

The First Step – Mental strength

If you have decided to be an IAS officer, let me welcome you to our country's largest, and quite difficult, competition. I give you my blessings and pray to God that he provides you with the patience, confidence and enthusiasm that should last you a long time, because these things are very important for what you have set out to achieve.

Still, before I tell you how to become an IAS allow me to ask you a very important question. The reason I'm asking you this question is that in my long experience of guiding civil service aspirants, I have found that most of the young men get so excited that they enter the competition without giving it a careful thought, and after few years of repeated failures they leave tired and exhausted. This is why I feel that every participant who wants to enter this race should ask himself the question that I'm going to ask you.

I'm not going to ask you 'Why do you want to become an IAS officer?' My ears have lost patience listening to the same old, clichéd answers. In any case, whether you want to be an IAS for power, for social status or for the prestige and a car with a red beacon on top, it has nothing to do with your preparation. Take any job that you want to do; it would have something that attracts you towards it. That is why you would want to do the job in the first place, unless doing it is some kind of an obligation.

IAS is different than other jobs in the sense that it has multiple attractions. It has so many attractions that I do not think it is wrong that majority of the students in the country want to pursue it. But, yes, if you think of it in the context of our country, a doctor or an engineer opting for IAS is damaging to our nation. The country could not benefit from the resources that were spent on producing that particular doctor or engineer. Anybody can become an IAS but not everybody can become a doctor or an engineer. However, as long as UPSC (the body that conducts IAS examinations) has allowed it, even the doctors and engineers are welcome in this competition. Let me now come back to the question I wanted to ask you. Answer me with all sincerity and think carefully before you reply. What did you see in yourself that made you think that you can be an IAS officer? This is the small question I want to ask.

Before you read the article further, you need to find your answer. Another person's answer will not do for you. To walk ahead in the path of becoming an IAS you need your own answer. When I put up this question to students who seek my guidance over phone or in person, at first, they simply do not understand the question. Actually they get dumbstruck after hearing this question because nobody has ever asked them such a weird thing. Until now, all they have heard is that they can do anything they want.

Anyone can do anything is an ideal thing to say, but it can sometimes be misleading. I do not believe that anyone can do anything. What I do believe is that there is nobody who can do nothing. Everyone has the capability to do something or the other, but no one can do everything. I asked you this question so it is settled in the beginning only that you are not in some such illusion. Here are some answers to my question that were given immediately and others that were given after a careful thought.

- I have always stood first in my class, so I think I can do this.
- I can do this because I can work hard.
- People tell me that I have a strong memory, I can be an IAS.

- I have to do this because my parents want me to do so, and I can't disappoint them, so I have to do this, no matter what.
- I can learn everything by rote, even math.
- I have vowed that I'm going to do this.

Friends, these are the answers that keep repeating themselves in different words. It is with regret that I'm telling you that none of them can satisfy me and I have to tell my young fellows, "Go and think about your goals once more." This is because none of the above mentioned reasons will make you an IAS and the lack of any of them is not going to keep you from becoming one.

Do not get bothered by my comment. In a short while, you will know what exactly is required of you to become an IAS. Now, I'm going to present you with some real-life examples so before you embark on your journey - and in case you have already started your journey, before you end it - you can evaluate yourself accurately to see what kind of pedestrian are you to walk the path of I.A.S. This evaluation will help you clear your mind and make you firm by presenting you with the truth. Ultimately, this will benefit you.

A young boy once came to me. He was smart, enthusiastic and had a decent academic record. He had come to ask me how he could become an IAS. While I was giving him some tips on how to prepare for IAS, he was constantly repeating, "Sir, I will do whatever I have to do for this. I can get myself beheaded but I have to do this."

I asked him to come to me after a month. When he came after a month, his first question to me was, "Sir, I have heard that IAS officers do not get paid very much?" "Yes, you have heard correctly," I told him. He asked me another question, "Sir, I have also heard that they get transferred quite frequently because of which their kids may face some difficulty in studies." This was also true. He was hesitant to ask me the third question, "Sir is it true that MPs and MLAs can scold collectors and walk away?" I told him that this does not happen every time but I could not say that it never happens.

Now you should hear the final answer of this IAS aspirant who was so passionate about being an officer that he was ready to be beheaded for it. "Sir, I'm thinking that if even after becoming an IAS there are so many difficulties, what is the point of becoming one?" he said. I respected his decision and got rid of him because it was impossible to make him an IAS officer.

I knew a girl who was in her final year of MBBS. She claimed that she would not only qualify in her first attempt but also bag a place within the top ten. I could have doused her fire, but what was the point. Unfortunately, after three failed attempts, she decided not to give the last one. The worst part is that she could not even qualify the preliminary examinations.

A boy had passed all his examinations until his bachelor's degree with compartment. Still, he thought he could become an IAS because he had heard that anybody could do this. It is funny that he not only believed what he heard but also took that path. Thankfully, he wasted only two years of his life to realise the truth and change his direction.

Students do not know language and whatever they do know is not totally correct. They are graduates but they do not have knowledge about any subject. In fact they do not even know the syllabus of IAS exams and yet they decide that they will become an IAS. The saddest part about this is that they waste precious three to four years of their lives in this delusion.

I have guided so many people in becoming an IAS officer, but it does not matter how many of them were deserving of it. What matters is how many of them worked to make themselves worthy of it. I believe nobody is deserving of anything, you have to work to make yourself worthy of something. What harms the first-class performers is that they make the mistake of thinking themselves worthy of the job. While sometimes the second and third division holders succeed because they know ‘I’m not worthy of it, and I have to become so.’”

I can tell you how what percentage of people made themselves worthy of achieving their goal. My answer is only going to disappoint you because it is less than even a percent. It is maximum half a percent which means one person out of 200 students. But the success of this one individual is guaranteed.

I know you may not believe my statistics and even assume that I’m merely saying it to support my stand, because even the rate of success is around these figures. But you should believe me. For example, I believe that the biggest challenge in the IAS exam is to write an accurate answer.

After I taught boys and girls how to understand a question and write the correct answer, I told them to write the answers for me, and also stressed upon its importance when they did not do so. I did this so I could evaluate their answers and guide them properly. Would you believe that the success percentage here was even less than half a percent?

The students would not bother to write the answers. They knew that their answers were lacking yet they believed that they would be able to do well in the exam. I don’t think they even know what led them to this conclusion, but they chose not to practice and lost the chance to learn from their follies.

I ask my students to listen to the news on radio daily. But the maximum that they have followed my instructions is for one and a half month. They have some excuse up their sleeve to avoid listening to the news. It is the same case when it comes to reading newspapers.

I tell them that devoting 45 minutes daily to news would suffice. They could read the important news and then analyse it from different angles. But they are one step ahead of me. They spend more than two hours on newspapers and when I ask them what they have read they have nothing substantial to tell. This is because they read bits of all news items rather than focusing on one important item. As a result, they end up reading nothing.

Overall, they ask how they should prepare and they are told how to go about it. They listen; they like it and even get impressed. But they still end up doing what they have always been doing. Even if they take my advice for some time, they return to their old ways after a while. This is not the case with just one or two people. In fact there are hardly one or two people with whom this may not be the case. Now what can you do with such people?

I have observed this, and quite rightly so, that preparing for IAS nowadays is not so much a career option as it is a fashionable lifestyle choice – and a respected one at that.

When someone asks – “What are you doing these days?” A person takes great pride in replying that he is preparing for IAS. This is the case even though most people are just whiling away their time under the pretext of studying for IAS; they don’t even know how they should be preparing in the first place. Even if these people are told how to do it, they will listen to everyone but do what they wish in the end.

Friends, I believe you will now be thinking ‘What is it in me that I can become an IAS? ‘Search inside yourself, and find out whether you will be able to adapt yourself to the needs and demands of IAS preparation.

You are what you are. It is possible that your mettle is even stronger than what is required for IAS. But you must know that there is no use for a sword where a needle is required. You have to acclimatize yourself according to what is needed to be an IAS.

And how do you achieve this goal? It is possible with mental strength, determination and a strong will. It is easy for many to resolve that they would do something but very few have the ability to stick to it. I believe that the one who vows to do something and follows it through can achieve anything – even if he is a third-division holder.

If you approach IAS preparation without mental strength, it will either remain just a dream or a very difficult feat - if not an impossible one. Without mental strength, your mind will start seeding excuses and you will end up putting off all the work that you must do.

For instance, a girl asked me “Sir, where do you give your classes?” After I answered her she told me that she would not be able to join. Do you know why she said this? It was not because the classes were expensive or she didn’t have enough time or even because she didn’t need them. The reason was that her house was three kilometres away from where the classes were held. Now what would you call this?

I used to hold three-day workshops in New Delhi on a monthly basis. I would guide young minds on how they should prepare for IAS. Students from around the country would come to attend it. Some would even call and ask when my next class would be. Even though I knew my next class would be the following month, I would tell them ‘I don’t know’. I knew that even next month, they will ask me again, “Sir when will your next class be?” There is no end to these questions.

Now you need to identify what is making you talk like the girl who was making excuses or like the boys who keep asking such questions. You need to identify the culprit behind all this. Otherwise you will think that you are doing everything that should be done. But instead you are just doing what you want to do.

There is a huge difference between ‘what should happen’ and ‘what I wish should happen’ and it is this difference that is the deciding factor between your win and defeat. The IAS exam doesn’t care about what you want; it only cares about what it wants.

So there is not just a gap between what you want and what the UPSC wants, but there is also a clash. You can only bridge this gap and end this clash through mental strength. I do not see any other way. Once you acquire mental strength, you will feel some changes inside you that will make you feel as if you are closer to your goal. What really happens is that the principle of ‘The Secret’ starts working and you will feel that your environment is favourable to you. Author Paulo Coelho mentions this in his novel ‘The Alchemist’ when he writes, “When you want something, the entire universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.”

Otherwise usually you get frustrated and feel that the whole world is against you and nothing is moving in the right direction.

To be continued...

NOTE: This article was first published in 'Civil Services Chronicle'.