

Candidates should understand the nature of the exam

Vishnu and Shiva are both Hindu Gods. Lotus is a flower and so is jimson weed (datura). Now I want to ask you a simple but very important question underlying social behaviour. Can you offer weed while praying to Lord Vishnu because it is also a flower? Our ancestors have answered this with a simple idiom – ‘To each God

His own prayer.’ Weed can be offered to Lord Shiva but not to Lord Vishnu.

You can apply this to the context of exams and competitive exams. Even though they are both exams, they are not similar. If they were similar, then there would have been no need to use ‘competitive’ before exam. Before you start preparing for IAS, or any other competitive exam for that matter, you should understand the nature and character of the exam in depth.

This is like the time when you visit a new place and gather information about the weather there beforehand, so you can prepare accordingly. You need to pack clothes depending on the weather. If you plan a trip to the hill station of Mussorie, even in summers, you have to keep an umbrella with you. I feel sad when I see many enthusiastic young men preparing for IAS continuously for years. In fact, an area called Mukherjee Nagar in New Delhi is famous for this. Mukherjee Nagar is now like an island full of IAS aspirants. They study night and day. Their eyesight may be weakening, their cheeks are probably sunken and their faces have lost all glow. They still did not taste success and even their eyes are not shining with hope as they did when they first started out. Why does this happen? Is this exam really so difficult that it seems impossible to conquer this fort? Or did we fail to come up with the right strategy which made the fort stronger than it actually is?

If you need to pass a long thing through a crisscross pipe a steel rod won't work. What you would require is something flexible – like a string – that can mould its shape according to the pipe. This is the case with competitive exams and it applies very strongly to the IAS exam. If you know how to jump across this IAS wall, which looks like it has the strength of steel, then you can stop beating your head against it while trying to break it. Your purpose is not to break the wall, but to reach the other side, and this you can achieve by jumping across it. In this context, it would benefit you a lot to understand the personality of the exam so you can prepare with that mindset.

There is a lot of evidence to back what I'm going to say here. There is no bigger evidence than the statistics of the exam which show that 50 percent of the selected students are those who do not have a first division. After looking at these statistics, a question arises in the mind - could it be that out of four-five lakh students who apply for the preliminary IAS exam, there are not even thousand candidates who are toppers or first-division holders? Actually, their number amounts to a few thousands. Then, why is it so that these toppers and PHD holders do not make it while the second and third division-holders do.

It is not a co-incidence. Clearing IAS is not a fluke, and even if it was a fluke, it could not possibly be a coincidence for 50 percent students. This proves the fact that these second and third-division holders were those who moulded their studies according to the competitive IAS exam. The toppers and first-divisioners, who could not make it, were those who studied for IAS according to university exam pattern. The challenge that I have faced when mentoring students to prepare for IAS is that they refused to turn their solid being into a liquid form that could fit into the IAS scaffold. I was limited by the fact that I could explain things to them, but not change them. Of course, I could not change the UPSC exam, either. So in

the end, it was the students who suffered. They could not change their university-level studying and answering questions. The only change they incorporated was to study lots of books on a particular subject, even reading some very good authors. In fact, they were not just reading them but memorising them.

However, civil services require neither of these things. The thing that it actually requires is lacking in these aspirants. This is why both cannot adjust to each other and this leads to them getting a divorce without even marrying. This has been a sad and bitter experience for me and I have discussed it before. I do not know why students come to believe that only studying is sufficient to clear IAS exam. If you start giving them tips about other important IAS requirements, they will yawn and start looking around, which shows their disinterest. They wonder how this information is related to their preparation.

I would like to share with you something that was said by former American President Abraham Lincoln and which I find to be relevant here. He said, "If someone were to give me six hours to chop wood, I would spend four hours sharpening my axe." This is a very important saying which you should try to understand. What Lincoln is trying to say here is that it is not just important to do as much work as possible but also to do it efficiently. If your axe is sharpened you can chop as much wood with it in two hours as you would in six hours. Therefore, there are things apart from studying that are equally important for you to achieve your goal. So now let us see what makes competitive exams different from other exams.

Selection criteria

I consider this an important characteristic of a competitive exam which renders it different from all university exams. College exams are based on the principle of passing or failing. Even if you score minimum possible marks, your year will be justified and you will move on to the next class. Thus you will be able to drag your way to a degree in the end. Competitive exams do not work on the principle of passing or failing, they work on the theory of selection. In competitive exams, the total number of candidates that will be selected is already declared. The exam is conducted and in the final result, which is prepared on merit basis, students are declared selected according to the number of administrators that are needed. In this scenario, it is highly possible that even though you secured 60 per cent marks you could not qualify the exam.

This means that those who got selected scored higher marks than you. You will now have to take the exam again. You will get no leverage next year because of what you scored in this exam. Also, you will get no certificate that you have achieved such and such level of success. This is essentially an examination based on competition where everybody is in opposition to one another. Your success could mean somebody's failure while your failure would ensure someone else's success. Thus, the thing we actually need to surpass others is a killer instinct.

This is why the style of preparation for this exam changes. Your selection depends not only on how good your preparation is but also on how well others have prepared. It is possible that this year you score 60 per cent marks and not get selected but next year you score only 55 per cent marks and are able to make the cut. This is why competitive exams demand the best from you. The tactic of reading the syllabus just to pass would not work here. Here you are not limited by just what you are doing. If I'm allowed some cruel words, then over here the strategy of vanquishing others works. You need enough power to defeat others. Don't you think that if these things are necessary then you would need to change your method of preparing?

Before a student sits for competitive exams, he has already been exposed to at least 15 years of yearly exams. Giving these exams on a yearly basis moulds the student's studying, writing and thinking style in a certain fashion. This may work for state civil services, but it will not work for IAS exams at all. To tell you the truth, this method has no value in this exam. It is a big challenge for any student to get rid of these old habits.

Students are from diverse backgrounds

All the exams that you have given until now were homogenous in nature. If you were an arts student, then the other students giving the exam were also from arts background. The engineering students gave exams with engineering students only while commerce students gave exams with commerce students. Since the syllabus is the same for everyone, the books and the question paper are also the same and everything appears simple and straightforward.

However, the IAS exam is neither straight nor simple. The exam is a huge sea where many streams merge such as arts, commerce, science, engineering, doctors, CA, management, law etc. Anybody who has done a graduation can appear for the exam. If you want to see your name in the selection list, you have to think carefully. So many streams and all of them have various subjects. In the preliminary exams you won't face any challenge because of this, but it may pose a problem in the mains where you have to choose an optional subject. Some papers are scoring while some are not. Although UPSC has a scaling method to tackle this, there is a fear about other people's scores.

It is also not completely true that such kind of problem is faced only with optional papers. Students from different study backgrounds have distinct advantages and disadvantages during the general knowledge paper. In topics where arts students benefit, science students may be at a disadvantage. But when it comes to C-SET, it's the engineering students who benefit. A lot of space is given to science so that science students do not lose out. All in all, though UPSC has tried its best to maintain a balance between all streams, it is not totally successful.

Now, the challenge you face depends on which stream you have studied. To overcome this challenge you need to focus on things that are holding you back. UPSC is not concerned with your academic background. It will only see the marks you have scored and announce your result. In this competition you are up against students from various streams and this may pose challenges.

Pan- India exam

Students in the state civil services do not have to worry about this. Although, students from other states can give the exam in any state, their number is very less. But IAS is different, students from all over the country and even those students who believe themselves to be good students take the exam. Here states do not matter but state education does. Every state has a different level of education. The medium of instruction and the amount of exposure also differs. In this context, some states are considered advanced while others are backward. States have their own education board and the syllabus is thus different. However, private state schools have the option of following CBSE pattern of studying if they wish to do so. Many schools have adopted this.

It need not be debated that the level of syllabus and exams in many state boards is not at par with that of CBSE. Students from state board may be at a slight disadvantage because the level of IAS, its syllabus and the pattern of questions asked is somewhat similar to the CBSE pattern. A similar difference exists in

universities. Some universities are considered very good and it is a feeling of pride to get admission in them. Universities also have different syllabi and different questions are asked in their respective exams. For example, the syllabi and questions asked in exams of Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University match the IAS syllabus. It is obvious then, that a student who has graduated from either of these universities has an advantage.

When we are talking of geographical differences, we have to consider the difference between a village, town and a metro. A student from a rural background is often unaware of the modern experiences and lingo. Even his body language is different. He also lacks study material, proper guidance and friends to have an intellectual discussion with. While students living in metro cities do not have to struggle for any of this if they are smart. So there can be numerous situations which depending on a student's location can become their strength or weakness. However, UPSC is not concerned with which university you have studied from, which state you belong to or whether you are from a village or a metro. It only tests you for the mettle it requires. Now this situation may pose a challenge which you have to overcome.

Power of experience

I find this to be the biggest challenge. When I was preparing, there were two things that I was afraid of. Firstly, since I had studied as a private student after eighth grade I was insecure that students who have studied from regular colleges must be much better than me. My other fear was that how I would compete with students who have been preparing for years and have sat for numerous exams, after all, experiences have their own importance.

During our times, there were only three attempts allowed for students belonging to general category. I got through in my second attempt. Now this challenge has slightly risen. Statistics show that most selections happen during second and third attempts. Still, no attempt should be underestimated. When a candidate gives his first attempt, he is also competing with a candidate who is giving his fourth attempt. That student not only has the experience of three attempts but it is also clear that he has been preparing for the exam for a long time. Do you think it would be easy to compete with such students? I'm not scaring you here, just warning you. On the other hand, there are many students who sit for multiple exams but are unable to gain anything from the experience. So neither should you feel pressurised because of it nor should you take it lightly. In the end, the time will also come when you are giving your second, third or fourth attempt. Although, I pray that this doesn't happen to you.

There is another aspect to the power of experience which is connected with various other competitive exams. While you are preparing for IAS, you should take other competitive exams as well. This will help you mature. Just remember, a person competing with you who only has the experience of this exam will find himself a little weak in front of you. I'm telling you these things so that you do not consider the student who has started preparation with you to be your main competition, but your actual competition is the student who has been preparing for a long time.

Questions asked

The questions you are asked in university examinations are not like the ones asked in IAS. I feel disheartened even with the CBSE question papers because they also pose questions which have straight-forward answers. It is the same case with state civil services. You are asked a clear-cut question and you can give a straight-forward reply. You will get marks for it. In state civil services, ordinary students can

surpass genuine and brilliant students. If a crammed answer is the benchmark to get marks then it is an easy task. Most students are good at cramming.

However, this learning by rote is not going to work in UPSC. This is the Mt Everest-like challenge of UPSC which very few students can climb. This is the main reason why toppers often do not find a place in UPSC. You pick out any UPSC paper from general knowledge in preliminary exams to general knowledge in the mains. You can even take a look at a paper for an optional subject. When you read the questions, you will feel that they are from topics included in the syllabus. You will also get the feeling that you have read about it and know a few things about it. But when you start writing down your answer, either your pen will stop writing or start repeating the things you have already written in different words. This becomes not just the biggest but the sole reason for many students' failure. I consider this to be the biggest challenge posed by civil services.

Now the question is how to face this challenge. If you don't address this issue, you can't succeed no matter what you do. You should take my warning very seriously. Your university exams-style of answering questions will not work here. You may have scored well in college while writing in this style. It is not your fault. You kept writing and scoring good marks so why would you think that you are wrong and need to write in a different manner? Well our purpose here is not to fix blame. Our objective is to understand and evaluate the challenges you may face, because when you understand the challenges your methodology of preparing for IAS will change.

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