government is essential

iv. Risk of Over-regulation

- Combining regulation, accreditation and standard-setting may create internal conflicts
- If not designed carefully, HECI may replicate the inspection-driven culture of its predecessors

These debates highlight that structural design alone is not enough; the regulatory culture will determine the final outcome.

Conclusion

The Higher Education Commission of India represents an ambitious effort to modernise the governance of India's universities and colleges. Its success will depend on balancing national coherence with federal participation, ensuring diverse and inclusive representation, and creating a culture of regulation that promotes quality rather than mere compliance. A unified regulator can simplify the system and strengthen academic outcomes—provided it operates transparently, remains expert-driven, and adapts to the varied realities of India's higher education landscape.

GS Paper III: Environment

2. Aravalli Hills: Why the New Hundred-Metre Cutoff Matters

a. Introduction

The Aravalli Range is one of the world's oldest fold mountain systems, stretching from Gujarat through Rajasthan and Haryana to the southern edge of Delhi. Even though many of its ridges are low in height, their ecological influence is disproportionately large. They block sand-laden winds from the Thar Desert, slow down the spread of dust towards Delhi, and maintain a continuous biodiversity corridor linking key habitats such as Sariska, Ranthambore, Kuno and Jhalana.

Thus, the Aravallis function as both a climatic shield and a habitat network. Without these ridges—especially the lower ones—Delhi's dust load, heat stress, and air-quality fluctuations would be significantly worse.

b. The Policy Shift: What Has Changed

The new policy counts only those landforms that rise at least 100 metres above their immediate surroundings as Aravalli hills. This narrowly constructed criterion excludes the vast majority of low-elevation ridges that are ecologically active.

Earlier, the Forest Survey of India used a broader scientific method, considering slope, geological character and landscape behaviour. Many ridges only 20–30 metres tall were included because they played an essential role in dust interception.

The new rule therefore directly determines which areas retain legal protection and which areas may become vulnerable to mining or real-estate development.

c. Why the New Cutoff Is Environmentally Unsound

i. Loss of Nearly Ninety Per Cent of Recognised Hills

According to internal assessments by the Forest Survey of India:

- Earlier, around 12,000 landforms were recognised as Aravalli hills.
- Under the new rule, slightly over 1,000 qualify.
- This eliminates more than 90 per cent of previously protected landforms.

This single decision drastically contracts the protected zone of one of India's most critical ecological systems.

ii. Ecological Importance of Lower Hills

Low ridges—especially those between 20 and 60 metres—perform crucial dust-blocking functions:

- Lower ridges trap heavy sand and coarse dust before it drifts eastwards.
- Higher hills then slow the movement of finer pollutants such as PM2.5.
- Together, these layers create a multi-tiered natural defence system.

If the lower ridges are removed from protection, the entire mechanism weakens, regardless of the height of the remaining hills.

iii. Greater Scope for Mining and Construction

Removing lower landforms from the definition exposes them to extractive activity:

- Mining increases dust emissions and accelerates soil erosion.
- Construction fragments landscapes and breaks ecological continuity.
- Vegetation loss reduces groundwater recharge and makes the region more prone to desert-like conditions.

Such degradation would deliver long-term environmental shocks to an already fragile region.

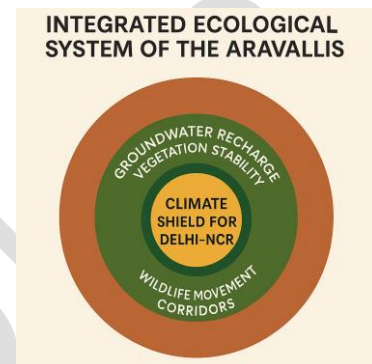
iv. Consequences for Wildlife Corridors

The Aravalli Range forms an unbroken ecological chain across western India. If large stretches lose protection:

- Movement routes between Sariska, Ranthambore, Kuno and Jhalana weaken.
- Habitat fragmentation rises, increasing human–animal conflict.
- Over time, genetic diversity declines and species numbers drop.

d. Implications for Delhi–NCR's Air Quality

The Aravallis influence Delhi's atmosphere in two important ways:



i. Barrier Against Desert Dust

- Lower hills intercept coarse dust and gravel from western Rajasthan.
- Higher hills slow down finer particles, reducing PM2.5 accumulation.
- The combined effect lowers the frequency of dust storms before the monsoon.

If lower hills are altered or removed, Delhi could receive higher dust loads, increasing pollution levels during peak summer.

ii. Winter Pollution Intensification

During winter:

- Temperature inversion traps pollutants close to the surface.
- Additional dust load worsens already severe smog episodes.
- Reduced vegetation increases soil drying and dust re-suspension.

This combination may push Delhi's winter air quality deeper into the hazardous range.

iii. Long-Term Desertification Risks

- Loss of ridges removes natural checks against eastward movement of arid conditions.
- Soil erosion accelerates.
- Agriculture, hydrology and urban habitability face long-term risks.

e. A Balanced, Science-Based Alternative

A technical committee earlier recommended a more nuanced and realistic definition:

i. Combined Height–Slope Criterion

- Landforms rising at least 30 metres
- With a minimum slope of 4.5 degrees
- And exhibiting Aravalli-like geomorphology should be recognised as part of the range.

ii. Ecological Advantage of This Approach

- Captures both height and functional landform behaviour.
- Includes critical low ridges responsible for dust interception.
- Leaves around forty per cent of the Aravalli system protected—far more than the eight to nine per cent preserved under the new rule.

Conclusion

The new definition treats the Aravallis as isolated landforms whose value is tied only to height. In reality, the Aravallis operate as an integrated ecological system, where low ridges, moderate hills and higher peaks work together to stabilise climate, trap dust, recharge groundwater and maintain biodiversity corridors.

Effective conservation must therefore focus on ecological function, not a single narrow parameter. A definition that excludes most active landforms risks weakening both the Aravalli system and the environmental resilience of the entire Delhi–NCR region. A science-driven, function-based framework is not only more accurate but essential for the long-term environmental security of northern India.

GS Paper III: Science and Technology

3. India's Digital Sovereignty: Why It Matters in the Twenty-First Century

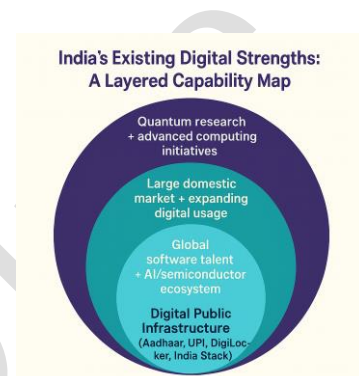
a. Introduction

Digital sovereignty refers to a nation's ability to govern its digital space with autonomy, ensuring that decisions about data, online platforms, digital laws and technological standards reflect national interests. Just as territorial sovereignty secures physical borders, digital sovereignty secures the virtual domain that now shapes governance, the economy and national security. It ensures that India's digital future is not determined by foreign companies or governments, but by policies designed for India's needs and priorities.

b. Why Digital Sovereignty Has Become Crucial

Digital infrastructure and data have become strategic assets. Countries that control cloud networks, payment systems, artificial intelligence and digital standards acquire significant geopolitical leverage. The global dominance of systems such as the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) shows how control over digital networks can influence global politics. In moments of tension, nations such as Iran and Russia have been excluded from major digital and financial systems.

For India, which is rapidly digitising, dependence on foreign technology platforms or cloud services can translate into strategic vulnerability. Protecting digital sovereignty is therefore central to safeguarding national interests.



c. The Three Strategic Choices Before India

i. The Path of Digital Ascendancy

This model mirrors the United States, where a small number of large corporations dominate global digital systems. Companies like Google, Meta, Amazon, Apple and Microsoft control search engines, social media, cloud infrastructure and operating systems. Under this model:

- Most countries become dependent on foreign platforms.
- Domestic policy influence remains limited.
- National autonomy shrinks in critical digital sectors.

ii. The Path of Digital Capitulation

A second path involves entering digital trade agreements that significantly constrain national regulatory power. These agreements may:

- Prohibit data localisation
- Restrict digital services taxation
- Prevent governments from seeking source-code or algorithmic transparency

Many developing countries that accepted such terms now face reduced policy space. This gradual erosion of autonomy has been described as a form of digital raj, because it creates dependence without overt coercion.

iii. The Path of Digital Sovereignty

The third path—most aligned with India's interests—seeks to balance global openness with national capability. It involves:

- Building domestic digital infrastructure
- Strengthening data governance
- Negotiating trade rules carefully

- Ensuring foreign companies follow transparent and accountable norms

This middle path promotes autonomy without isolating India from global innovation.

d. Why India Cannot Replicate China's Closed Model

China built an insulated digital ecosystem by limiting foreign platforms and nurturing domestic firms such as Alibaba, Tencent and Didi. This allowed it to develop its own cloud systems, payments networks and artificial intelligence capabilities.

India's context is fundamentally different:

- India is a democracy with high levels of global economic integration.
- Its technology sector is deeply connected to multinational companies.
- A closed digital system would restrict innovation and economic growth.

Therefore, India must pursue a balanced, open, yet sovereign digital ecosystem rather than a tightly insulated one.

e. India's Existing Strengths in the Digital Sphere

India has built one of the world's most successful digital public infrastructures. This includes:

- Aadhaar for identity
- Unified Payments Interface for financial transactions
- DigiLocker for secure document access
- India Stack as the underlying digital architecture

Alongside this, India has:

- A large and growing digital market
- A global pool of software talent
- Expanding capacities in artificial intelligence, semiconductor design and quantum research

These strengths provide a solid basis for enhancing digital sovereignty.

f. Key Risks to India's Digital Autonomy

Despite significant progress, India faces several structural risks:

i. Restrictive Clauses in Trade Agreements

- Prohibitions on data localisation
- Limits on digital taxation
- Bans on regulating foreign digital platforms

Such clauses, if accepted, could bind India's policy choices for decades.

ii. Dependence on Foreign Cloud Infrastructure

- Most major cloud systems are foreign-owned
- Control over data storage lies outside India's jurisdiction

iii. Reliance on Global Financial Networks

Dependence on SWIFT means global financial sanctions can disrupt key economic flows.

These vulnerabilities highlight the need to build domestic capability and negotiate digital rules carefully.

g. Why Digital Sovereignty Is Essential for India

Digital sovereignty strengthens multiple national priorities:

i. Economic Security

- Ensures India creates digital value rather than just hosting foreign platforms
- Protects domestic industry from external dominance

ii. National Security

- Sensitive data stays within India's jurisdiction
- Digital systems remain resilient against foreign interference

iii. Strategic Autonomy

- Enables India to frame its own rules on artificial intelligence, data protection and taxation
- Ensures freedom of action during global crises

iv. Employment and Innovation

- Expanding domestic capability generates high-skill jobs
- Encourages innovation across sectors

h. The Way Forward: Building a Sovereign Digital Future

A coherent approach to digital sovereignty rests on several pillars:

i. Preserving Regulatory Autonomy

- India must negotiate trade agreements carefully
- It must avoid clauses that restrict taxation or data governance

ii. Strengthening Domestic Technological Capabilities

- Investment in cloud infrastructure, artificial intelligence and cybersecurity
- Building semiconductor manufacturing capacity
- Expanding quantum technology research

iii. Establishing a Strong Legal Framework

- Robust data protection law
- Modern competition rules for large digital platforms
- Clear norms for artificial intelligence governance

iv. Using Digital Public Infrastructure as Soft Power

- Exporting platforms such as UPI or DigiLocker-like systems
- Helping shape global rules through leadership and innovation

Conclusion

Digital sovereignty is central to India's future as a secure, innovative and self-reliant nation. It does not imply withdrawing from global digital networks, but rather engaging from a position of strength. By building domestic capability, preserving policy space and developing transparent digital governance, India can ensure that its digital destiny remains firmly anchored in its own choices, values and strategic interests.

Reader's Note — About This Current Affairs Compilation

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While every effort has been made to balance depth with brevity, please keep the following in mind:

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This compilation is curated primarily from the UPSC Mains perspective — with emphasis on conceptual clarity, analytical depth, and interlinkages across GS papers.

However, the PrepAlpine team is simultaneously developing a dedicated Prelims-focused Current Affairs Series, designed for:

- factual coverage
- data recall
- Prelims-style MCQs
- objective pattern analysis

This Prelims Edition will be released separately as a standalone publication.

2. Content Length

Some sections may feel shorter or longer depending on topic relevance and news density. To fit your personal preference, you may freely resize or summarize sections using any LLM tool (ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, etc.) at your convenience.

3. Format Flexibility

The formatting combines:

- paragraphs
- lists
- tables
- visual cues

—all optimised for retention.

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4. Monthly Current Affairs Release

The complete Monthly Current Affairs Module will be released soon, optimized to a compact 100–150 pages — comprehensive yet concise, exam-ready, and revision-efficient.

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