

## Common sense in Civil Services-4

....Continued from previous article

Try to remember the earlier discussion on this topic in which I told you that Indians are more analytical than most other people. As far as the analysis required for the fourth paper of general knowledge is concerned, it is in our DNA. Our grandparents narrate thousands of stories to us. These could range from Vedas and Puranas to animals and birds in the forest. It is not imperative to mention that the message that these stories contain is what is required in the fourth paper. Indians grow up watching Ramleela, Krishnaleela and they participate in festivals and fasts at home, and religious gatherings. We are taught social etiquettes, such as touching the feet of our parents to seek their blessings and considering our guests to be Gods. Our psyche has imbibed all these teachings.

This means that we have started preparing for this paper since we were aware of our existence. It keeps on developing and our experiences enrich it further. So even if we are not aware of the principles in this paper and have not done an organized study on it, we at least have a working knowledge of it. This is our biggest strength and our originality comes from it.

Now we will try to understand the above mentioned things in the context of questions asked in the paper. There are two parts in this paper. The first part has direct questions. The second part presents you with situations. You have to give your opinions and decisions on them. We will take a look at both here.

Read this question carefully. “All men seek happiness. Do you agree? What is happiness to you? Give an example.” (150 words)

To answer this question you have to understand different shades of the question –

- Seeking happiness
- Your opinion on seeking happiness
- Happiness, according to you. They are not asking for opinions of sociologists, philosophers and other intellectuals.
- An example

When you read this question first, it seems easy. It is kind of easy. The challenge here is not gathering the facts but putting them to paper. Once you start writing, your brain will start evaluating all the facts. They start fighting with each other to get space in writing. This is the first challenge. The next challenge is to include all you want to say within the word limit. If you were not bound by the word limit then the tussle of facts in your brain would not bother you as much. This challenge needs to be addressed to score maximum marks in the paper. Else everyone has a bit of knowledge about these matters.

My first question to you is: ‘Tell me can bookish knowledge help you in answering this question?’ This is not about just one question, but all the other questions as well since they are of the same nature. So your answer to this question would be “not much”. But you do have to answer it. So how will you answer the question? Based on your experience. Now think, is this experience different from analysis?

All the questions that are asked have ‘you’ in it. If the ‘you’ element is removed, the question will become one that can be answered with a book. The question instead of being “What is the meaning of happiness to you?” becomes “What is the meaning of happiness?” Once ‘you’ is removed from the question a book takes its place.

But once 'you' are in the picture, the book has to be removed. If still a book exists in your mind that means you are not doing justice to the question. In the question the 'you' part is what brings experience and behavioural aspects which are being termed as analysis and common sense here.

Do not think that you can pass whatever you have read in a book as your own thoughts. Some people do this. But the examiner will see through this because your writing style and language will differ when you are copying from a book and writing something of your own. This would happen at a subconscious level.

In the first three papers of General Studies you have the liberty to quote others or analyse their ideas. But that is not the case with this paper. This paper is focused on you. You can turn yourself into a book and study yourself to prepare for this paper. You are your own book. This is why your opinion is asked at the end of the question. This opinion is not an intellectual opinion but more of a behavioural one. If you feel that this talk is abstract I shall give you few examples using questions that were asked in previous exams. Here are a few questions –

- What do you understand from dedication in public life? What are the problems faced in following this in the modern world? How can you overcome these challenges? (150 words)
- Which eminent personality has most inspired you in the context of ethical conduct? Give the gist of his/her teachings. Giving examples describe how you employed those teachings for your own ethical development. (150 words)
- The current society is plagued by widespread trust-deficit. What are the consequences of this situation for personal well-being and social well-being? What can you do at a personal level to make yourself trustworthy? (150 words)

Let me tell you that all these questions have been taken from a single year's paper. There are numerous such examples that you will find so I have not mentioned them here. The purpose of these examples was to tell you how the answers expect personal honesty from you. You should know that the idea behind including this paper in the main exam is to test your ethics and dedication. This can only happen by perusing the papers of your own life, not those of books.

Questions worth almost 130 marks are asked in the first part of this paper. There are few questions that will ask you your viewpoint on a social issue. The opinions asked in this paper are different from those asked in three other papers of General Studies. The main difference is that in the fourth paper you have to say what you think. In the other papers you can repeat what others have said.

For example take this question, "We are witnessing a rise in cases of sexual violence against women. The incidences are increasing despite the existing legal provisions against it. Suggest some innovative methods to tackle this menace. (150 words)

Pay attention to the word innovative. It means new, something that has not been used yet. The word innovative is the soul of the answer. If you answer with methods that have been used before, it would not be the right answer. So where will these innovative ideas come from? The answer is from analysis and behaviour.

Part B of the paper is entirely student-based. Studies in Indian Institute of Management are conducted in this format and I'm a fan of this format. I think studies should be conducted in this format. NCERT books follow this format up to some extent. But emphasis is on facts and not on the behavioural aspects of it. If we start focusing on the practical aspects I think the talent pool we will have will be different than the current one. The world and society is practical at the end of the day. Principles help us ensure that practicality. Let us just say that if you have read NCERT books with concentration you will be able to score high marks in this paper.

We can refer to Part B as decision making. No matter on what issue your opinion has been asked, your viewpoint will describe how you would solve the issue when faced with it. This will clearly explain your personality, your thinking process, your approach towards work, behavioural knowledge of the world and your virtues just like a simple blood test can reveal many ailments your body could be suffering from.

Take this example.

Q- Imagine a close friend of yours, who is also a civil services aspirant, comes to you to discuss ethical conduct in public life. He raises the following points:

1. In the present times, when unethical environment is quite prevalent, individual attempts to stick to ethical principles may cause a lot of problems in one's career. It may cause hardship to the family members as well as risk to one's life. Why should we not be pragmatic and follow the path of least resistance and be happy with doing whatever we can?
2. When so many people are adopting wrong means and are grossly harming the system, what difference would it make if only a small minority tries to be ethical? They are going to be rather ineffective and are bound to get frustrated.
3. If we become fussy about ethical considerations, will it not hamper the economic progress of our country? After all in the present age of high competition we cannot afford to be left behind in the race of development.
4. It is understandable that we should not get involved in grossly unethical practices, but giving and accepting small gratifications and doing small favours increases everybody's motivation. It also makes the system more efficient. What is wrong in adopting such practices? Critically analyze the above viewpoints. On the basis of this analysis, what will be your advice to your friend? (250 words)

This question presents you with four points. You have to give your opinion on all four. You have to explain whether you agree with them or no. If you observe closely none of the questions refer to law and order. If the same problem was part of a law paper, the answers would be based on the law. But you have to address the questions based on ethics so you do not have to study law for it. You are, however, expected to know the law of life and that of the society.

Read the last sentence of the problem. It asks you to critically analyze. What is this analysis? It is the analysis you have conducted on the four options. If you want to choose one of the options as your answer, you are free to do so. But if you want to give a different opinion that is also allowed. It is obvious that whatever you suggest to your friend is what you would have chosen for yourself. It is therefore your opinion.

This paper is very interesting. It seems as if amidst the hustle and bustle of life you have to navigate your way through the many streets in your neighbourhood. Is this not interesting? It is interesting if you have made your way through the streets of life. It is something you should do. It is this experience that results into analysis.

## Interview

After clearing the mains you reach the UPSC building, a circular structure standing amid the lush green trees on Shah Jahan road, to give your interview. I have spoken on the interview in great detail in my book 'How to become an IAS'. I would like to mention a few things here that are linked to common sense. These will be of great assistance to you.

You should understand this very well that interview is not to judge your knowledge. That has already taken place and hence you have reached this stage. In a way, you can call this interview a general representation of the

fourth exam of General Studies. The personality traits and values that you displayed in writing in that paper now you have to introduce them at a personal level.

To give a good interview you need to have a lot of self-confidence. Is it that you are scared of the interview? Feeling vulnerable at this stage is different, most people will experience that. But being afraid is different from being vulnerable. Where does this fear arise, a fear that is haunting you like a ghost? This fear stems from impracticality. This fear exists because you have protected yourself from the challenges in life. Or you may be scared of talking to people. You may panic even when faced with small problems. You panic because you lack the experience to deal with such situations.

Now, let us deal with another thing. Although, the interview starts in a question answer format it takes the shape of a discussion very soon. You will be asked a question which you feel is on a topic but then you will realise that it is not about your knowledge of the topic but about the problems associated with the topic. Now you will see that you are faced with a difficult situation and since you do not have the experience of dealing with such situations, this becomes your biggest difficulty.

It is important that solutions you give to solve the problems are practical. When you suggest solutions in the exam, the examiner cannot cross question you. The situation is different here. Your situation now is like that of a parliamentarian who has to answer a volley of questions based on his answer to a question. Many questions are asked from him, questions are asked on his answers as well. You have to calmly bear all the questions and give satisfactory answers. Now you must have understood where a future administrator, sitting in front of an experienced interview board, would get help from.

Let me come to an entirely different set of questions that were abundant before but are now asked only in small numbers. This example is that of my batch mate. He was asked, 'Imagine you are the collector of a district. You are informed on phone that a train accident has taken place in the area. What will be the first step you will take? Before you read any further, it is better if you think of an answer. Usually, the first thing that comes to mind in such a situation is how to save lives. According to this we would answer that we would send a team of doctors, send teams for search and rescue etc. My batch mate's answer was: 'Sir, I would first find out whether the train was a passenger train or a freight train?'" He scored very well in the interview.

The question here is that how did he think of such an answer. I did not ask him this but I assume that he could give this answer based on his knowledge of the practicality of life. In such situations also, common sense is our biggest strength.

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