

## The roadmap to IAS success

There are two ways of going to a place. You buy a ticket, reach your destination and start exploring. The other way is to know everything about the place you are going to visit beforehand. You take a map with you and already know which places you should go to. While you can visit the place following either of the methods, the output of the trip differs. It is obvious that one who adopts the second method will not only save his time, money and energy but also enjoy the trip more since it has been planned systematically.

This can be applied to the IAS exam too. A lot of young people impulsively decide to take the exam. Unfortunately, we don't have the culture of planning ahead for something. This approach is okay when it comes to trivial matters, but not when it is something important. Of course, it need not be mentioned that passing the civil services exam is no easy feat.

You know the three stages of selection – preliminary exams, mains and the interview. You need to clear all three rounds in the same attempt. If you pass this year's preliminary exams you will not be allowed to skip it next year and sit for the mains directly. So if you flunk at any level, even if you have reached the interview stage, you have to start from square one.

There is another challenge associated with civil services that the candidate only gets to know when he takes the exam. Maybe you will have trouble believing what I am going to tell you, but that does not change the fact that it is the truth. Sometimes, it has happened that a candidate has been selected in the civil services but he wants to improve his ranking. So he takes the exam next year, but he can't even qualify the preliminary exam. Some candidates score less marks in the interview, or they get decent marks, but it is not enough to change their ranking. So they have to take the exam again if they have an attempt left. You can face this challenge only if you have a roadmap for your exam preparation.

There is yet another challenge that is linked to the optional paper. Until you take the main exam, it is difficult for you to assess whether the subject is the best choice for you. However, once you have opted for a particular subject, try not to doubt your choice. Also, do not change the subject unless it is absolutely necessary to do so. If you prepare well and still do not score well in the optional paper, it indicates that you should change your subject. If you do this it would render your previous attempts to be trial attempts. There is no guarantee, however, that the next one is not going to be a trial attempt too.

Basically what I'm trying to say is that the challenges in the exam make it a 20-20 over cricket match, not a five-day one. Here the number of balls is limited, the wickets are limited, and the target that has to be achieved is huge. Every ball and every wicket is precious. A single limitation can throw the game away. But obviously everyone has drawbacks, so when it comes to getting selected it evens out. Still we should strive towards perfection so that we not only succeed but do so in the manner that would please us.

So let us now talk about the planning part of the process.

### Elements of planning

There are lot of rules and regulations that you have to follow to achieve your goal. The candidate who can play by the rules achieves success. So what are these rules and limitations?

a) A candidate from General category has four attempts. Candidates belonging to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) have seven attempts. For those from the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) there is no limit to the number of attempts.

b) The next limitation is that of age. You can take the exam from the age of 21 to 30. For OBC and, SC and ST candidates, the age limit is 32 and 35 respectively.

c) There are three levels of the exam and a candidate has to qualify all three in the same year.

d) These are the rules laid down by UPSC. But other than these there are social and situational limitations that people may face. For example it is not very easy for women to keep trying to clear the civil services exam till the age of 30. The pressure to get married from the family may control their plans to a certain extent. It is not wrong for parents to think this way either. It becomes very difficult to marry girls who have crossed a certain age. Although, if they do get selected in the civil services, in most cases, they are allowed to choose their own life partners.

In case of men, marriage is not the primary concern. The issue is to get settled. Thirty is not a young age. If you get selected then it is all good, but if you don't then what? The chances of your selection are not very high according to the theory of probability. But the problem is that if you don't try, you have no chances of selection. As you age, not only do your attempts decline, you also feel the pressure to get settled. Your past failures also weigh you down.

These are the facts you should keep in mind while coming up with a complete and long-term plan on how to prepare for the exam. It should be complete in the sense that you succeed and get the service of your choice. It should be long-term in the sense that you should have a plan for all the years or attempts you have left. You may get selected and not even require all this planning, but you need to plan ahead until your last breath. Now let us discuss some facts that will help you plan.

### **Planning should be long-term**

Firstly, if you are in a hurry and want quick success, then I would suggest this field is not for you. A genuine IAS preparation is like running a marathon; it is not a 100 metre sprint. Cloudbursts will not work here, even though a lot of water may pour down. Here a steady downpour is needed, where each droplet is absorbed by the soil and becomes an integral part of it. The knowledge you need for your preparation should similarly be absorbed by the brain so deeply that it ceases to exist outside of it. The candidates who employ this to a higher degree are more likely to succeed. So this career path is not for impatient people.

Some people get so worked up they declare, "I will grab a position among the top ten in my first attempt." When I look at them sceptically, they mock my suspicions. They also justify this by giving me examples of people who have achieved this feat. They are not wrong. However, this is not the whole truth. The students are not able to understand the other facts behind this truth. The truth is that those who achieved this success did so because they were preparing for a long time for the exam. They probably started their preparation when they were in the first year of graduation or even before. It is true that it was their first attempt, but it is not true that they only prepared for a year or so. But the attempt is not the concern here, it is the preparation. You can prove your preparation in the first attempt itself or not be able to prove it till your last. It is important that you understand this fact about civil services before you make your plan. You need to be rational about this preparation, just like you can't win a cricket match without the right strategy.

If you had decided in tenth grade that you want to get into civil services, it would have been very easy for you to achieve success. Even if you decide this in twelfth grade it is good because you can opt for a subject in graduation which you can take in civil services too. You could not only opt for the subject but even study it better than others. Also if you had decided your aim this early in life, you could have focused on general knowledge too, which would now pose a formidable challenge.

Today, when you are reading this article on how to become an IAS, I don't know which grade you are in. If this applies to you, it is a positive coincidence and you should take this as a hint from nature that it is telling you to think about IAS. If you are doing your graduation, then also it is fine – better late, than never. You will just have to work a little harder. In any case IAS is not for those who shy away from hard work.

If you are thinking about IAS after graduation, you are a little late but all hope is not lost. Take heart from this psychological fact – as your brain matures, you take 50 minutes to understand the things that took you 5 hours to comprehend.

To be honest, you have no reason to worry until you have four attempts left. Although people get selected in their second attempt, the risk is high if it is your fourth attempt. But you can still taste success. Many matches have been won in the last ball.

In the first attempt, people don't even clear the preliminary exams, except in some cases. I think of this attempt as an attempt to gain experience, just like an amateur cricketer plays safe and dodges the first ball. After the first attempt you are in a position to evaluate your preparation. According to statistics, even if you do qualify the preliminary exam in your first attempt, it is very hard to crack the mains. One reason behind this is that due to lack of experience, the students only focus on the preliminary exams. Some students even say that they will prepare for mains after the preliminary exams. This is not possible.

So your second attempt can in a sense be your final attempt. There are chances of missing out on a good rank. Students take the exam again because they do not have a good rank. So this second attempt is successful but still not satisfactory. I'm only mentioning the usual scenario here; there are of course exceptions to this rule.

I would suggest you do not give your second attempt in the next consecutive year if your preparation is not up to the mark. When I'm talking of preparation here I mean the preliminary exam, mains and even the interview to some level. If after taking the exam once you feel that you need a longer time to prepare, do so. Do not hurry. But you cannot repeat this in between your second and third attempt and between your third and fourth attempt. Ideally, after your second attempt you should continue giving the exam. Otherwise some stagnancy may creep into your preparation and this may hamper it.

Once we have prepared well, we do not need to work so hard next time. After this the focus is on enhancing your knowledge about the subject and understanding it in depth. To accomplish this you need to think more and study less and you do not need as much time to think as you need to study.

### **Do not take time to get involved**

There is a psychology behind preparing for an exam. Studying the same thing over and over again can get boring and frustrating. If we study with this frame of mind, it will not be of any use. Do not forget that as we age, our enthusiasm to study fizzles out. People also come under a lot of pressure due to increased age. So you should at least start studying at 21 years of age and aim to finish your preparation by the age of 26. If you take too much liberty, you can stretch it to the age of 27, but no more. Forget the fact that you can actually give the exam until the age of 30. Initially the age limit was 26, then it was increased to 28 and now it is 30. It would be

good if the age limit was again reduced to 26. The increase in age limit can keep you in an illusion because you think that there is a lot of time left. But this is actually an indication of weakness. If you want to achieve something, why not work for it now? Why don't people pledge that they will work hard and whatever has to happen will happen by the time they are 26? If this happens fine, otherwise I will try my hand at something else. When you start thinking this way, your brain cannot play tricks on you anymore. This will maximise your efficiency.

Many students, especially those from rural backgrounds overlook an important fact about the civil services. During preparation the students' main focus is to get selected. However, they do not realise that if they get selected at a young age, their career will be better. They can retire from a higher post. For example, in a given year, two men are selected in the same service. One man is 23 years old while the other is 29. While they are from the same batch, there is a 6 year age difference. The 23-year-old has 37 years of service left in him, but the 29-year-old has 31 years only. It is obvious then that the older man will not be able to get the best out of his career.

There is another thing. Let us assume that the younger man has a better ranking than the 29-year-old. In this case, even though they belong to the same batch, the younger man will be considered senior. When the post of a superior falls vacant, it will be offered to the younger man. You may not realise it now but once you are in the service, you may have these bitter experiences. So while planning your preparation do not focus on the maximum age, instead focus on how to achieve your goal as soon as possible.

### **Sit for other competitive exams**

I told you to plan long-term. It will also help you take other competitive exams. Students who follow this do find success somewhere. Some people get egoistic and think that since I'm preparing for civil services why should I take state civil services exams, banking exams, or staff selection commission exams. This way they are only harming themselves.

You should not see various exams as undermining each other. In any case, in any exam whether banking or state civil services, they have one general knowledge paper. Since you are preparing for IAS you do not have to do special studies for these exams. For state civil services you have to read up on the state and this is something you should not avoid.

Even if you do not want to enter these services, you should take the exam for the experience. It will hone your skills and provide continuity to your preparation. It will also boost your confidence if you get selected in any of the exams. So your planning should include taking these exams even if it is not the focal point of your preparation.

What will you do if while preparing for IAS you get selected in some other service? Many students are faced with this dilemma and they worry that if they take up a job, they will not be able to study for IAS. Some worry that if they start working it would dampen their enthusiasm for IAS.

Here is my advice to those who are wondering whether to take up a job or not. If you get a job offer, take it. IAS exam is tough and there is no guarantee of success. But obviously people do get selected, and it could be you.

Don't reject the job; just see how you can manage work as well as studies. For example, if it is possible to delay the joining, do so. You can take a long break, after you have started working. This also depends on how much time you actually need for your preparation.

You will be pleasantly surprised to know that most people who get selected for civil services are those who already have a job. Job is not an obstruction to your civil services aspiration. Why don't you work on honing your skills instead? Reduce your sleeping hours. Cut down on entertainment and spend every minute preparing for it. It is better you figure out a way to juggle both things rather than sit around thinking this is impossible.

### **Manage preparation with regular studies**

Let us assume you are done with your graduation and want to become an IAS. You are not 21 yet. What should you do in this case? Most students focus only on IAS preparation assuming that once they are 21, they can sit for the exam. They are not wrong. But if they change this thinking they could utilise their time better. The subject that you want to opt for in IAS mains, you should choose that subject in your post graduation too. You do not have to be a regular college student to do your post graduation. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has standard notes and it could be a good idea to do a post graduation from IGNOU through correspondence.

This will not only help you prepare for IAS but you will get a post graduate degree as well. Anything can happen in the future. If you don't get selected you will still have a degree.

There is one more thing related to the interview that I must mention. It has been observed that if you have done your post graduation in a subject or conducted research on a subject, you are generally asked questions about it. This way you are also preparing for the interview because it is easier to answer questions on topics that you are aware of.

### **Benefit from experience**

We can only benefit from experience in future if we employ it in our daily lives. Imagine that you took the preliminary exams for the first time and did not get selected. This is an attempt to gain experience. But you will only gain experience from it if you use it efficiently. You need to evaluate the attempt, understand your weaknesses and strong points. It is only after understanding things that you can strengthen your strong points and eliminate your weaknesses. I will explain to you how you should achieve this.

After your preparation is over, the next day or as soon as possible you evaluate the paper and note down the points somewhere. Do not be lazy and think that you will remember everything. You will forget these things and then you will not be able to make the best use of your experience. You can evaluate yourself on the following points –

- a) How many questions did you answer correctly?
- b) How many questions have a 50 per cent chance of being correctly answered?
- c) What confused you about the questions that you could not answer them correctly and thus they only have a 50 per cent chance of being correctly answered? This analysis is important to help you understand your weak points. You will notice that you get baffled by a question because you did not study the topic seriously. This evaluation will help you do better next time.
- d) How many questions could you not answer at all? Try to understand why you could not answer these questions. It could be that you did not study the topic or did not take it seriously enough. It could be that you read the topic but it did not include the particular question that was asked. Try to figure out which book you should have read to be able to answer the question correctly.

e) Also write down how long it took you to finish the exam and what did you do with the remaining time. Students should use the remaining time to solve questions they cannot answer. You should keep in mind that in competitive exams each mark matters.

The most important thing here is not whether you cleared the exam in your first attempt. It has been seen that since the age limit for taking IAS exam has been raised, along with an increase in the number of attempts, the number of students who cleared the exam in their first attempt has gone down to 15 to 16 percent. Now students taking the exam for the second or third time are more likely to be successful. This shows that experiences play an important role in success.

However, experience does not come from merely taking an exam. It is important that you jot down your experiences, analyse them and give it a serious thought. Try to get rid of your weakness with the help of this critical analysis. Otherwise your destiny will be similar to a car which has been started on jack stands so its wheels are turning but it hasn't moved forward even an inch.

