

Common sense in Civil Services-2

The conclusion of the last article was that common sense though individual is also collective. In fact, we can call it collective cognition. In the context of civil services, this collective cognition is important because it can show how practical you are. Maybe your common sense on a topic is quite different and more valuable than the collective sense prevalent on the subject. But if the practical application of your common sense is not good, it will be a waste. For example, let's look at questions asked in civil services that are associated with fundamental problems of economy, rural development, liberalisation and other issues the country faces. You can suggest what you want based on your common sense. But if your ideas and suggestions cannot be implemented on a practical basis, then they are of no use. The right example here would be that of Delhi Sultanate's Mohammad Tughlaq. He introduced the idea of nominal token currency to India. He introduced copper/brass coins which were to pass at the value of the contemporary silver coin. Although his idea was good the practical aspect was not thought through and the experiment reached a disastrous end. It is a different matter that today the currencies across the world are token currencies. This is why before a scheme is launched nation-wide; a pilot project is undertaken by the government. This helps understand the potential problems in implementing the scheme at a larger scale.

I have told you this to make you understand that you should also consider the practical aspects of the suggestions that arise from your common sense. You will see that practical suggestions are mostly collective. But do not mistake common sense to be anti-innovation. You will understand the difference as you read on.

Difference between cognition and analysis

Both papers in the preliminary civil services exams are called General Studies paper 1 and paper 2. Similarly, in the main exam all four papers are of general analysis. In this situation, if you ask why cognition is required, this question would not be wrong. For this purpose, I have raised this point here so that you can understand the difference between the two in detail and prepare for your exam, and maintain the right balance between the two in your answers. Let's learn about this a bit more.

Knowledge-based versus experiential

Before I elaborate on these points, it is better to inform you that in actuality the field of knowledge is so broad that it is impossible to analyze its spheres separately. For example, research, survey, contemplation, experiments, etc all these elements work as sources of knowledge. Although these sources are different from each other, they are not completely unrelated. This is similar to how water that rains on earth ultimately ends up in the sea. Our mind functions like this sea that gathers information from various sources, analyzes it and presents it in many different forms. Therefore, the main difference in these elements is the process and not the objective. The goal is the same for all of these; that is to attain knowledge.

When we say General Studies, the word "general" is similar to the word "common" in common sense. However, these words are not synonyms. The word "common" is broader when compared to the word "general". You can say that "common" contains everything, but "general" only contains some parts of everything. This means that "general" when compared to "common" is more specific and exclusive. When we talk about common sense, it contains the knowledge of the entire village or city, but when talking about general studies, it is evident that it does not include the village or the community, but only a minute part that is specific and important.

Now we look at “studies” and “sense”. It is obvious that study is related to reading and writing. The skill to read and write is called study. This skill needs to be acquired. Without knowledge of language this is impossible. However, for sense it is not necessary to study at all. As a matter of fact, sometimes it feels like study at some point becomes an obstacle for sense. Whereas, sense comes naturally, analytical ability, on the other hand, needs to be developed. In this situation, natural and artificial are in conflict with each other. This conflict becomes an obstacle in the path of sense. In the middle ages, out of all the disciples and saints, most had no knowledge of letters. However, they had a great and in-depth cognitive ability such that they were able to easily talk about deep philosophy with success.

Obviously, when you prepare for the General Studies exam, you have to take help of books. But when you think of common sense you have to keep the books aside. You have to interact with people and indulge in social activities. Your common sense will thus develop without much effort.

You can memorise knowledge and revise it at times. But cognition is based solely on your analysis. This is not something you can memorize. You live in the world and observe things, and therefore you learn. You learn certain things from your own experience while you learn some after listening to other people’s experiences. Someone who has a wealth of experiences will also have a treasure trove of cognition.

How Siddhartha became Buddha is an endorsement of this statement. He had the experience of a palace. After leaving the palace, he met many gurus. He undertook many spiritual practices that they told him to do. But, in the end it was his own meditation that provided him with enlightenment.

But even though it was his own meditation that provided him with the knowledge, it should be noted that he had crossed many processes of knowledge in the context of experience. His own meditation met with the practices he had earlier performed to create a new cognition. It is important for cognition that a person gets involved in varied walks of life and allows all experiences to sink in without any biases or prejudice. This would make your experience multilateral and more practical.

Factual versus hypothetical

When we analyse, we come across numerous facts. A mixture of incidents, figures, and ideas moves around in our minds. We identify the facts important to us and register them in our copies and minds. We can deduct how good someone’s analysis is based on how many facts they are aware of. General Studies analyses these facts. Of course, it is less in-depth when compared to analysis.

However, cognition is solely dependent upon speculation. The role of facts is limited to helping you formulate a hypothesis. These facts are not facts derived from books but from actual society. Until now, whatever we have seen and learnt, before we speculate, quickly flashes in our brains and within these flashes we can catch a glimpse of the hypothesis.

It is not necessary that your hypothesis is totally correct, but it is definitely very close to the truth. As far as the role of hypothesis in the civil services examination is concerned, its contribution is 75 percent of facts.

Structured versus Unformed

The process of analysis is quite similar to the method of science. Things form a sequence. They are noted down from our brains to the pages of our notebooks in the same sequence. This happens because we had kept the facts in our brains. When required these facts can be used. Therefore, their form is in order. It is not entangled or scattered.

Cognition runs contrary to this. A cognition-based expression can be quite unstructured and disorderly. This is because when you are expressing something thoughts and ideas stored in the brain from various sphere and time are manifested on paper; therefore, it is difficult to put them down in an orderly fashion. Often, it is observed that cognition-based style of writing is short. Tulsidasa's background was one of analysis. He composed a huge epic "Ramcharitmanas". However, Kabirdas was an illiterate weaver. He wrote short couplets. This does not mean that these couplets are in anyway less valuable than the long epics. The objective of life is inherent in cognition and therefore it contains greater depth. It is not bound by size for expression.

Limited versus Unlimited

There is a limit to our ability to perform analysis. The problem with those who analyze a lot is that their mind becomes captive within the bounds of analysis. Whenever they talk they try to present the evidence of their analysis mid-conversation. This means they are constantly quoting others. This results in them being able to establish their prestige as a scholar; however, they are unable to become an original thinker. They do earn fame as good researchers.

Cognition means to surpass the limit of knowledge. That is, to forget whatever one has studied and to make statements based on what has been observed and understood. It is at this level that one's consciousness experiences independence in a true manner. As soon as one's brain breaks the cage of analysis, uninhibited flights take place and it becomes boundless.

Originality in its true sense is born at the level of cognition. Otherwise, we keep repeating whatever we have read in our own words. When it comes to originality, it is said that if one quotes without naming the author, one becomes original.

I believe that after reading about the difference between analysis and cognition you would be able to evaluate the level of your knowledge accurately.

Role of common sense in civil services exam

Read thoroughly the question papers prior to and post 2013 and try to read them carefully. You would be able to identify the following differences clearly:

- Previously, the questions in the preliminary examination were fact based. Later, they were more cognition based.
- The removal of optional subject in the preliminary examination is proof in itself that the role of facts in this exam is negligible.
- In the preliminary examination, the second General Studies paper is completely cognition-based.
- In the main paper, give some time to the questions asked in four General Studies papers. Read them carefully. It is possible that you will find these questions easy; these easy questions demand cognition.
- Majority of questions have two parts. The first part requires analysis and the second part requires common sense.
- Now, the essay questions have also changed. One section is fully based on common sense while another is a combination of common analysis and common sense.

What are your thoughts on the interview?

I have provided a general preview of the civil services exam questions, so that when you read ahead you take this seriously. When we believe that something is very useful to us, we behave with it in a good, friendly and serious manner. In the end, it is to our own advantage. Otherwise, our studies continue in a makeshift manner.

Now, I will talk about different stages of civil services exam based on the role of common sense.

Preliminary Examination

As it has been mentioned previously, the second paper in the preliminary exam is solely based on cognition. It does not play a smaller role in the first paper as well. To begin with let's look at the nature of the questions asked. Around 50 percent of the questions are comparatively long and confusing. A statement is provided followed by two, three or four options. If it ended here, it would not be so problematic. But there are more options encrypted within these options. In this situation, by the time you read the entire question, all the facts are mixed up in your brain. In this condition only common sense can rescue you. For example, look at the following question:

Which among the following states are associated with the life of Buddha?

- Avanti 2) Gandhar 3) Kaushal 4) Magadh

Choose the correct answer using the set below -

1. Only 1 and 2
2. Only 2 and 3
3. 1, 3 and 4
4. Only 3 and 4

This is the easiest of all the questions in this pattern. Otherwise, long sentences are provided in the form of options. Anyway, the focus is how common sense can help you to answer this question.

It is obvious that no student is able to memorize names of each and every place. It is not possible, and to be honest, it is not required. In actuality, the question is assessing your common sense. Now, we will apply our common sense to this question.

You must know Gautam Buddha's region fell in the middle of Bihar and Nepal. When Buddha lived 2,500 years ago there were hardly any means of transportation. In any case Buddha used to travel on foot. In this context, we should be able to realize that the areas near this region should be associated with Gautam Buddha's life. If you have an understanding of the map, which you should have, you would be able to find Kaushal and Magadh in the areas around Bihar and Nepal. Now remaining options are Avanti and Gandhar. Avanti or Ujjain is in central India and is quite far away from Magadh. Gandhar is in Afghanistan, which is very far from regions associated with Buddha.

In this situation, we will use our common sense to choose the option which contains Magadh and Kaushal. So we will use our common sense and choose the 'd' option.

I should tell you here that some questions have three options while some have two. It is true that questions which give only two or three options to choose from are easier than those that present four alternatives. But the role of common sense is still strong. Let us look at another example in the following question –

Read the following points:

- Prime Minister reigns over executive branch of the Indian coalition.
- Prime minister is ex-officio head of the Civil Services Board.

Which of the above- mentioned statements is/are true?

1. Only 1, b) only 2, c) both 1 and 2, d) none

You probably have no doubts about the first statement. You must have read about it numerous times. The statement is correct. The second statement is the tricky one. After reading it, our brain starts thinking in a different way. It thinks that since civil services are the foremost services, PM must be the chairman of the board. The question has been posed to trick you. The first statement is given to establish the PM as the head of the executive branch. As government servants, IAS officers have the highest powers. The mind combines both the statements and concludes both to be true. But is this correct? Let us now discuss cognition. Firstly, the board has been established to oversee transfer etc of IAS officers. Do you think the Prime Minister of the country should be involved in such matters? Secondly, the services fall under respective ministries. So it is possible that the minister presiding over the ministry is the ex-officio head of the board. But the probability of the Prime Minister being the ex-officio head is very low. Therefore, we can utilize the cognition we have developed based on things we have heard about administrative affairs to find the correct answer.

We will continue this discussion.

NOTE: This article by Dr. Vijay Agrawal was first published in 'Civil Services Chronicle'.

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