

Psychological challenges faced by IAS aspirants

“Sir, I have terrible news. Two boys committed suicide last night.” I was shocked when I heard this on my phone at 10pm during the day. “Why, what happened?” I asked. “Sir, you know that the results of preliminary exams were declared yesterday. Both of them were not selected. So they took the extreme step.” I was taken aback. I felt shocked and as if there was a void inside of me. A wave of grief gripped me. What would I do even with the world at my feet! If we die it does not matter how beautiful the world is because it has ended for us. Why would they take such a foolish step?

It is not true that such incidents have risen after economic liberalization. I’m narrating an incident from 2015. I also recall an incident that occurred in 1980 when I was in Delhi to take coaching classes. I was staying as a paying guest and had a student from Uttar Pradesh as my neighbour. We would talk and study together sometimes. After a year, I heard that he had committed suicide. I could not stop thinking: Why? He killed himself because he could not make it to IAS. You would be surprised to know that he was already posted as a deputy collector in UP. Actually his problem was not that he was not selected for IAS but that four of his brothers were. He must have been suffering from an inferiority complex. But when he failed his last attempt and all doors to IAS closed for him, he took this foolish step.

Friends, I have included this topic in the book knowing fully well that it won’t help you during competitive exams. You will find nothing in this section that would aid your preparation. But now I feel firmly that the preparation for civil services is not one-sided and two-sided, rather it is a multi-pronged approach. It poses many challenges, it is quite difficult and 99 percent chances are that one would fail. Therefore, I feel that you need an anchor to keep you from being carried away in the flood of these challenges.

You should have no doubt that IAS is not such a big deal that the value of our life, which is beautiful, important and difficult at the same time, is reduced to pennies. If you have decided to get a government job then IAS is the best choice for you. But it is not that other jobs are not important in comparison. In fact, IAS is not more important than life. I have seen many people and heard of those who got selected in the IAS, worked for some time but then quit to do something else. This is not a new phenomenon. You must have heard about Subhash Chandra Bose. During his time, being an IAS officer was quite a big deal. In 1921, during the British era, an Indian became an IAS officer and secured the fourth position in the merit list. After a few months of training, and despite a lot of persuasion from the British, Bose resigned.

Joining IAS and then leaving the service still happens. The only thing to think about here is that if you are working hard to achieve something, why you would change your mind when you have it. I am not demoralising you here. I’m only trying to apprise you of the truth of IAS and that of life.

Obviously, when we do not get something it becomes very important to us. But does it have the same value for us when we achieve it? No, it does not. I feel that it is better this way. If after joining IAS you want to quit, it means that your stature is now higher than the stature that IAS can provide you. Earlier you were considering yourself to be very small when compared to IAS. Today, your stature is so enormous that IAS seems small in comparison.

The question here is one of relativity. After you reach a certain level, you might start thinking, “I should do something else because I can. And that something that I would do is better than what I’m doing right now.” The definition of ‘better’ is different for different people. One could perceive something as better if the job provides a higher salary, better facilities, more opportunities to work, more comfort, it may be more creative, may have a greater social impact, include travelling or most importantly it may give satisfaction. You must have heard of

Aruna Roy, a Rajasthan-cadre IAS officer from the 1974 batch. You would be surprised to know why she left her job after a few years of working. She did not join another job after quitting. She started living in a village. She opened an NGO in the village. She can be credited with providing us the Right to Information (RTI) that is helping to boost transparency in the Indian system.

Now I don't mean to say that IAS is worthless. I'm trying to tell you that IAS is very important but not so important that it should be valued more than your life. In fact everything else does not matter when compared to life. Life is everything as it makes it possible for you to do things. We don't know how many opportunities are awaiting us in the future. Selection in the IAS could pave the way for a happy phase in your life. It is an achievement but this does not mean that once you become an IAS you should not aim for anything else. It is possible that you could achieve something far more great. The vast opportunities lurking in the womb of life should not be overlooked in any circumstances, even if your current failure makes it difficult for you to believe so.

Since IAS is a major challenge, not getting selected seems like a huge failure. To cope with this failure you have to strengthen the nervous system of your brain. This is just like raining blows on a wrestler who does not even bat an eyelid, but if you hit your friend with even half of the force, chaos would ensue.

Friends I would like to make you aware of some psychological challenges posed by the civil service exam. This would help you remain aware of the challenges so that when the psychological storm blows you are quipped to face it. This is not a difficult task. But sometimes I feel that youngsters with such a weak mind do not deserve to be in the IAS. I'm not criticising these young people. I have complete sympathy for them. Sometimes I feel sorry for how narrow-minded they are.

When you become a civil servant, remember you are not lying down in a plank of flowers. Instead you are inviting challenges. People are tired of solving their own problems, and can't even solve them half the time. You are taking upon the responsibility of solving the problems of the world. You are essentially assuring people that you would solve their problems. Do you think it is easy to be a king? Is it easy to remain a king? Importantly, is it easy to become a good king? If you think about these things in depth your mind will explode. When we read about or watch movies on kings and queens we envy them. We believe they live awesome lives. But we do not realize that every moment of their lives is difficult, full of expectations, full of fear and pressurising. Relief and contentment have vanished from their lives forever. In fact they can't even think they would ever be content. They never have an off, even if they are not holding a 'darbaar'.

You are not becoming a king. But your desire to be one is manifested in your ambition to be at this top-level post in a democracy. There is nothing wrong in it. It is wrong when you start thinking of it as a medium of comfort and wealth. You will have all of this but you will have to pay for the comforts. It will be repaid in the work you do. Again there is no harm in this. No society will give you anything for free. They should not even do this. So if a society gives you rights it is not so you enjoy them. It is so that you use them to fulfil your duties. In fact anyone who wants to be a civil servant should know that he is not going to enjoy but make others happy and find satisfaction in that.

So how would this be possible? It is obvious that many people will come to you with their problems whether they are common people or your colleagues. The situation will be such that you will be surrounded by people wanting a solution for their problems. You cannot escape this situation. In fact you might even dream of solving problems when you sleep. People give up when they are faced with such problems and you have to stay in the middle of people and their problems and find a solution without giving up. Now if in the midst of solving other people's problems if it becomes too much for you, how would things work? If the captain deserts what will happen to his group of soldiers? You have to understand that your breaking in this situation is tantamount to

break up of the entire group around you and not just that of a single person. You are single but you are not. You have become multiple persons. In many cases you will have to sacrifice self for the benefit of these multiple persons. This means you will have to put your own problems aside to focus on those of others. Remember that the problems you face will not be simple ones. If they were small problems the concerned person would solve them themselves. Your subordinate could have also found a solution to the problems. The problems you will face will be the ones none of these people can solve. The higher your ranking is, the more complex the problem will be.

Friends the truth that I'm going to explain to you here is that the road to IAS is difficult but the road after becoming an IAS officer is tougher. A poet put it thus:

“Sahilkesukoon se kiseinkaarhailekin,

(Who is averse to enjoying the peace of the sea shore, but)

Toofan se ladnekamazaaur hi kuchhai.

(The joy of fighting the storm is indescribable)”

What is more important than the happiness that you get from treading this difficult path is the satisfaction that you get from it. It is fantastic. This peace should be the force that motivates you to become a civil servant. If your motivation is something else, such as the comforts I talked about earlier, you will be disappointed. Your illusions will be dispelled. You can only find happiness at that level if you can row a boat in a stormy sea and enjoy it as well. There will be waves. They will lift the boat, sometimes they will enter the boat. Consequently, the boat will sway. You might worry that it will sink any minute. But you should assure yourself that it won't sink. Instead of screaming in fear, you will be chuckling with excitement. If you do this, then performing the duties of a civil servant will be a carnival for you, a pure carnival that not only provides you satisfaction but also to those around you.

The challenge posed by civil services demands you to be mentally strong. This is the biggest trial you could face. A psychologically weak person cannot perform this role. Thus, the first thing for you to do is to acquire mental strength if you are feeling weak. You will have to start work on this right away. Do not think that once you get the job you will become mentally strong. You can definitely strengthen your mind at that position. But it is not possible to turn wood into iron. It is however possible to form steel from iron. If you think you will not be able to become mentally strong, you should give up on your civil service dreams.

Due to the lack of a strong mind, firstly it will be difficult for you to reach this stage. Even if you do reach this stage you will not be able to do anything great, especially any of the ideas that you have in mind. This will result in frustration. Subsequently, quality of your life will decline to such an extent that it won't matter then that you are a civil servant. You should accept this fact with sincerity. This is why I said that a 25-year-old who is full of energy, who has just started his life and has a long way to go, if he chooses to end his life then what could be bigger proof of his cowardice. If he cannot survive such a small failure, how will he deal with people when they bombard him with their problems and create a ruckus when they are not solved and criticise him. It is obvious that such people do not have the right perspective of civil services. They cannot see what civil services is all about. They just catch a glimpse of what they want to see. This is why when they feel they won't be able to achieve it, they kill themselves. Do you think anyone should take this step? Most importantly, could anyone be allowed to do so?

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