

Preliminary Examination: Psychological challenges of General Studies

On 24th August this year the Mahakumbha of civil services examination will be held where lakhs of participants eyeing to become civil servants will take the holy dip. All these contestants are whole heartedly welcome and our good wishes are with them. I wish things could work out only with good wishes. Out of Lakshmi of these contestants, only a few thousands will have the good fortune to go make the final offering in this sacrifice. Out of these also, only the offerings of a few would hold value and then the chief priest, UPSC, will call them over for a face to face conversation, only after which the names of the ones who would have attained salvation in this Mahakumbha would be declared.

I have myself been through the Civil Services selection procedure and have been in direct contact with youngsters going through this selection procedure for the last 30 years. Though in these three decades there might have been revolutionary changes in the country's economic character and the socio-cultural scenario, but with regards to the preparation of civil services exam I haven't been able to see the seeds of any kind of revolutionary change in the consciousness of the youth, besides the fact that the number of applicants have gone up by two and half times, from approximately two lakhs to five lakhs now. But the number of people honestly preparing for these exams is still not more than five percent of this total number. This is a bad figure; this figure scares that out of five lakh only one thousand will be chosen. But the good thing is that the students who prepare honestly do get successful sooner or later. If not here, then elsewhere, and their success is better than the general successes.

When I talk about an 'honest preparation', it means an organised philosophy of preparation. For sure this philosophy of preparation is linked to hard work, but not just to hard work. Almost 95 percent students believe that more and more studies and more and more hard work is the key to success, they practise it to, but unfortunately they still do not get the desired result. In reality, they are unable to understand that through the medium of these exams what are the actual expectations of UPSC from them. Regarding these expectations, I have already written in one of the earlier issues of this newsletter, so no point repeating it. But here I would like to mention with utmost conviction that preparing for civil services exams is in a way going through the procedure of becoming a civil servant itself. If, while preparing for it, you are not able to bring about a change in your mental ability, a change in your efficiency, an increase in your self confidence, then believe that there has been some deficiency somewhere in your preparation. This way, preparing for these exams itself becomes a process of bringing about an internal change in the student. You will have to understand this. In the absence of such understanding, you will not be able to do justice to the syllabus of this exam, the questions asked in the exam and the marks obtained against answering these questions. It is a good thing that for this you neither have to study nor do anything separately. You only have to change your way of preparation and this way of preparation is beyond the number of books you read, names of writers and the number of hours you study. Basically, this preparation is at a psychological level. In this article, I am going to throw light on this so that you can get help to mould yourself around this.

Any youth wanting to become a civil servant must develop the ability to see all situations in an organised and scientific way. Bigger the task, more is the need to scientifically view it, and undoubtedly, preparing for civil services is a big task. In this country with a population of a million and a quarter, elections can happen in the right manner only because an organised system is in place. A house can be run in any fashion but not a country because it is a big entity and a big entity demands organisation. If you agree to this, then you would also agree to what I said earlier that preparation for civil services needs to be done in an organised manner. I would like to call this the science of civil services exam. Here, I would like to specify that this article only relates to the scientific way of preparation only for the preliminary examination, and too only to its paper on General Studies.

Now the question is how do we start with this scientific way. Yes, it is not very difficult. I am amazed when I find that a student doesn't know that how many questions, on which topics and what kind of questions were asked in the 2012 preliminary exams. You are also preparing. Do you also know? If you know them, then I would like to appreciate you, and if you don't then I suggest that you should know. And of you know the questions, then do you know the fine details to answer those questions which requires a different kind of intelligence altogether. It is possible to catch the minute details of this nature only when you understand that subject in depth and can catch the inherent psychology in that question, which is sufficient to confuse any student.

Now I come to another question attached to this. My second question is that if you have read the questions asked in the preliminary exams of 2013, then have you read them with full attention? I hope you have not given it a fleeting glance and then forgot about it. And if you have read it with full attention, then have you analysed how this paper of 2013 is different from the previous years' papers, especially from the papers of 2012 and 2011, because the C-Set paper was introduced only in 2011. If you have not done this, then you have made a mistake, a big mistake.

Why am I saying all this? Because I solved papers work like a lighthouse for any student. It is like the pole star which guides you and shows you the direction. It tells you what you should prepare, how much should you prepare and how should you prepare. It becomes even more important when any competition is going through a phase of change. Don't forget that right now you are passing through this phase. If you don't catch these changes, then I won't say that you would not be successful, but then definitely your path to success will be a little difficult. Or it may even happen that the peak of your success is not as high.

Unsolved papers give you direction and so the 2013 paper will appear the same in its pattern to the previous years' papers but in its content and internal element it is very different from the papers of previous two years. I am not saying this. You can inspect it yourself. This difference should have come, because the Main exam of 2013 was unlike the previous years. If you believe that the three exams for IAS have some connection with each other, then how can you can believe that if there has been a change in the main exam, then in order to maintain a balance, there will be no change in the preliminary exam. This is the science and this is what you need to know. In the absence of such knowledge, a student does work hard but there is no output. When he thinks about it at a superficial level, he finds that the syllabus of 2013 preliminary exams is like before only and there is no change in the syllabus of 2014 either. You are right. He even finds that in General Studies earlier too 100 questions were asked, and so is it now. The pattern of options which were given earlier, is the same pattern which is given now. The scheduled time of the paper is also 120 minutes. So if he arrives at the conclusion that everything is like before, then he would like to keep his strategy for preparation also like before. Whereas, this is not the truth.

What I am going to tell you now, you can verify by seeing the preliminary exam papers of the last 3-4 years. But for this you will need to devote some time. Verification done in a huddle will not prove you right. Anyways, scientific preparation demands that you make a strategy before waging a war, similar to the game of cricket where the captain makes a strategy for his team considering the opponent, before the game begins. Now I would like to draw your attention to those points on the basis of which I found the preliminary exam paper of 2013 different from the previous years. This change can be understood from the following points:

- Maximum question asked in 2013 were based on bookish knowledge. You cannot answer these questions correctly if you don't have in-depth knowledge of that subject, if you don't know facts. Whereas, the earlier questions don't expect you to know facts as much as they expect you to draw the correct inferences from the knowledge of facts.

This means that now your strategy for preparation should be to study the subject as per syllabus well, understand it and apply it. Revise important things from all angles so that there is no confusion about them. For certain, the role of recollecting has increased here. Whereas in the earlier papers this played a lesser role.

Why did this happen? This had to happen because in the Main exam three papers on a general Studies have been included. More importantly, in these three papers there are totally 75 questions and that too of 200 words each. Whereas before this, there were only quarter to two papers of General Studies. Don't startle reading quarter to two. Earlier, one fourth of the second paper of General Studies was related to the analyses of graphs and numbers, which has now been included in the C-Set paper in a way. I consider this a part of reasoning, and not knowledge. So I said quarter to two.

When you see the questions on General Knowledge in the Main paper, then apart from the few questions on geography and history, rest all questions that are asked expect you to analyse. Earlier, this analytical ability was also tested in the GS paper of the preliminary exam. Because, it has got an adequate place in the main exam, hence, the logic to end it in the preliminary exam can be understood.

- Even though the syllabus of preliminary exams includes the current affairs related to the national and the international scene, but you will notice that the questions based on them are not asked. It will not be wrong to say that there are no such questions.

Then why is it there in the syllabus? I think it is there for two reasons. One, because General Studies can never be complete without current affairs, and second it has also been done for your convenience. GS paper of the main exam is mainly based on current affairs only. If you are not aware about the current affairs from the beginning only, then do you think, at the month end after giving the preliminary exams, in the middle of three and a half months beginning in December, you will be able to prepare for those three papers? Don't ever think about it I your dreams also. It is impossible. That is why UPSC has included it in the preliminary paper only to caution you.

- Papers preceding 2013 had some questions on government schemes. Because, these have now become a part of the main paper, thus, they are no longer a part of the preliminary paper. These questions don't exist here at all.
- No questions have been asked on international affairs in the preliminary exam. But a lot of questions have been asked on it in the main paper, and that too not easy ones.
- Earlier some questions, even though they were few in number, were asked in which there were incidents of some important awards, honour, places and sports. It is evident that since there is no place for current affairs so, such questions should not be expected.

Friends, i have presented to you the important fact that i have gathered after comparing the General Studies paper of the 2013 preliminary exam with the previous two years' papers in depth. I am not saying that the carbon copy of the pattern of the 2013 General Studies preliminary paper will be made in the future exams, at least it is not expected from the civil services exam, but you can definitely make a preparation strategy based on this. Another thing is that if you will not make a strategy based on this then what other basis do you have available to make a strategy upon?

Now I will touch upon the second part of this scientific preparation, which is related to the topics of the questions. I have been pleasantly surprised to see that in 2013 papers all important topics have been given equal importance. It is not that many questions have been asked from a particular topic and only a few questions on some other topic, which used to happen earlier. On this, I would like to present you the following facts:

- If we consider physics, chemistry, botany and biology within the scope of science, then they make 29 out of 100 questions, ie. 29 percent. This is not less. It is obvious that Science students will be at an advantage. These questions will not be easy for Arts and Commerce students. But it is also true that whoever has read and understood the NCERT textbooks will also not find these questions very difficult.

Now if we divide these questions on science on the basis of topics, then, 9 questions out of 29 have been asked on Botany. This is right also, because under Botany we can also consider Agriculture and Environment. Two questions have been separately asked on environment, and if we include those also then the total questions asked on Botany are 11. Good thing is that the questions on botany are only a little above the average level, which relate to the life cycle of plants. I am especially mentioning this here so that you can understand on what parts of botany you need to focus.

Second place is of Biology. 8 questions have been asked on it. It is right also because biology is directly related to the science of our bodies. Like botany, most of the questions are just a little above average level. If UPSC has to select a little above average candidates then they will have to raise the standard a little. In state services these topics are considered at average and sometimes even at below average levels. So if we add up the questions on botany and biology, they make 17 out of 29 questions. Good thing is that unlike physics and chemistry which demand technical knowledge and hard work, biology and botany do not demand as much, because they are directly related to our lives and somewhere or the other a discussion happens on them in our everyday lives. This is a reason for relief for Arts and Commerce students. So, do not panic.

Now we are left with Physics and Chemistry. Questions asked on them are 7 and 5 respectively. It can happen that the paper setter considers them only a little above the average level too, and they may be right. This depends on the student's own preparation. There are two questions in Physics which can be solved with common sense. But, in the realm of minus marking, how correct would it be to solve them, will depend on what is your plan to solve the paper.

- Economics is on second spot, from which 19 questions have been asked. I feel the way economics has become the focus in the last few years, considering that the number of questions asked on it are justified. This can be expected to be continued. Clearly, you should not take it lightly.

Earlier I had said that current affairs is almost missing from the GS paper. For certain, it is not present in a straight format. But it is present in the paper in a latent form especially in the Economics questions. Economics is certainly one of the most difficult subjects of Arts. In general, it has a vast syllabus and is also very detailed and difficult. In such a situation, you might feel anxious because of 19 questions. But if you view this paper on a scientific way, you will have no reason to be anxious.

Whether the economic questions are of preliminary exams or mains, you can be certain that all questions are of applied economics, that is, behavioural economics. It is that part of economics, about which we keep gaining knowledge from newspapers and news. Of course, it is a different thing that whatever we read here is behavioural and not theoretical, and what is asked in the paper is theoretical and not behavioural. If it would have been behavioural, then it would have been straight questions of current affairs like "what is the rate of economic development fixed in the twelfth five year plan". This is even better. It is easier to understand theory through behaviour, instead of understanding behaviour based on theory.

So how will you prepare for it? It is very easy. Take up any decent twelfth class textbook and understand the topics in depth which are applied in economics. This will help you get an understanding of the subject. After this, whenever you will read about an economic situation you will find it easier to understand it through a

theoretical viewpoint. In preliminaries when such situations would be asked in the garb of theory, you will be able to answer them easily. Take time in understanding this because it will be helpful in your mains too.

- Third spot is of political organisation which can occupy a bigger chunk in the future. 17 questions are asked on it and the nature of these questions are similar to the economics ones, that is, it is more factual and not situational. Of course, there is always a link of these facts with the situations that take place in the environment, but it is not the case with all questions.

The biggest contributor in this political organisation is the Indian constitution. You must make a note of this point. This is natural too, because the entire political structure revolves around our constitution. You should not just have good factual knowledge about the constitution but also good subjective hold over it. By 'subjective hold' I mean that you should not only know the constitution in its words and content but also in its spirit. Just word meanings are not sufficient. You should also know the feel and spirit behind it.

This political landscape is a major part of your GS. It holds weightage not just in mains but also in the interview. There might not be any student who is not asked any questions on the political organisation in the interview. Hence, it is not on your will that you prepare it superficially. It is important that you have a very good preparation on this subject. Of course books will help you prepare this subject but more than that it will be newspapers and news. Political news is not absent from any day's newspaper. Just that whenever you study this subject you should be a little conscious and whenever you read about a political news, see it in the light of the constitution. See what is the constitutional article associated with it. By this method of preparation, you will have a good hold over the Indian constitution, which you must have.

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