

Time management for Civil Services-2

Continued from Part-1.....

Once you have an intense time schedule laid out, you are eager to start studying. But this rush may lead to failures. If you are in a hurry, your study would not be in depth, it would lack knowledge. This rush may help while studying for other competitive exams. But the deep knowledge that civil services requires is not easy to achieve through shortcuts. One needs patience for this and a long-term plan.

How long should your plan be? You have numerous attempts and a higher age limit. So does a long-term plan entail that you should plan until your last attempt or the last possible age limit? This could be dangerous. This is because we would keep postponing our preparation in such a scenario. Psychologically, we would think that we have ample time, so we can study later. That time would never actually come.

I think the maximum we should plan for is the third attempt. You need to clear the exam at three levels. It would be ideal if you could clear each extra level with subsequent attempts. It may be difficult to qualify preliminary exam in your first attempt. This is why the first attempt is considered a maiden over. However, in the second attempt, one should be able to qualify both pre and mains. It is possible that would become your last attempt. Even if that is not the case, you would gain the experience. This would help boost your chances of success in the third attempt.

If you are unable to qualify in your third attempt, you should still try. You still have good chances of tasting success. So you should steer clear of studying in an impatient manner and being careless as a result.

It is important not only from the view of time management but also from that of success in civil services that you understand that there is no need to read too many books. It is a myth that the more we read, the more we learn. The truth is that this would make us confused. Consequently, when we do write answers, we end up writing things that do not fulfil the requirement of the question. Friends, I'm not asking you to not study, I'm merely saying that study as much is required and is important.

To be honest, qualifying civil services requires less of studying and more of thinking. If we go by this principle, the problem of time is solved. Now you need less time to study. And when it comes to thinking that can be done anywhere and everywhere. You do not need a book in your hands or a table and chair to think. I'm not giving you false information. I'm laying bare the truth of civil services.

Now, it is time to determine what is important to study. I have already explained this in great detail in a previous book so I won't repeat the things here. However, two important things that I would take the liberty to mention are:

Firstly, read NCERT books to clear and grasp the basics of subjects. You don't have to read or memorise the topics. You need to understand them. You have to understand them in the way you understand the formulae in mathematics. If you know the correct formula in a mathematical question, you can solve all questions from that particular topic. The same should hold true for general studies.

I would stress here that you should take as much time as needed to go through the NCERT books. Do not link your preparation to hours, instead focus on this: I need to understand the topic well. This is important because the students who do not have a good hold on their subject are the ones who are unable to qualify preliminary exam, or those who qualify the preliminary exam but not the mains, or those who qualify mains in a particular

year but fail to qualify preliminary exam the next year. It would be a coincidence that someone is able to qualify the exam without having a good grasp over their subject. But these are the ones standing on the thin line between failure and success. It won't take much for their rank to fall and their name to be out of the list of successful candidates. There is no reason a person whose basics are strong would fail in his attempts. However, it is possible that he may not get the desired ranking due to low scores. To boost your ranking, you need to study in a slightly different manner, I will discuss that later. But let me assure you that even to increase rankings, the foundation is laid by your grasp on the basics.

Think about it yourself. You have a good hold on the basics. You have prepared for the optional paper as well. You can complete this in a year. This is not at all impossible. After a year, you take the preliminary exam. You will either qualify for mains or not. If you did get a chance to take the mains, you were unable to qualify. In both cases now, you have to take the exams again next year. Now you have to strategise how much time you need if you take the exam again. "A little time," this is not the only answer to this. There are two ways to answer this. If you have knowledge about all the basics, the answer is "a little time." If you have not prepared basics well, the answer is "a long time." In fact, this time could be as long as the time devoted during the previous year. You have to start afresh, this is because you did not utilise your time efficiently in the previous year. If you had used the time efficiently, then you would spend only half the time preparing this year.

There is another thing here. You must be thinking that the time that is spent on reading the news would still be the same. But this is not how it works. Since you have cleared the basics, and are aware of many such topics, it would not take you so much time to prepare them. The time would be reduced to half of what it was before.

Principles of time management

Friends, if you do not take it otherwise, let me start this with an example from my own life. This is because it is my own experience and I'm proof that it was a success. My aim here is not to highlight my achievements. I'm not saying that you have to follow the same principles. Everybody is in a different situation. Everyone has different needs and different requirements. They also have different capabilities. This is why I'm very clear that the time management model that I followed may not be the one for you. Your model may be different but it is possible that you may get some behavioural principle from it, which is similar and works for you.

Friends, I started my preparation in 1979 and took the exam in 1980. I thought that I'm now prepared. I realised the truth when the results were out. The way I had incorrectly answered certain questions was shameful. Obviously, it was an illusion that I was fully prepared. Maybe I prepared for it like we prepare for our college exams. But I had reached the stage where I knew the truth. This is why I came up with a long-term plan and decided that I would not take the exam in 1981.

Since in my time, one had to opt for two optional subjects, I needed the long-term plan. One of my optional subjects was Hindi literature in which I had completed my post graduation. I was, in fact, teaching the subject in college since the past two years. So I did not feel the need to prepare extensively for this subject. The second optional subject was History, which I was quite interested in. I also believed that History would help improve my general knowledge. History was my subject in preliminary exam too. In those times, a general studies paper was included in preliminary exams and you could opt for another subject.

I am telling you these things because even though I had a good hold on the two subjects I did not consider myself knowledgeable enough to give civil services a shot. I kept myself away from rushing it and after a gap of a year took the exam in 1982. I don't know how I would have done if I had taken the exam in 1981. But I took the exam in 1982 and things happened exactly the way I wanted them to. This is why I think that the plan that I made was successful. Maybe I would have taken the exam in 1981 and not have been selected and then taken it

again in 1982 and might have failed to clear it. I don't know what I would have done then. We had only three attempts back then.

Friends, let us discuss the important bit about managing time here. While preparing for civil services I was doing two other things. I was teaching in a college and I was conducting research for my PhD. I did not stop doing any of this. While all the three things I was doing were different, they were also somehow linked. I was teaching Hindi literature in college while finishing my PhD in the same subject. Although, it is true that whatever I taught did not aid too much in my preparation because I was mostly teaching things I had taught the previous batches. The benefit that I did get was that the process worked sort of like a revision exercise for me. The topic I had chosen for my PhD did not directly relate to my preparation but since all three are related to academics and studies let's say that they were linked.

Ambikapur in Chattisgarh is a small town. It took me a maximum of 10 minutes to bike from my house to college. In college, I had to take only four courses that lasted for 45 to 45 minutes. This took three hours. However, this was not a matter of three hours. In this, I spent from 10 in the morning to 4 in the evening. It is a strange thing that we do not receive help from someone we expect would help us. All the professors there knew that I was preparing for civil services. They also knew that nothing may come out of it. Yet, they wanted to be assuring. On the surface, everyone used to motivate me for this, and the senior professors used to promise me all kinds of help. However, the truth was not what it appeared to be. It was the opposite of this. If my department wanted then they could have very easily given me permission to take four classes together, so that I would be free from college in three hours. In the remaining hours, I could have done my preparation. But my college's timetable was made in such a way that I had to attend my first class at 10 am in the morning and the last class at 3 pm in the evening.

Nevertheless, it was what it was. In this state, we only have three options. Either we change what is or we leave it and separate ourselves from it, or whatever the situation is, we find our way through it. I did not have the ability to change things. If I had left everything and detached myself then would we eat? For this reason, I adopted the one and only remaining option. So now, I will get to the topic of what I did.

- I consider mornings the best time for studying. It is not important that you also consider the same. In any case, in small towns, there is not much to do at night and even TV was not invented in 1980. In this sense, I was fortunate. In any case, I used to try my best to study for at least 1.5 to 2 hours in the morning. I used to do this. If on any day, for some reason, I could not do this then I used to suffer from guilt all day. I would chide myself and be absentminded throughout the day. This was advantageous, because if I had to save myself from this mental suffering, the only option was to study for 1.5 to 2 hours every morning no matter what. Therefore, to deal with this obligation, I had formed my own psychological mechanism.
- After studying, I used to go for a stroll, which I still do. This hour is my time to enjoy various experiences. The environment, chirping of birds, slow breeze, swaying trees and gradually emerging sky. This filled my heart with a unique sense of joy.
- In the morning, the brain is more energetic. There is no entanglement of any kind. Therefore, I used to spend this time to review topics that I have studied just before in the morning. Quietly, I used to revise those topics. Especially, where there was a missing link or if I felt that that I am forgetting something, I used to take a mental note of those separately in my mind. Upon reaching home, I would search for these topics in the book and fill the missing links. The truth is that this was very beneficial to me because I reviewed these topics in the books, and even if I did forget other topics naturally, I could never forget these topics. Friends, not only did I enjoy productive study sessions in the morning, but also the strolls were providing me with an opportunity to strengthen my knowledge.

After that, daily chores began. After getting ready, I prepared for my lectures. Next, I used to leave for college. Time from 10 in the morning to 4 in the evening was spent in college. Since the house was close to the college, I ate lunch at home.

There is another task I did. The time that I spent in college was not completely busy. There were some breaks in between. So I thought of how to use the free time. I did not have an option. Therefore, I divided my preparation in two distinct parts.

The first part which was of a serious nature and for which I needed more peace and more time at a stretch. The second part consisted of preparation that was not normally very serious and which could be studied in small sections. The serious topics I saved for the morning and the tidbits I saved to study while at college. I used to take such books, magazines and newspapers with me to college which I could read there. As soon as I got some spare time, I used it. If you ask for the truth, these bits of preparations combined together would result in a comprehensive preparation. This is how I managed to complete bits of work in college.

At 4 pm, after reaching home, I once again spent around 1.5 to 2 hours of my time in different ways. Sometimes, I did PhD related work. Sometimes, I prepared for civil services. However, I should make it clear that because after the result in 1980 I had decided to take the examination in 1982, I had enough time. Therefore, I was preparing in a relaxed manner for my exam and I feel that the result of this approach was that while I qualified the civil services exam in 1983, I got the results of my PhD within a few days too. There was a gap of 15 days. I feel that if had I made both these tasks stressful, which means if I had taken the civil services exam in 1981, then things would have been difficult. Or you could say that the level of success achieved would not have been as good as it was. Nonetheless, whatever the situation would have been, I have no doubt that the decision I made was best suited to my circumstances and sensible. This is probably why it bore fruit.

Friends, I have put the gist of my preparation in the form of a story in front of you. Now, I would like to put some formulae in front of you which you can use in your own way.

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