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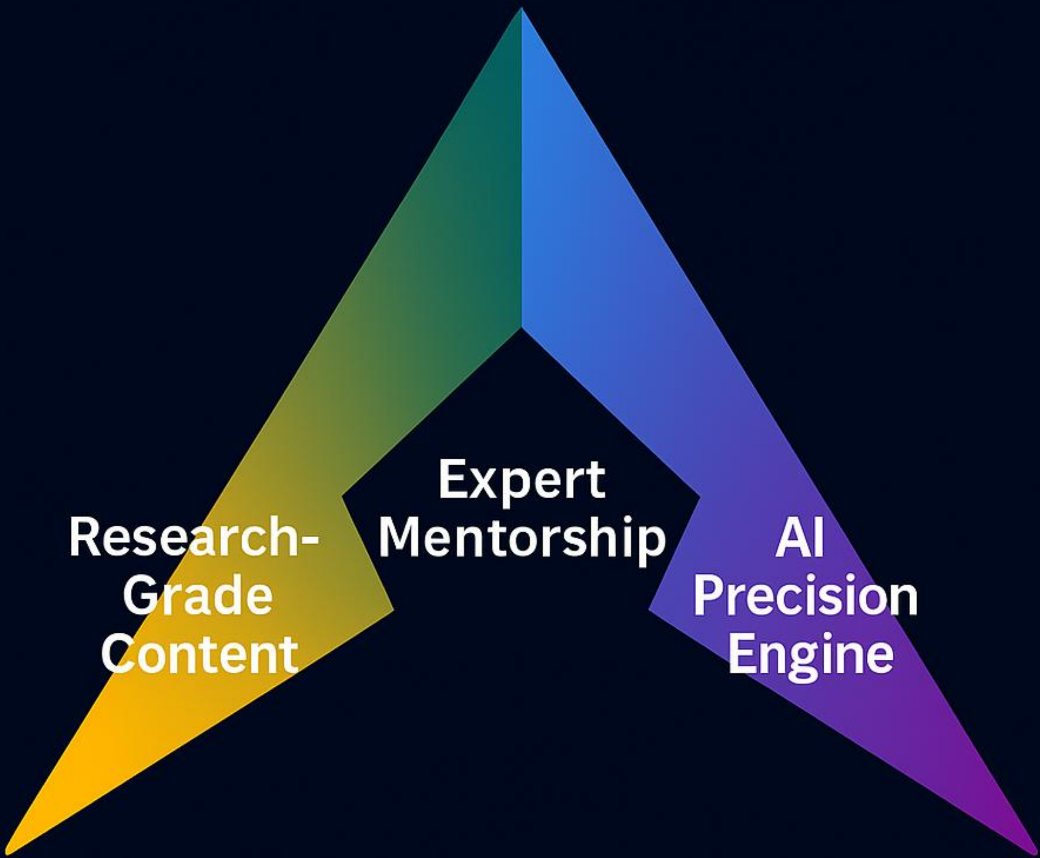

Preparation Meets Precision

A Next-Generation Learning Institution

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First Edition: January 2026
Printed and published by PrepAlpine

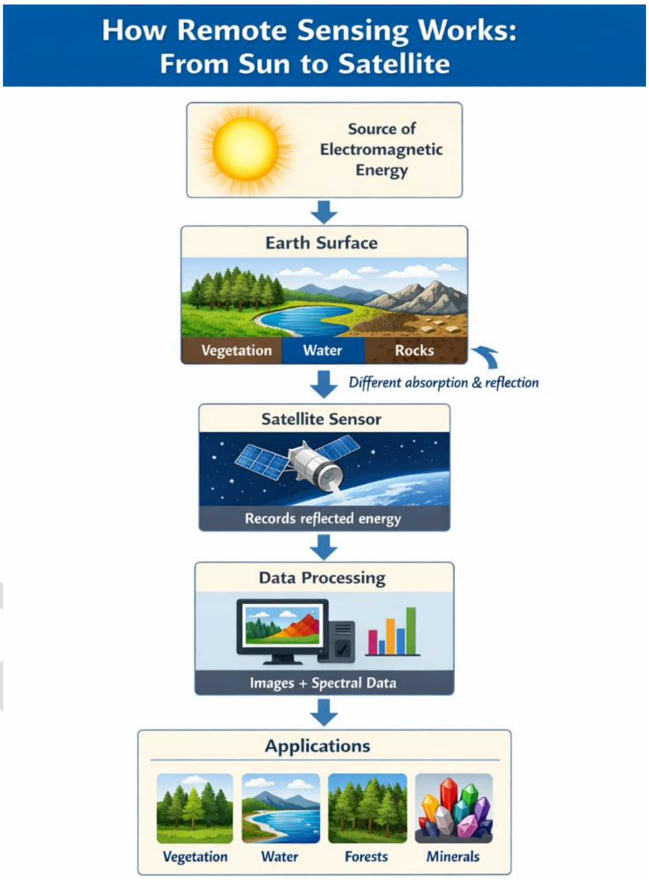
DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS DATED 06.01.2026

GS Paper I: Geography

1. Remote Sensing: Mapping Plants, Forests, Water, and Minerals from Space

a. Introduction

Remote sensing is a modern scientific technique that enables the observation and analysis of the Earth without direct physical contact. Using sensors mounted on satellites, aircraft, or drones, it allows systematic collection of data on vegetation, forests, water resources, minerals, landforms, and even certain subsurface characteristics.



For a country like India—where climate change, groundwater stress, forest degradation, food security, mineral exploration, and disaster risks are deeply intertwined with development outcomes—remote sensing has become an indispensable governance and planning tool. It supports evidence-based decision-making, continuous environmental monitoring, disaster preparedness, and sustainable management of natural resources.

b. Basic Concept of Remote Sensing

Remote sensing refers to the acquisition of information about the Earth's surface and near-surface features through sensors that are not in physical contact with the objects being studied.

Working Principle

- The Sun emits electromagnetic energy towards the Earth.
- Different surfaces—plants, water bodies, soil, rocks—absorb and reflect this energy differently.
- Each material reflects energy in a unique pattern across wavelengths, known as its spectral signature.

Satellite sensors record these signatures and convert them into images and datasets for scientific analysis.

Key Idea:
Every natural object on Earth has a distinct spectral fingerprint, allowing it to be identified and analysed from space.

c. Electromagnetic Spectrum and Its Importance

Remote sensing extends far beyond visible light and uses multiple regions of the electromagnetic spectrum.

Role of Different Wavelengths

- **Visible light**: Identifies basic land features and surface patterns.
- **Near-infrared (NIR)**: Highly effective for assessing vegetation health.
- **Shortwave infrared (SWIR)**: Provides information on soil moisture, rock properties, and mineral composition.
- **Thermal infrared**: Measures surface temperature, useful for heatwave analysis and volcanic monitoring.
- **Microwave (Radar)**: Penetrates clouds and works at night, crucial for flood mapping and terrain analysis.

The use of multiple wavelengths allows remote sensing to capture both physical and biochemical characteristics of the Earth's surface.

d. Remote Sensing of Vegetation and Crops

Monitoring crops and natural vegetation is one of the most widely used applications of remote sensing.

i. Vegetation Reflectance Behaviour

- Healthy plants absorb red light for photosynthesis.
- They reflect a large portion of near-infrared radiation.
- Stressed or unhealthy vegetation reflects less near-infrared energy.

ii. Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI)

This contrast forms the basis of the NDVI, a widely used indicator of vegetation health.

- High NDVI values → dense and healthy vegetation
- Low NDVI values → crop stress, drought, or land degradation

In India, NDVI-based monitoring supports crop assessment, drought monitoring, yield forecasting, and food security planning.

e. Remote Sensing of Forests

Remote sensing plays a central role in forest conservation and management.

i. Forest Cover and Change Detection

- Continuous mapping of forest cover and forest density.
- Detection of deforestation, forest fires, and encroachment.

ii. Advanced Forest Analysis

- Hyperspectral remote sensing divides reflected sunlight into hundreds of narrow bands.
- Enables identification of tree species and detection of nutrient stress.
- Supports assessment of overall forest health.

iii. Forest Biomass and Carbon Stock

Satellite data are used to estimate forest biomass, which is essential for:

- Calculating carbon storage
- Monitoring climate commitments, including India's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)

Thus, remote sensing links forest management directly with climate change mitigation.

f. Remote Sensing of Water Resources

Remote sensing has transformed the monitoring of both surface water and groundwater.

i. Surface Water Mapping

- Water absorbs near-infrared and shortwave infrared radiation.
- It reflects visible green light.
- This contrast is used to compute indices such as the Normalised Difference Water Index (NDWI).

Modified water indices are especially useful in urban areas, where shadows and built-up surfaces complicate water detection.

ii. Flood Monitoring Using Radar

- Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) operates through clouds and during night-time.
- Water surfaces appear dark due to low backscatter.
- Essential for flood mapping during cyclones and extreme rainfall events.

iii. Groundwater Assessment

Although indirect, satellite missions like GRACE detect changes in groundwater storage by measuring variations in the Earth's gravitational field.

These observations have revealed serious groundwater depletion in parts of northern and peninsular India.

g. Remote Sensing of Minerals and Energy Resources

Remote sensing supports exploration by reducing uncertainty and environmental impact.

i. Mineral Exploration

- Certain minerals alter surrounding rock chemistry.
- These alterations are detectable through hyperspectral sensors.
- Helps identify promising zones before field surveys.

ii. Oil and Natural Gas Exploration

Satellites do not directly detect hydrocarbons, but they provide indirect geological indicators.

- Structural mapping identifies folds such as anticlines.
- Gravity and magnetic surveys indicate subsurface formations.
- Vegetation or soil anomalies may signal minor hydrocarbon seepages.

Thus, satellite data guide exploration by indicating where resources are likely to exist, not exact drilling points.

h. Advantages and Limitations of Remote Sensing

i. Advantages

- Large-area and inaccessible region coverage
- Non-invasive and environmentally friendly
- Continuous and repeated monitoring
- Cost-effective compared to extensive ground surveys

ii. Limitations

- Optical sensors are limited by cloud cover and dense vegetation.

- High-resolution data can be expensive.
- Ground verification is required for accuracy.

i. Relevance of Remote Sensing for India

Remote sensing underpins several critical national priorities:

- Precision agriculture and food security
- Forest conservation and climate mitigation
- Water resource management
- Disaster preparedness and early warning
- Mineral and energy security

It enables informed, timely, and scientifically grounded decision-making across sectors essential for sustainable development.

Conclusion

Remote sensing has fundamentally transformed our ability to observe and understand the Earth. By analysing spectral signatures recorded from space, it provides reliable and timely information on vegetation, forests, water resources, minerals, and disaster risks.

For a climate-vulnerable and resource-dependent country like India, remote sensing is not merely a technological advancement. It is a foundational pillar of sustainable development, environmental protection, and long-term economic planning, enabling the country to balance growth with ecological resilience.

GS Paper II: Current Affairs

2. Aviation Safety in India: Credibility Deficit and the Need for Systemic Reform

a. Introduction

Civil aviation is among the most safety-critical components of modern infrastructure. Unlike many other sectors, even a single accident has consequences that extend beyond immediate loss of life to include public confidence, international credibility, and the legitimacy of regulatory institutions. As a signatory to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), India is bound by globally accepted norms governing accident prevention, investigation, and safety oversight.

In recent years, however, India's aviation safety framework has come under sustained scrutiny. Concerns regarding weak accident investigation standards, limited transparency, regulatory dilution, and poor institutional learning have together produced a visible credibility deficit. This deficit is not merely reputational; it poses a direct risk to passenger safety and undermines India's standing within the global aviation ecosystem.

b. Global Aviation Safety Framework: The ICAO Perspective

Aviation safety under ICAO rests on the principle that safety is collective and indivisible.

i. Core ICAO Principles (Annex 13)

- Institutional independence of accident investigation
- Preservation of evidence and crash-site integrity
- Fact-based, transparent reporting
- International cooperation and information sharing

ii. Governance Logic

- Accident investigation is not about blame, but about identifying systemic failures
- Safety oversight is both a national responsibility and an international obligation

This framework treats aviation safety as a global public good, where failures in one country can affect international air travel as a whole.

c. Institutional Architecture of Aviation Safety in India

India's aviation safety ecosystem involves multiple institutions with distinct roles.

i. Key Institutions

- Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) – safety regulation and compliance
- Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) – accident investigation
- Ministry of Civil Aviation – policy direction
- ICAO – global standard-setting

ii. Structural Gaps

- Limited indigenous capacity in accident forensics and flight data analysis
- Weak expertise in human factors investigation
- Dependence on foreign agencies (e.g., NTSB-USA, AAIB-UK) for serious crashes

This dependence raises concerns about institutional maturity, self-reliance, and credibility.

d. Structural Weaknesses in India's Aviation Safety Framework

i. Credibility of Accident Investigations

- Delayed securing of crash sites
- Risk of evidence contamination
- Long delays in final investigation reports
- Absence of clear, actionable conclusions

Such deficiencies reduce public trust and weaken the learning value of investigations.

ii. Transparency Deficit

- Delayed or vague preliminary disclosures
- Poor communication with the public
- Space created for speculation and misinformation

Global best practice emphasises early release of verified factual information, even while investigations continue. India's failure to do so erodes both domestic and international confidence.

iii. Regulatory Capture and Dilution

- Safety norms diluted under operational or commercial pressure

- Repeated extensions and exemptions granted by the regulator
- Questions over DGCA's functional independence

From a governance perspective, this reflects regulatory capture, where oversight institutions become vulnerable to political or industry influence.

iv. Failure of Institutional Learning

Repeated accidents reveal systemic learning failure, not isolated lapses.

- Mangalore (2010)
- Kozhikode (2020)
- Ahmedabad (2025)

Common patterns include:

- Known infrastructure hazards left unaddressed
- Safety recommendations implemented slowly or partially
- Deadlines repeatedly extended

The recurrence of similar failures indicates weak feedback and accountability mechanisms.

e. Aviation Safety as a Disaster Management Concern

Aircraft accidents are low-probability but high-impact disasters.

i. Disaster Management Dimensions

- Crash-site management
- Rescue and fire-fighting preparedness
- Inter-agency coordination

ii. Observed Gaps

- Weak coordination during emergencies
- Inadequate preparedness at certain airports
- Premature resumption of operations complicating investigations

These gaps show insufficient integration between aviation safety systems and disaster management planning.

f. Lessons from International Best Practices

i. Functional Separation

United States model:

- FAA → regulation
- NTSB → independent investigation

ii. Key Features

- Immediate factual briefings
- Swift precautionary actions (e.g., temporary grounding)
- Evidence-based, politically insulated reporting

Transparency strengthens trust, rather than undermining it—an insight central to global aviation safety culture.

g. Implications of the Credibility Deficit

A sustained credibility deficit has wide-ranging consequences.

i. Systemic Impacts

- Erosion of public confidence in air travel
- Strained relations with ICAO and foreign regulators
- Reduced international cooperation

ii. Broader Economic and Strategic Costs

- Reputational damage affecting tourism and investment
- Weakening of India's global image
- Higher scrutiny on Indian aviation operations abroad

In aviation, credibility is as vital as technology or infrastructure.

h. Way Forward: Towards Systemic Reform

Restoring trust requires deep and sustained institutional reform.

i. Strengthening Institutions

- Make accident investigation genuinely autonomous
- Insulate the regulator from political and commercial pressure

ii. Building Indigenous Capacity

- Advanced training in flight data analysis
- Expertise in human factors and systems engineering
- Reduced dependence on foreign agencies

iii. Embedding Transparency

- Timely release of verified factual information
- Open collaboration with international agencies

iv. Safety-First Regulatory Culture

- Zero tolerance for violations
- Strict enforcement of compliance timelines
- Regular safety audits of airports and airlines

Growth in aviation must never be prioritised over safety.

Conclusion

India's civil aviation sector has expanded rapidly, but its safety governance has not kept pace. The credibility deficit visible today reflects deeper institutional weaknesses in regulation, investigation, transparency, and accountability. In a sector where one accident is one too many, aviation safety must be treated as a non-negotiable public good, not a political or commercial variable.

Restoring trust requires independent institutions, adoption of global best practices, and an uncompromising commitment to safety. Only then can India ensure that its aviation growth is not only rapid, but also safe, credible, and globally respected.

GS Paper II: Current Affairs

3. The SHANTI Bill and India's Nuclear Sector: Changes, Implications, and Debate

a. Introduction

Nuclear energy occupies a strategic position in India's development trajectory. It provides clean, reliable, and continuous baseload power, while reducing dependence on imported fossil fuels. Since Independence, India's nuclear sector has remained largely under State control, shaped by concerns of national security, safety, and long-term environmental responsibility.

The Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy in India Bill (SHANTI Bill) marks a significant departure from this tradition. By opening the civilian nuclear power sector to private and foreign participation, while retaining majority government control, the Bill introduces a new governance framework. This shift has generated intense debate around safety, liability, accountability, and the balance between public interest and market participation.

b. India's Nuclear Programme: Institutional and Strategic Background

India's nuclear programme has been State-led since the 1950s, governed primarily by the Atomic Energy Act, 1962 and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010.

i. Institutional Structure

- Nuclear power generation has been the exclusive domain of the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL).
- The Atomic Energy Commission and Department of Atomic Energy provided policy and strategic direction.

ii. Scale and Strategic Vision

- India currently operates 25 nuclear reactors across 7 nuclear power stations.
- The long-term roadmap is anchored in the three-stage nuclear programme, aimed at exploiting India's abundant thorium reserves.

This model ensured technological self-reliance, with indigenous capability in reactor design, fuel fabrication, and reprocessing.

c. The SHANTI Bill: Scope and Objectives

The SHANTI Bill represents a comprehensive restructuring of India's civilian nuclear energy sector.

i. Stated Objectives

- Strengthening long-term energy security
- Ensuring round-the-clock baseload electricity
- Supporting India's clean energy transition and Net Zero target for 2070
- Facilitating deployment of advanced technologies, including Small Modular Reactors (SMRs)

ii. Reform Philosophy

Rather than outright privatisation, the Bill adopts a regulated partnership model, combining:

- State oversight and strategic control

- Private capital and operational efficiency
- Selective technological collaboration

This sets the stage for a controlled opening of a traditionally closed strategic sector.

d. Opening of the Nuclear Sector under SHANTI

A central reform under the Bill is the ending of NPCIL's monopoly in civilian nuclear power.

i. Nature of Private and Foreign Participation

- Private participation permitted up to 49%, with the government retaining at least 51% control.
- Sensitive activities—fuel production, enrichment, reprocessing, and waste management—remain under State control.

ii. Scope of Participation

- Indian private firms may build, own, and operate nuclear plants, subject to licensing.
- Participation allowed in equipment manufacturing, fuel fabrication, and R&D.
- Foreign companies may supply technology and equipment, but ownership and operational control remain regulated.

Thus, the sector transitions from a State monopoly to a State-led, tightly regulated partnership framework.

e. Strengthening Regulation: Role of the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board

Opening the sector necessitates stronger oversight.

i. Statutory Empowerment

- The Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) is granted statutory status.
- It becomes directly answerable to Parliament, rather than functioning solely through executive authority.

ii. Regulatory Functions

- Licensing of nuclear facilities
- Enforcement of radiation protection standards
- Oversight of emergency preparedness
- Periodic safety inspections and quality assurance

This reform seeks to enhance regulatory credibility and independence in a more complex nuclear ecosystem.

f. Changes in the Nuclear Liability Framework

The most controversial dimension of the SHANTI Bill relates to nuclear liability.

i. Earlier Liability Regime

- Operators could seek recourse against suppliers for defective equipment or negligence.
- This upheld accountability but discouraged foreign suppliers.

ii. New Liability Structure

- Supplier liability is removed.
- Operator liability is capped, with different ceilings for large reactors, medium plants, and SMRs.

- Liability beyond the cap is borne by the Union Government or a dedicated Nuclear Liability Fund.
- Financial penalties for violations are also capped.

iii. Government Rationale

The government argues that a predictable and limited liability regime is essential to:

- Attract investment
- Reduce risk uncertainty
- Enable access to advanced nuclear technologies

g. Continuity of Indigenous Capability

Despite liberalisation, the Bill does not dismantle India's technological autonomy.

Indigenous Strengths

- Mastery of Pressurised Heavy Water Reactor (PHWR) technology
- Indigenous fuel fabrication and reprocessing
- Operationalisation of fast breeder reactor technology
- Continued research on thorium-based reactors

Foreign collaboration is projected as complementary, not a substitute for domestic capability.

h. Concerns Raised by the Opposition

The SHANTI Bill has faced sustained criticism on multiple fronts.

i. Safety and Liability Concerns

- Removal of supplier liability dilutes the polluter pays principle.
- Accident risks are shifted to the State and society.
- Liability caps are seen as inadequate in light of disasters such as Chernobyl and Fukushima.

ii. Governance and Transparency Issues

- Certain provisions restrict disclosure of nuclear information.
- Potential dilution of the Right to Information framework.

iii. Labour and Institutional Concerns

- Exclusion of nuclear workers from general labour safety laws.
- Questions over the necessity of foreign participation despite strong indigenous expertise.

These critiques highlight fears of privatised profits and socialised risks.

i. Government's Justification

The government defends the Bill on strategic and developmental grounds.

Key Arguments

- Nuclear power is essential for clean, reliable energy expansion.
- Reduced reliance on coal supports climate commitments.
- Strong regulation, not supplier liability, is the primary safety guarantee.
- Reforms enhance India's credibility in global nuclear cooperation.

Conclusion

The SHANTI Bill represents a profound shift in India's nuclear governance, attempting to reconcile energy security and clean growth with market participation and technological collaboration. While it promises faster capacity expansion, it also raises fundamental questions about safety, liability, transparency, and public accountability.

Ultimately, the success of the SHANTI framework will depend not merely on legislative intent, but on the strength and independence of regulatory institutions, robust oversight, and an uncompromising safety culture. Only under these conditions can nuclear energy advance India's development goals without eroding public trust or environmental responsibility.

Reader's Note — About This Current Affairs Compilation

Dear Aspirant,

This document is part of the PrepAlpine Current Affairs Series — designed to bring clarity, structure, and precision to your daily UPSC learning.

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

1. Orientation & Purpose

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.

If you prefer a specific style (lists → paras, paras → tables, etc.), feel free to convert using any free LLM.

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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  Weekly "Open Mic" sharing sessions where learners discuss strategies, mistakes, breakthroughs, and lessons from their UPSC journey.

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"From Isolation to Interaction — Learn the UPSC Way, the Smart Way."

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Our content team regularly reviews inputs and includes relevant suggestions in upcoming Monthly Current Affairs Modules.

Beyond daily updates, the PrepAlpine Discord functions as a complete UPSC learning ecosystem — offering free peer mentorship, structured discussions, practice threads, AI-powered micro-learning tools, and a community of serious aspirants working together.

Together, these resources embody the PrepAlpine vision:

Better Content. Smarter Mentorship. Intelligent Preparation.