

Choosing the optional paper

Do not underestimate the choice of optional paper in the process of becoming an IAS. Before 2013, choosing an optional paper was twice as more challenging because students had to pick two subjects. But now only one paper has to be chosen, so I believe that this challenge has not only been reduced by half but it has also been eliminated. In my experience, students have more trouble when they have to choose two subjects than when they have to choose only one.

For example, engineering students would choose a subject relevant to their stream which is simple and easy for them. The problem would arise when they had to opt for a second subject. Similarly, for post graduates, the subject of their post graduation is an obvious choice for an optional paper. But they would also face difficulty when choosing another subject.

So now that candidates are not required to choose two optional papers, their difficulties must have eased. But is that what has really happened? I regret writing this but the answer is no. Although, the challenge has somewhat diminished compared to before, it hasn't been wiped out. Even now students ask me, 'Sir, what subject do I chose?' I feel sad because I have to disappoint them. But I also feel hurt that this student does not have the ability to even choose a subject for himself. At this initial stage only I detect this as a weakness in their personality and this is hardly ever wrong. Take some time, and think calmly which subject you should opt for. Who else other than you can decide which subject you should take? After all, how much does the other person know you that he can tell which subject you should choose?

You will get different replies from different people about this. If there is someone who didn't get selected because he scored less in public administration, he may not advise you on which subject you should choose, but he would definitely suggest, 'Do whatever, but do not choose public administration'. It is quite possible that the same day you meet someone who scored very high in public administration. Obviously, before you can even finish questioning him, he will tell you to choose public administration. If you ask coaching centres they would tell you to opt for subjects which they are teaching. Remember, none of these people are wrong; they just view the truth differently. Even coaching centres teach subjects they think are important. This is their truth. The fact is you have your own truth and someone else's truth is not going to work for you. On the basis of my years of experience of guiding civil services aspirants and my successful juniors, I say this with conviction that there is no subject in UPSC that no one has ever opted for or no one has passed. If there were a subject like that, UPSC would have removed it from its list.

I think this problem needs to be addressed in a more logical way, because students unnecessarily worry about this. Ponder over these questions –

- 1)** What is the reason that a subject in which one student succeeds becomes the reason for another's failure in the same year?
- 2)** Why is it that a subject that seems simple and interesting to one student appears difficult and boring to another?
- 3)** Why has UPSC introduced scaling of marks? Actually the aim of this move is to ensure equality in the marks scored in all optional subjects.

If you think about these questions seriously you will begin to see more clearly. This will save you from choosing the wrong subject. When I say 'wrong subject' here, let me clarify that no subject is wrong in itself, it may just be wrong for us. What influences your decision the most while choosing a subject for yourself? It is 'rumours'. In the community of IAS aspirants, various subjects keep coming in the limelight. Some candidates think that because high numbers of people are being selected from a particular subject, their chances of selection will also increase if they opt for it. Both the facts are wrong here. People don't get selected because they choose a particular subject, more number of successful candidates from a subject means more students are opting for that subject. If you look at it from the point of view of percentage, you won't find much difference. If you just look at the numbers, they will appear higher, and this is what is happening here.

The other fact you are not considering here is that you can wear someone else's hat, but would it fit you? You need your own hat. You know how many students who opted for a subject got selected; do you know the number of people who didn't? I do not mean to say that you should shy away from choosing popular subjects. I'm not saying that at all. If you feel comfortable with the subject, there is no need to doubt whether you should take it.

There is one more thing. It has been observed that every year the paper of one subject or the other is very tough. This results in a bad score and the subject gets a bad reputation. Sometimes this could happen with one subject continuously for two three years. In this situation, you should not think that since last year the paper was easy, it will be easy this year too. UPSC creates high and low tides in these papers to strike a balance. So I think you should be very careful when deciding to opt for a subject based on its popularity.

So what should you do?

I'm giving you a torch that will shed light on which subject you should choose. You can have faith in this torch of mine. Although I have called this my torch, the battery in it belongs to UPSC. In discussing the syllabus of the mains exam, UPSC has already clearly mentioned that the purpose of the exam is not to ascertain how much information one has about a subject or how good his memory is. Its actual purpose is to find out what a person's intellectual capacity is and whether they have in-depth knowledge of their subject.

It is then clear that the subject is not important; your knowledge of the subject is what matters. When you start being analytical about a subject, you gain a deep knowledge of it and start developing your thoughts accordingly. This renders even a simple subject important. On the other hand, even the most important subject can be turned simple.

So use this torch when you are deciding upon a subject for yourself. Do not be in haste when it comes to choosing your subject. Think about it calmly. You can take advice from other people, listen to what they have to say, but do not get so influenced that their suggestion becomes your decision. Think about it logically, analyse your facts and then take a decision.

Once you have made your decision, stick to it, do not change it easily. Alter your decision only if you cannot fall in love with the subject despite trying everything. Change your decision if you feel that you love your subject, you have a good hold of it, but the exam results are not very encouraging for you. I'm not talking of exam results being bad, I'm talking of the results being really bad. If your results are bad, do not blame UPSC or the paper; do not blame the books you have studied or the examiner who corrected

your answer sheet. Instead of finding faults, find out where you were lacking. By blaming things, you will get a false sense of self-satisfaction, but not success. If you want success, work on your own shortcomings. You do not have control over UPSC or your examiners.

I'm mentioning this because I have seen students change their subject. They do not change themselves, they keep changing their subjects and consequently their results do not change. As I mentioned above - students get selected from every subject and if we are not getting selected the problem lies with us.

However, there is one more truth. If you are not getting the hang of a subject initially, you should not take too long to change it. Even if you have wasted a year on that subject, it is better not to waste five more years over it. This will not just save your years but also your future.

The '*mantra*' of choosing your subject

The *mantra* here is nothing magical. I have used it in the sense that it should be the first and most important basis for your selection. The subject in itself is very important. Compared to other five exams in civil services, it is this subject that you can master. As far as the four papers for essays and general knowledge are concerned, the syllabus is not limited. The preparation is also subjective, every student prepares in a manner he sees fit. However, your optional paper is one that you have chosen. Its syllabus is clearly defined and it is taught in a systematic way in colleges. You have even studied all these subjects. But general knowledge has not been taught to you like this. This is why there is a huge difference between scores in general knowledge while there is not much discrepancy in optional papers' scores. This is why you should do the best preparation you can for your optional paper. You should try that your score is in the higher range. This would be quite difficult if you do not choose your paper wisely.

I will now tell you the most important scientific principle behind how to choose your optional subject. This method is time-consuming but you will reap benefits. So let us talk about the most important aspect of choosing your subject.

After talking to various people – and after giving it a deep thought - if you have decided on one particular subject, let me congratulate you. However, if you could not settle down on one subject, or you are confused among two three subjects then you can use the following method –

First stage

Buy a few books for the subjects you have shortlisted. But take them at the medium level, not advanced. These books should be of graduation level and they should cover the basics and core knowledge about the subject. Also, these books should not be too analytical in nature. They should be written by ordinary authors in a simple manner.

Now read the book of a subject. Take at least three four days to read it thoroughly. You can jot down important points – ask yourself whether you liked studying the subject or were you bored? Did you find the subject easy or difficult? Was it easy to understand? Now try recalling the topics that you read and see how much of it do you remember. Write all this down somewhere.

Second stage

Now take a look at the UPSC syllabus. Read properly the syllabus for the subject whose book you have studied. Once you read a book for a subject, you get a fair outline of it. You also form an impression of that subject. When you see the UPSC syllabus, you will find that your brain is interacting with it. You will find it surprising that after reading the book when you read the syllabus, you will form an impression about the syllabus too. Now write down whatever impression you have formed of the syllabus.

Third stage

In this stage, take a look at the previous years' unsolved papers of the subject. Read the questions asked in the papers carefully. Don't just read them, read them carefully. You will start noticing different shades of the question. You will notice the hidden angles in the questions. UPSC rarely asks questions that can be answered straight-forwardly. This stage will help you figure out whether you are able to detect the hidden angles or not. If you are able to detect them it means, the subject may be right for you.

Fourth stage

This is the last stage and you have to work hard here. Select a topic in the book and see what kind of questions have been asked from that topic in the previous years. Write down the questions somewhere. Now read the topic again, numerous times if required, but read it in such a fashion that you have a strong hold on the topic. When you are satisfied that you have studied the topic the best you could, take the questions asked from that topic in previous years' papers and write down the answers for them.

This will be the deciding moment for you. If you are able to write the answers, you have found your subject. Let me tell you that at this point your answers will not be of the level that UPSC requires. You will achieve that level when you have studied the subject thoroughly and have a hold on it. As of this stage, the level of the answer is not very important. The important thing is whether you are able to answer the questions, even if your answers do not match up to UPSC standards.

Now after completing all the stages, you find that you cannot see different shades of a question or you are not able to write decent answers, this means that this subject is not suitable for you. Now repeat the stages with all the other subjects you have shortlisted. Even if it takes you a month to complete all these activities, it is not a big deal. After all you are going to become an IAS, and becoming an IAS is no joke. You may face a third situation. You go through all the stages and the results are the same for both the subjects. Then you will be faced with the problem of what to choose. It is not very difficult to solve this. See which of the subjects can also help you prepare for your general knowledge paper. This subject will kill two birds with one stone. For example history, geography, sociology, political science, economics and public administration are subjects that play an important role in your general knowledge preparation. Even if these are not your optional subjects, you will have to study them. Of course you would not have to study them in depth as you would have otherwise.

So, this was if you were in a dilemma regarding the choice of the subject. Now I will tell you some ways that will prevent you from getting confused in the first place. If you rise above the rumours and stop being influenced by others, you will not get confused. Let us discuss this in detail.

1) If you are a post graduate, I would advise you to think very carefully about why you do not want to take the subject of your post graduation as your optional paper. You have invested two years on the subject. Unless you spent two years on the subject just for a degree, this subject will prove to be your best companion. In any case, if you do not choose this subject, you will choose some other subject and it will

be a subject that you know nothing of. If you think about this logically, it is better to take up a subject about which you know something.

Also, when you go for the interview, it is likely that you will be asked questions about your postgraduate subject even if you have not chosen it for the mains. This means you will anyway have to brush up on your knowledge of the subject when you go for the interview. This is why I take it as a fact that the subject of your post graduation is the ideal choice for an optional paper.

However, there are exceptions to this rule. It could be that you didn't give your subject a serious thought during post graduation. Maybe you did not get the subject you wanted and had to settle for another. Perhaps you did get the subject of your choice but you did not enjoy it or could not master it and scored less as a result. In this scenario, it is better to avoid the temptation of choosing this subject.

Normally there are three subjects that students do not want to take up in IAS, and this even includes students who have done their post graduation in these subjects. Students believe these subjects have a vast syllabus or they say that the subjects are very tough. Also, since these subjects are dynamic, it is difficult to keep up with the constant changes. This makes these subjects less scoring. These three subjects are – Math, physics and economics. This does not mean that no one opts for these subjects. It also does not mean that anyone who chooses one of these subjects will not succeed. Students get selected from these subjects too. These are students who have an interest in the subject and are able to answer according to UPSC standards. Now you decide what your situation is.

2) It is possible that you are a graduate, and not a postgraduate. Then what should you do? Every student studies at least three subjects during graduation. You should choose one of these three. Choose the one you like best. B.E. students can take either civil engineering or electrical engineering. MBBS students can choose a subject like biology if they are not opting for medical science. In fact they could even go for anthropology or psychology.

The logic behind choosing the subject when you are a graduate is similar to the logic I gave you when I told you about how to choose when you are a postgraduate. You do know something about the subjects you studied in your graduation, so you should make use of this knowledge.

3) Although the number of students pursuing this degree is gradually decreasing, some still choose to do B.Sc. It has been observed that B.Sc students do not like to choose any of the papers they have studied in graduation as their optional. For a science student to opt for an Arts subject would not be wrong. Choosing a science subject as an optional paper is beneficial only if you have done your post graduation in it.

Science students should keep two things in their mind. They should figure out which subject is somewhat familiar or adjustable to what they have studied as science students. For instance someone who studied geology could choose geography; a math student could opt for statistics and a biology student could go for anthropology.

Another advice is to take a subject that also helps you prepare for the general knowledge paper. This is not a necessary thing but if possible you should follow this advice.

There is one other important thing which I want to tell you – do not ignore your interests. Our brain is wired to gain in-depth knowledge of only those subjects that it enjoys. It is difficult to have a long and

fruitful companionship with a subject which is of little interest to you. To figure out which subjects you enjoy apply the *mantra* I told you above.

This is all I want to say on this topic. I want to briefly discuss some other things you should know.

a) You cannot figure out which subject to choose depending on whether it is difficult or easy. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, whether a subject is tough or easy is subjective and varies from person to person. Secondly, if some subject is actually easy then it is easy not just for you, but for everybody else too. You are aware that in a competitive exam you are not concerned with just scoring passing marks. You are required to score sufficient marks to make it to the final list.

b) How vast is the syllabus of the subject should only determine in part whether you should choose it. So do not base your decision on the length of your syllabus. You should make sure whether there are enough books for you to study to cover the syllabus and whether you can handle them.

c) If you are choosing a subject completely new to you, keep two things in consideration. Firstly, figure out whether you will be able to gather study material for the subject. Secondly, if you would require help from someone to understand the subject, find out if that help is available to you. If you cannot fulfil the above two conditions, then the subject will not be able to fulfil your expectations.

d) Lastly, remember that no subject can make you an IAS. It is you who can become an IAS with any subject. So do not give the credit for your success or failure to your subject, give it to yourself.

I have told you some things about how you can choose an optional subject. I cannot guarantee that I have told you all important points that you need to consider while choosing your optional subject. If you get some help from my advice, it would be my pleasure. However, if my advice could not help you, do not worry about choosing your paper based on something else you see fit. Do not think that your decision will be wrong. The subject is not important here, your treatment of the subject is what matters.

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