

## ***The truth about some important beliefs***

**Continued...**

Since IAS is the top-most exam of the country, many students studying all sorts of subjects take the examination in large numbers. This is one reason a lot of exaggerated theories about IAS preparation are floating around. These overstated things seem true given the stature of the exam. People tend to think that because it is such an important exam, these things must be true. Let us separate myths from facts so you can develop the right strategy to prepare for the exam.

**A) Chances of selection are few :** If you see the available data, then you are 100 percent correct in assuming that the odds of being selected are few. On average, almost 4 lakh students fill the form while the advertised posts on average are somewhere around 800 to 1000. If you calculate the ratio of those who sit for the exam to those who get selected, it would indeed be frightening. So it is better we do not do it here.

The statistics are true but the truth is not what we have come to accept. So let us learn the actual truth so you can be free from needless fears. Let's assume that for 900 vacancies, 4 lakh candidates have applied for the preliminary exam. These many students saw the advertisement and felt they should take the exam. But it is not just about applying; it is also about taking the exam. We should not be concerned with how many have applied, but with how many actually sat for the exam.

You will be glad to hear that every year 45 to 50 per cent of applicants do not actually take the exam. I believe these people are intelligent because there is no point in taking the examination without preparation. So the truth behind the figure of 4 lakh comes down to around 2.15 lakh. Now let us take a deeper look at this figure too.

- 1) Out of this new figure of 2.15 lakh, half of the students are not at all prepared and just take the exam because it is convenient for them. These are 'on-the-fence' students. They keep wondering whether they should take the exam and end up sitting for it. You should not consider them your competition.
- 2) For those belonging to SC/ST there is no restriction on number of attempts, while the attempts are limited to 7 for OBCs. So some students can take the preliminary exam and not worry about wasting their attempts.
- 3) Some students prepare and take the examination. However, their preparation is not intensive. They consider hard work as preparation enough and thus fall behind.
- 4) Some students sit just for the experience. I find it surprising that they want to experience the exam without having undergone any preparation.

Friends, believe me, the crowd you see during preliminary examination is not the genuine crowd. This horde is just for show, it includes few people who have prepared and the numbers for those who did prepare correctly are even lower.

The odds of an individual's selection are 1 in 7. Around 13 percent extra of the total advertised posts are declared successful in the preliminary exams. Now you can see the numbers fall from 4 lakh students to only 80,000 to 90,000 students. This is the actual figure.

The real deal about the mains is also quite different. Around 25 to 30 percent students are those who start preparing for the mains after qualifying the preliminary exams. You can remove them from the competition. Also remove 10 percent of those students who can't focus on their preparation for some reason or the other, such as lack of time. But they still sit for mains because they qualified. Around 15 to 20 percent are students who clear the mains but their marks are so little that they never make it to the list.

Similarly, in the mains, which I consider the real exam; half the students belong to the category which I would shy away from labelling as valid competitors. I consider them players that give a walkover in the field.

Whether you believe it or not, the odds of success in the mains are 1 in every 4 students. I do agree, though, that it is not easy to prove that you are better than the rest because they are all bright. This is not a cricket match between India and Kenya or Bangladesh. This is India playing against Australia and South Africa, where unless you are an excellent performer, you won't last.

In the interview, the chances of success are one in every two and a half students. If you reach the interview stage, you have already won 40 percent success. But the problem is that there is no such thing as 40 percent success. Success is either 100 percent or it is not there at all. So I want to free your mind of this terror of the masses, this wrong belief. Indeed, there is a lot of crowd, but it is not genuine and won't stand a chance against you if you are fully prepared.

**B) It is a very tough exam :** There are many aspects to why the exam can be classified as a hard nut to crack. One reason the exam is classified as difficult is because of the competition but I have already told you the truth about it. Other reasons cited are that the syllabus is vast and the difficulty level of the questions is high. Let us examine them in detail.

First let us discuss the syllabus. The minimum requirement for IAS is graduation. So if you opt for the subject you have studied in graduation, it means you must have studied that much already. The syllabus includes a little more than what you have studied in graduation and less than what you have studied in post graduation. Its level is at par with that of Honours.

In any case, by the time you complete your graduation, you are not yet 21, which is the minimum age to sit for the exam, so most people do a post graduation. Even if you are not doing a post graduation, you still have a year or so to be 21. According to the maturity that you will gain in the year that you have left, should not the syllabus be a little more? This is how it should be and this is how it is.

You may feel that the syllabus is too much in the following cases –

- 1) You chose subjects that are new to you, i.e. you opted for subjects that you neither studied in your graduation nor in your post graduation.
- 2) You chose the subject of your graduation but you have passed exams by cramming at the last minute so you have forgotten everything by now.

- 3) You cannot develop an interest towards the subject.
- 4) You compare IAS to state civil services, or
- 5) You do not view the syllabus as a whole but instead you see it as paper 1 and paper 2.

The syllabus is not that huge. Also, if you have decided to enter the top-most service in the country, the prestige of the service has to be protected. It is only possible when the syllabus is according to it.

Now let me address the gripe that the difficulty level of the exam is too high. I completely agree with the fact that the kind of questions asked in the exam and the kind of answers that are expected raise the difficulty level quite high. But, this is, both the beauty and the challenge of the exam.

The level of the exam is high and so is the status of the job. If this is reduced to the level of state civil services, then instead of 4 lakh, 40 lakh students will apply. However, the worst thing to happen will be that it will be difficult to spot more talented people. I have met so many people from the civil services and I cannot say that even one of them was not knowledgeable.

Whether the level of the exam is high or low, is also subjective. It could be that my own level is so low that I find the level of the exam too high. Otherwise there is nothing like this. For a student who is in the habit of studying and understanding his subject in depth, this exam will be like any other. If you also start doing this, you will feel that the exam is at your level.

Competitive exams do not work on the principle of pass or fail. They work on the principle of selection. The exam selects as many candidates as it needs from the top, their scores do not matter. The questions whether the paper was easy or difficult and whether the difficulty level was high or low do not matter here. This is so because if the paper is difficult, it is so for everybody, and if something affects everyone equally, then it also influences the results in a similar manner.

If the paper is difficult then selection is based on fewer marks but if the paper is easy the cut-off will go high.

**C) The exam demands too much hard work :** If you fear hard work, then this exam is not for you. However, it does not mean that the exam demands so much of hard work that you would soon be wearing spectacles and would not even have time to shave. You must have read terrifying accounts in interviews of successful students in which they claim, "I studied 15 hours a day, for four years." Somewhere, I read this narration of a girl, "I did not even step down from the first floor in three years of my preparation". These are ridiculous statements and even if they are true, then I pity the girl's intelligence, her ability and her method of preparation. I'm wondering how foolish that girl must be. What really worries me though is what these bookworms would do in the services. They would be a better fit in the university.

These are people who want to create a larger-than-life image of themselves. To glamorise themselves they come up with these half-truths. They may have studied for 15 hours at a stretch for two or three days, but they talk as if it applies to the entire duration of their studies. Beware of falling into their trap.

The truth is that you should devote at least 5 to 6 hours to studies. This amount of time should suffice. The mind can also only grasp things up to a limit at a given time. Clothes that are already wet will not soak anymore water in the tub.

You need 5 to 6 hours every day for the initial year of your study because this is just the beginning. Once the preparation is complete you can limit your studies to 4-5 hours and eventually only 3-4. Now, if you believe that even this is hard work, then only God can save you.

I wish to tell you one more thing here. People who say IAS requires extreme work are those who study many writers, almost all available ones, for a particular topic. These people study 4 to 5 newspapers a day, and they study everything in it. They try to read as many magazines as possible too. If this is the approach, and it is not a very feasible one, then doing all these things will take time.

Actually, there is no need to study this much. Doing something like this is not just unproductive, but also counter-productive – your brain assembles all sorts of useless information. This will make you lose focus. Instead of concentrating on important points, this overload will make you waste time on futile points. The rule that works in IAS preparation is that ‘read less, but whatever you read, read it completely and meticulously.’ Rather than knowing little of everything, it is better to know everything about something. The thing here is that you should know what this ‘something’ should be.

**D) Fluency in English :** It has been over 30 years since English language has been the medium of instruction in schools along with other languages. But even today students fear how they will crack the exam without proper knowledge of English language. They find the knowledge essential to get selected.

I can understand the psychology as I have been through something similar at the time when the Indian government had just taken this revolutionary step. I cleared the exam in 1983 and with 100 percent honesty I swear that lack of fluency in English language was never a hindrance to my success.

Today there are plenty of magazines in Hindi language. There are Hindi translations for all popular English language books. It was not like that during my time. Due to my lack of knowledge about English language, I could not read the books available in English, but I still managed quite well.

You have the statistics for UPSC; the figures will assure you that there is no need to worry. Every year, around 50 percent students choose Hindi and other Indian languages as their medium of instruction. Out of these non-English students, half are those who have opted for Hindi.

It is true that 50 per cent of the students will choose to give their exam in English. But this does not mean that students who speak other languages are not being selected. The reason more English-speaking students get selected is because the percentage of people choosing English as the medium of instruction is higher.

For example, almost all students from South India and North-East choose English as their language because the medium of instruction in their schools was English. The number of students who choose to give the IAS exam in South-Indian languages such as Tamil, Telugu and Kannada is very less. But those students who do take these languages are also successful. Students from metro cities and towns in North and West India also choose English as it is the medium of instruction for their studies.

Hindi is now the language of small towns, villages and government schools. But as far as UPSC is concerned, there is no discrimination on the basis of language. There is no need to doubt this.

But, you do need to know enough English to answer the eight questions asked in the C-SET paper. In any case, qualifying the General English paper was a must before as well.

**E) Lack of a first-class career :** This question is asked to me by almost every second-division holder and third-division holder who is now preparing for IAS. They believe that since during interviews a candidate's entire bio data is in front of the interviewers, their second and third division will have a negative effect and they will not be shortlisted.

Let me reason with you about this. If a first-division was important for UPSC then it would have been added in the eligibility requirement like it is if you are applying for lectureship. If this is not a requirement, it is because it is a well-thought decision. UPSC knows its job is to select those who can be good administrators. It knows that to be a good administrator, one does not need a first-class examinations record. Akbar was one of India's top-most administrators, and he was illiterate. When you are in front of board members for an interview, they are aware that you have reached this stage after qualifying the preliminary exams and the mains. There is no direct entry to reach where you are. You have proven that you deserve to be there. This is why your past does not matter, what matters is your present.

Similarly, if you are a first division holder, topper or doctorate, do not be in the illusion that you will get some additional benefit. This is not the case. What will matter is your performance there. So, instead of thinking about your past, focus on your present. UPSC is very generous about this.

**F) Family Background :** Just like lack of fluency in English language and inferiority complex about not holding a first division can create doubts in some candidates and dampen their enthusiasm, so can family background. Some young people worry 'I'm from a village. My father is a labourer, farmer. My family is illiterate, I'm not smart. My family income is too little. My family conditions may hamper my progress.'

To address these concerns, I would like to say the same thing I mentioned above. The job of UPSC is to select candidates that have the potential to be administrators and hand them over to the government. All the ministries and departments of the government have their own training institutes where they train the selected candidates. This training is to get rid of all the deficits an administrator should not have and to instil all the good qualities he should have. I do, however, admit that if you had had these doubts before 1980, I would not have had the nerve to discard them with so much certainty as I do now. In fact I don't even need to gather my courage because this is the truth. Family background may have played a role in older times but given the political scenario of the country, it is a thing of the past.

You will be pleasantly surprised to know that in the last 20-25 years the number of youth from rural backgrounds who have cleared IAS is rapidly increasing. If you do not believe me, you could visit UPSC's website to verify this.

**To be Continued...**

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