

The miracle of mental strength

The first article of this series that was published last month in ‘Civil Services Chronicle’ generated a great response from the readers; this made me even more confident that my approach is correct. Believe me you have to start out with mental strength, while most people start out with books. It is not easy to change this viewpoint. But this column will be a complete civil services preparation guide to you.

I received a lot of calls, and 95 per cent of students asked me how they should start their preparation. I find it unfortunate that even after appreciating my article so much not a single student asked me, “Sir is there a way to achieve mental strength?” It is one thing to like something, but to believe it is another, and to believe something and follow it is a different thing altogether. Now you think what stage has reading my article landed you in. Let me give you an example. I got a call from a student. “Sir I have read your advertisement in the Chronicle,” he said. I stopped him before he could say anything further, “But I have not given any advertisement in the Chronicle.” “No sir you have given a statement. I just read it.” “I have not given any statement, either.

There must be a misunderstanding.” “Sir I’m speaking to Mr Vijay Agrawal, right?” “Yes.” “Sir I have read a two-page statement by you in chronicle. I still have it right in front of my eyes.” “Oh, so you are talking about that article. But it was three pages long,” I had realised the bent of mind of that student within minutes of our conversation. “That is what I meant sir,” he said. That was the end of our conversation. With most students, their manner of studying and explaining is such that they have to end their sentences with “This is what I meant.” But the mentality of “this is what I meant” or “this is what I mean” won’t work if you want to be an IAS. The country’s top administration demands a mind which understands exactly what it sees, and explains precisely what it understood. You cannot see the reflection of a face in when the flow of water is erratic. To view the reflection, the water must be still. This is what a strong mind does, and it works like a miracle. This is the miracle of psychology. So let me tell you what will happen to you once you have decided to do something and you are determined about it, especially if you have decided to prepare for IAS (not decided to become one).

1) The most important thing that will happen is that your mind will stop making excuses. The only thing that will remain in your mind is the determination – “I have to do this.” IAS preparation will top your priority list and become the first thing in your schedule as oppose to something you put off at the mercy of time. IAS preparation is not something that you can do part-time or in your extra time. If you think so, it is better you stop wasting your time.

2) Within few days of IAS preparation, students start complaining about boredom, exhaustion and feeling drowsy when they sit down to study. They, perhaps, actually experience these symptoms and they may not be mere excuses. If you are mentally weak and IAS preparation is some sort of fashion statement, then these things are bound to happen. When these complaints cease to exist, you can be assured that you are mentally fit to prepare for the exam. You would still get tired even if you are mentally strong but it would be only for two reasons. Either you have studied too much, or you could not study for some reason or the other and are feeling guilty about it.

3) The speed at which you understand and memorise your subject will gradually improve. There is scientific evidence for it. Your determination and mental strength will also lead you to take more interest in your studies. Comparatively, we are better able to learn and understand the things that interest us. Also, things that we understand, we remember them for a long time. This is the reason you remember the plot of your favourite movie and can recall it for longer.

4) You achieve stability because the mental strength inside you switches on and activates all four channels of your energy. You will find yourself physically fit and happy at a mental level. Your mind gets flooded by positive thoughts and they continually boost your confidence. You get emotionally involved with your goal, so much so that your emotional energy keeps inspiring you to do something. When you get the combined support from all the three energies, they form a fourth energy which I would like to call intellectual energy. This generates a nice feeling inside you and makes you feel light. It even creates such situations and coincidences that will take you closer to your goal. Do not doubt this. You will experience it yourself at a later stage.

5) Undoubtedly, becoming an IAS is no child's play. The exam is difficult and there is always a doubt of not clearing it. This is not happening only with you, it happens with everyone out there. To your face, people will tell you, "Work hard, you will make the cut." But behind your back, they will say, "Now that he is in deep waters, he will realise what it really takes to be an IAS".

You are surrounded by such invisible negative energies. This negative energy will hurt your being and you may fall into depression. You may also feel shattered under the pressure. But mental strength has the power to turn the negative energy into a challenge and this ultimately becomes your power. The power that fights the challenge has to be even stronger than its opponent. This will happen with you as well.

I want to tell you that you would require mental strength not just in IAS but in every sphere of life. It is most important, essential almost, when the goal is important and difficult - and the ambition of IAS is an important and difficult goal.

Keep in mind that the mental strength I'm talking about does not mean a passionate decision taken in a moment that "I want to be an IAS." Most people take such passionate decisions that fizzle out with time. This is a tide that settles down after a while. You can't do anything just by saying it. You have to calmly think about it. Once you have decided something, then you have to stay firm on that decision and work to achieve your goals.

I have often heard people say that they took the wrong decision. Decisions are not wrong; it is just that the steps taken to fulfil them are not the correct ones. If you do not have the strength to know the correct process (it will be told a little later) and follow it, it is better you refrain from taking such decisions.

If you never take a decision to take the IAS exam, no one is going to point at you and say, "Oh look, what kind of a person he is, he never sat in the IAS exam." But if you decide to give the exam and are unable to prepare accordingly, obviously you will fail. Then people might smugly proclaim, "Oh yeah, serves him right, what was he thinking, trying to become an IAS." This is why I believe you have to think very carefully before you take this decision or else you can stay happy in your present situation. Only a well-thought decision can give you mental strength.

So now the question arises - how to take the right decision? I would like to discuss some things regarding this with you. These are based on my observation, experience and analysis.

1) **Inner need**

You need to scrutinise very carefully if becoming an IAS is just a show-off to you or it is an inner requirement. If it is your inner need then you will enjoy everything associated with it, even things that most people dislike. You die every minute because you want to achieve it and life would be incomplete if you do not. You would be ready to do anything to accomplish it. Isn't it?

2) **Interest in academics**

You need to be a graduate to be eligible to sit in the IAS exam. So before you start preparing for IAS, you have already been studying for 14 years. You have the wealth of this experience. You know whether you enjoy studying or not. If you find studies a burden, then IAS is not for you. You should enjoy studying at least till you are preparing for IAS.

When I say you need to enjoy studying, I do not mean that you should study for 14-15 hours every day for three to four years. All I'm asking you is whether you enjoy studying or not. You can spend the rest of your life without so much as glancing at a book, but you need to be in love with them at this stage. You should enjoy studying because this is what you have to mostly do for IAS. The ladder to IAS includes studying and writing down what you have studied.

It is not at all necessary for you to study endlessly. This is useless advice and people who say so just want to create panic in the minds of students. If a student studies with full concentration and sincerity for five hours a day, I believe it would suffice. But this bit of studying should be with complete interest, not as fulfilling an obligation. If you wish to know the correct way to study you can read my book 'The Art of studying.'

3) **Stability**

You must have heard the tale about the hare and the tortoise. The crawling tortoise defeats the hare in a race. The tortoise's win underlies the importance of stability in our lives. The tortoise won the race because he never stopped running, even if the pace was slow.

In IAS preparation too, stability is essential. The nature of the preparation and the subject is such that without stability not much would be achieved. The strategy you employed during your university exams will not work here. You can't study two months before the exam and get first division.

For example, general knowledge plays a crucial role in IAS exam. It is in the syllabus in the preliminary examinations and the mains. It is even asked in the interview. You can't prepare for this without reading the newspaper and magazines to keep up to date. It is obvious, then, that you need to take out time for this daily reading. You need to do it anyhow. UPSC does not care for your excuses.

You can only answer the questions you are asked in the mains perfectly if you have in-depth knowledge of your subjects. For this knowledge you can't just memorise your lessons, your brain needs to digest them. This is possible only when you study daily and also analyse the topics.

Also, the race for IAS is not a 100m race, it is a marathon. A sprint racer would tire out very easily. The race has to be completed with a medium pace the win depends on the principle of stability.

4) **Mental capability**

This competition is primarily mental. The country's best minds will compete and register their wins depending on their abilities. So obviously your aptitude has to match a certain standard. Even if you do not possess it, you need the strength to be determined to boost your capacities and work hard. What will you achieve if you do not understand this and act like the man who went to Delhi and stayed there preparing for IAS for five years, even after I advised him not to do so. His poor younger brother sold fruit juice to send him money. God took four years to show mercy and finally he returned home.

So what do I mean by mental capacity? It is this –

- a) You should have the ability to understand your subjects.
- b) After you have understood a topic, you can discuss it with others and even teach it to them if need be.
- c) You can put forward an opinion on a subject.
- d) Your memory may be nothing to boast about, but it should not even be extremely ordinary. You should be able to remember facts for some time and should be able to quickly recall them when repeated.
- e) Your grasp on language should also be decent. You should be able to speak and write well. To achieve fluency, you should start practising.

5) Outside support

Since the process of becoming an IAS is a time-taking one, I believe you should have some outside support. Girls especially need this support because they have to adjust according to the wishes of their parents and also the parents get worried about marriage as women age.

A good thing here is that outside support does not mean in terms of money whereas if you do a professional course, you would need money. Thank God that currently there is no professional course required for IAS. All you need is a little money for books and hundred bucks for monthly newspaper and magazine. As far as coaching is concerned, it is not something that UPSC has asked or deemed necessary. It is totally up to you whether you need it or not.

However, it is necessary that you know how to prepare. You should also know how to study and how to write correct answers.

Even though outside support is not vital, they still directly or indirectly boost our abilities to help us succeed. The outside support can come from following sources :

- a) Your family can help and support you. It takes away mental stress and you can prepare with patience. They also support you financially.
- b) If you are working, you can benefit from the support of your employer.
- c) You can benefit from the experiences of your college professors and those who have cleared the civil services. The SP and collector in every district are taken from civil services, you can seek their help. In state capitals, officers are appointed in various sectors, you can meet them. Believe me; most of the officers would love to help you out.
- d) The support of your friends can help you discuss topics with them and it will also encourage you.

If you feel you can satisfy all these conditions or if you do not fulfil the requirements but believe you could adapt to them in the future, let me welcome you once again in this competition called IAS.

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