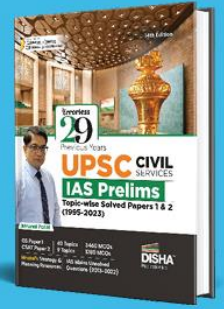




29 Years Previous Year Question Papers was constantly on my study table, and I have referred them every day. I have practiced extensively from Prelims PYQs and revised from it multiple times. For Aspirants, follow the CSAT PYQs as well from this book. Another Book I followed was Compulsory English for Mains.

**Animesh Pradhan**  
UPSC CSE 2023, AIR 2



**Avinash:** So hello everyone. My name is Avinash Agarwal. I welcome you all on behalf of the Disha publication. Today we have Animesh Pradhan with us who has secured all India rank 2 in the civil services examination 2023. The case of Animesh Pradhan is very interesting and insightful because he has broken a lot of bets on his journey towards cracking the examination.

Animesh Pradhan was born and brought up in a small village in Odisha. He studied from DAV public school. So unlike what most of us think who think that one needs to be from a big school and a big city. He did his B. Tech from NIT Rourkela. No IIT tag. He prepared for the civil services examination while he was doing a full-time job, breaking the notion that you need to leave everything else to prepare for civil services. And last but not the least, he cracked the civil services examination in the first attempt.

This is again, contrary to the belief which most of us have that we require a preparation of at least 5 to 6 years to crack this exam. So this is going to be very interesting, deep interview wherein we would not talk about the syllabus, the pattern, and how we can crack the prelims and how to choose optional, rather we would deep dive into the strategy and methodology of this exam, and try to understand how he was able to crack India's toughest examination. So stay on till the end. Welcome, Animesh. So a warm up question. I would appreciate if you can share your journey from an aspirant to UPSC topper, about your background, family, you know, everything so that we set the context right.

**Animesh:** First of all, sir, thank you so much and the entire team of Disha publication for inviting me and giving me this opportunity that I come here and share my happiness with you. And, I am extremely grateful that my journey from being an aspirant to, a qualified and a rank holder and a topper was very short. It ended with my first attempt. Extremely extremely lucky and grateful for that.

A brief about me as you said, I come from a place in Odisha called Talcher, which is a coal mines area And I studied in same school from LKG to 12, 14 long years in same school called DAV Public School Culling Area, Talcher. And then I moved on and did my BTech in computer science and engineering from IIT Rourkela. And then through campus, I got placed in Indian Oil, and I was posted and still working with Indian oil corporation. As in throughout my preparation, I was working and I did not take any extended leaves per se for preparation purpose. And, a bit of tragedy, when I was in class 11th, I had lost my father.

My father was a political science lecturer, in Talcher. And, my mother who had always been the most significant pillar of my strength, we lost her a month back before my results came out in March. I'm so sorry. And throughout the 2

years of preparation that I had, we were, fighting her terminal breast cancer. So I started preparation full fledgedly after a month when she was diagnosed with the terminal breast cancer, and that was a bigger fight in life.

I'm still coping with that loss, but I'm very happy that because of my success, her legacy is getting continued and people are getting to know what a wonderful woman she was. And I have an elder sister who works with the government of Odisha's assistant multicultural officer. And, yeah. So this is a brief background of me.

**Avinash:** So Animesh, it all looks very humble, but there is something more to it, I mean to say, you know, you know, this not only inspires me, but as you see, whenever we talk of UPSC, so what I hear whenever I speak to aspirants is that we require 4 to 5 years, so there must be something that you did different from others. You must be knowing something that others don't. And that "something" has distinguished you from the crowd in spite of you losing both your parents while, you know, you were a student and while you were preparing and in spite of all this clearing the examination, working full time, clearing it in the first time, and that too, securing all India rank 2. So what was it that you did it differently or was it all a matter left for luck?

**Animesh:** I mean, obviously, luck and blessings of my parents for sure would have played a huge role. But I think a bit of context to everybody who's watching this as well. I had a brief stint with the preparation of 2 years. I started full fledged preparation in February 2022, and the exams were in May 2023. So that's one, one and a half year of preparation, 1 year of the entire exam cycle.

But I think the kind of upbringing I had, the kind of climate that I was subjected to in my childhood, my school, and then in college would have helped me. My, as I said, my father came from political science background. My mother was a history postgraduate. So our dinner table conversations in school days had always been about things in economy, polity, what's happening in national international news. I remember, like, now elections have come up, results have come up.

I remember during 2014 time, I and my father would sit down with a pen and paper and do an analysis of food, when and which seeds. And I was pretty young at that time. So I had this inclination towards the country, humanities, and the subjects that are part of syllabus right from my childhood days. In college, I was an avid debater. I did student journalism there as well.

So I had this inclination towards everything that's asked in UPSC, but I did not pick up a book per se in college for UPSC preparation. And I enjoyed my college life to the fullest. But I was always a very aware citizen, aware person, which I think must have helped me, to crack this exam in the first attempt. But you just said that, you know, you know, everything everything was falling in place and, you know, kind of a foundation was being laid. What was the time wherein you thought about pursuing this career and giving the UPSC exam. Did you realise it long before, while you were pursuing your B.Tech or while you were doing your job that you want to crack this exam?

So I this was a very planned career, trajectory that I had. Right from very early childhood, I can remember I wanted to become an IAS officer, not knowing the intricacies of the job. I just was fascinated with it. And my father had ingrained the idea of it. But in high school and all, I was very clear that I want to do this as a profession.

But I was also clear that I come from a humble background, and then I lost my father in 11th and then I knew that financial independence would be the priority. And I knew that I'll have to pick up either medical and engineering

because back at home, those were the very avid career choices. And I had I was a PCM based student. I was getting a medical I was I had enrolled at good school with NEET as well and JEE. And then I took engineering with the hope that I'll get a job early and take up a job and prepare alongside. So everything that I'd done so far on a career front was very planned to prepare for this exam and get the success as soon as possible.

**Avinash:** So, Animesh, whenever we talk about, another crucial topic that crops is UPSC the syllabus. It looks like an endless sea, so what is the way to manage the syllabus because as we were talking, there is a difference between studying and preparing and most of the students probably get lost in this, you know, syllabus as it has to be covered in width as well as depth. How were you able to manage all this? Should we cover the entire syllabus or should we leave some parts of it? How do you and how do you decide about what are the resources? Because in today's day and age, there are too many, you know, there is a problem of abundance also.

There is a surplus of available resources. And, you know, you get trapped into, you get into that trap that other students are studying from that particular source, so I should also follow this, and, you know, you get lost. So how do you manage the syllabus with depth, resources? How do you know work this out?

**Animesh:** So, in my opinion, everything in the syllabus comes, and I would not advise to leave anything. Do it. But the again, the point is you have to prioritize your topics. It's an exam where everything under the sun is a part of the syllabus. So what comes handy is thorough analysis of the PYQ, previous editions, where you understand what subjects you want to go, what deeper, what depth you have to cover, what breadth you have to cover for one particular topic. And for what topic you can manage. it's manageable if you do it on a surface level as well.

So that would depend on kind of questions, kind of complexities of that particular topic would be encountering. So you can modify your preparation that way, but do not leave anything at all because you'll never know the pattern would change, on any day, and you could be at a disadvantage. And second, I was also, lucky slash unlucky. I'm not sure. I did not have a peer group or circle.

I just said that you would see somebody's reading that material and there'll be abundance of material that is as in I was preparing all alone but still I was I encountered with a lot of materials and I had to filter it down. But that also got limited because I was not in touch with anybody. So I'd made up a mind that these are the resources. I binged towards a lot of top of videos before starting. So I had made up a list. These are the things that I would prepare. Obviously, I did a lot of additions and, omissions afterwards as well. But as you said, everything, every material was picking up from the mindset that I have to do Tayari, not padhai. Padhai would be a secondary thing which would come a long way. But I'll have to gather content and manage something so that I'm preparing to clear the exam primarily and secondly to get knowledge.

**Avinash:** So a very interesting thing that has come out and which is again contrary to the common belief because when we being a publishing company speak to a lot of students and aspirants, people don't understand the importance of PYQ's. They think that it is something to be referred to after the preparation is complete. Contrary to this, he is saying that PYQs play a strategic role even as you start your preparation. They help you understand how deep you have to dive into a topic during your preparatio. So a very, very deep insight and very, very interesting thing. Second thing, you know, as everything under the sun comes under the syllabus. But we don't just have to capture it in our mind, besides capturing we also need to recall on top of the mind, recall and analyse. So notws play a significant role. The art and science of note making that what whatever you're seeing, whatever you're reading, how do you capture it and how quickly you are able to reproduce it. So, did you too make notes? How did you make them? And what are the other things that we must keep in mind while note-making?

**Animesh:** So I had 2 sets of notes. 1 which catered to the mains and one for the prelims. I made everything handwritten. I could not just do with digital notes. So the notes, in my opinion, my main notes especially were in an answer format. Because at the end of the day, you'll be writing max 2 or 3 page in a question.

So there's no point if you keep on making a note on a topic for 7 pages or 10 pages like we do in graduation days. And then with exam, it will be writing for 7 minutes in a 10 marker and 11 minutes in a 15 marker. So no point in making bulky notes. So my notes were very compressed as if it's then in an answer format, which I can just replicate if I'm getting any question in that topic. So it would have, like, initial, data points, statistics, then the challenges or steps taken, every one one line.

There would be the value addition materials like stats, examples, Supreme Court judgments, articles, case studies, but everything packed in 1 or 2 page maps for every topic of means. And I made it a point that, I should have this one pager note of every topic throughout the mains so that whatever topic comes, I'll be able to just replicate my notes there. With an example, you don't have time to think. It's a physically draining process as well to write so many papers continuously. And your mind just can't take time to think.

So I made my notes so that I do not,

a) add in exam writing process becomes easier. And second, the revision and everything gets easy because for those 1 pager note, 2 pager note for every topic. So these were my mains notes. The prelims note that I made, which is after thorough reading of a material. Because what I found is that, for example, you're reading a very standard book, and I used to read it for 3, 4 times.

And then I used to make notes from that. Only of those material which I knew that I'll forget it or which would need at least a revision 7 days before the actual exam and not the things that I would have already internalised. The things I felt that I would not be able to internalise, those would come to my notes so that those will be my last-minute notes.

**Avinash:** So your prelims notes were different from the mains notes? Does that mean that we should prepare differently for different different phases? You know, what I'm trying to ask is that, for example, there are 3 major milestones in this journey. 1 is prelims and other is mains, and the third one is the interview. And all 3 have quite requirements. So according to these stages, what type of changes should we adopt during our preparation? And I am very surprised. And one thing which is very interesting, which has come up is that he made different notes for prelims with a different mindset but only for those topics he could not internalise, and different notes for mains. Perhaps the mains notes would be in-depth and analysis based whereas the prelims notes would be more factual. Could you enlighten us on how aspirants should maintain the flow of their work? And should we prepare for mains right from the start or should we focus on prelims first? How do you do it?

**Animesh:** So, for majority part of a preparation, like, from February 2022 to January 2023, my entire preparation was in 3 slots. One slot was for reading the standard books, one for my optional, and one for current affairs where I made my from where I made my main slots. So one was the standard books are very premiums heavy. Mhmm. Then was it optional, and the third part which was main plus current affairs. So I studied everything integrated with but after January, I shift my gears to exclusive prelims preparation.

So during that time, I did not make any notes from the standard books. Mhmm. And after reading them for, like, 11 months, well, I was very thorough with their content. Mhmm. Before 4 months, I made only those points, like, entire 800 pages book, I made it in 10 pages. Only those points which I know that this I can't remember. I'll have to read it before the exam.

**Avinash:** Sorry. I'm slightly confused. I didn't get it. I got lost in between. You are saying that during your preparation, you did not make notes for prelims but started making prelims notes only after January to keep a record of the factual and could not be internalised and there was a fear of forgetting them. But before January, were you making notes or not? If yes, were they mains oriented?

**Animesh:** Yes, I was making only mains notes from February to January, and I was reading prelims standard books and kept on underlining important stuff. And then I stopped preparing for mains from January 2023, and from February I started prelims exclusive. Then whatever I revised from the standard books were prelims focused. I worked on prelims notes till February, March 2 months I prepared and kept on revising them till May. And May was when I caught up.

**Avinash:** There's another important and interesting topic for discussion. Current affairs. It is tricky. Call it current affairs or contemporary affairs, anything under the sun can be asked. And I realised it from your points, with a little realisation beforehand as well, the role of current affairs is significant. Should we approach it differently as per the different stages of our preparation? How to integrate current affairs with static knowledge? Is the integration necessary? Should we do it, and if yes, then how to do it?

**Animesh:** Correct. So current affairs, I think I think I had a very different approach while approaching current affairs is that I did not have time. I was a full time I was not a full time aspirant. I had a job. So I could not read newspapers. But everybody who has time should go through that. There's no doubt.

**Avinash:** An interesting question that comes to my mind, before it misses out. The Indian oil job did, was it because you had it in mind that since it is a government job, there would be less pressure on you. Because most of the computer science graduates and that too from NIT Rourkela, I'm sure you would have had many job options in terms of coding, multinational companies offering reasonably decent package. Then why did you choose Indian oil only?

**Animesh:** So. So, my like, I was in coil India's quarters all my life. Mhmm. So I knew how does PC work and every, work and everything.

And I had interned with Microsoft in, in my 3rd year as well. So I had a clear idea in terms of the working conditions between these two. But everything, every myth of it broke at when I joined Indian oil. I felt Indian oil would have this very orthodox style of working. What I'd seen, and what I had heard everywhere that PSUs are not very tech savvy, for computer science students, but, there's not a lot of thing to offer.

Mhmm. But that was completely different within my case. Mhmm. I was working in a team called strategic information systems that run the digital initiatives in Indian oil. Mhmm.

So my entire profile was very updated towards the emerging technologies. It was very artificial intelligence, ML based. So I did everything that usual a Microsoft. But there must be lesser pressure in Indian Oil as compared to the

corporate pressure, such as in Microsoft. There was a good work play balance, I would say. But whatever I was working, everybody was passionate in the team. So it was not like full relax, there's no deadline.

It was proper. It was like a mini startup within a piece. I understand. So much. So and even we published a couple of research papers as well. So Outside office job, 8-9 hours of work. Everybody was so passionate. So that was not a regular PSU job.

**Avinash:** So, did you intentionally decide on working for the Indian Oil. I'm asking this because I want to understand, when you were in NIT Rorukela, you must have got many offers from private companies as well, then why did you choose Indian Oil only? Were you clear from the start that you want to go in the government sector only?

**Animesh:** Uh, this was a conscious decision that if I had other opportunities as well and with whatever opportunities I had, I felt if I go to Indian Oil,

a) if I do not clear this exam, this would be a better back up, because I, as a person, is not very inclined to tech and coding, and I wanted something which is a more managerial position. So if I feel like this would be a better back up, and, yes, work life balance and preparation scope would be better if I'm here.

**Avinash:** Sorry. I interrupted you in between. We were talking about how current affairs are to be integrated with static affairs. And how to approach current affairs in each stage differently and how to understand them?

**Animesh:** So I did not read newspaper because I did not have time. Mhmm. So what I relied upon was, the magazines that come. Mhmm. And personal opinion, they're actually good materials. If you, stick to one resource of them, then because they integrate the static and current in the magazine as well. For example, there would be news on, some investment on renewable energy. The news will get it this this has been done for renewable energy. But if you put that in a magazine, you'll see they'll give a background to it also. What are the steps that have been taken? What are the schemes? So on and so forth. So I found their content very wholesome. So I relied on coaching materials and the coaching materials I made by main notes.

So it was reading for mains, making main notes, and giving current affairs covering them, and I was giving weekly tests on them as well. On the content of the weekly current affairs that I was preparing as giving a half Lind test for that. So I'd given this half Lind test from February to December every Sunday. So I'd have done immense answer writing every week. I'd given 48 tests in the span of time.

So I was, like, I was very confident with my answer writing skills. Because of this, the practice had done. So I integrated answer writing mains and the current affairs at one exercise.

**Avinash:** Okay. And these were, you know, you used to go to some school and write the test or.

**Animesh:** I used to do it at my home. I used to scan. Like, in a time bound manner, I had a timer, and I used to do it. Who evaluated those copies? Or were they not evaluated? They were evaluated, the particular this, weekly current affairs program I had that taken from the coaching, they used to evaluate and give feedback.

**Avinash:** There's another important question that's coming to my mind right now. Because you were working a full time job, you did not have much time, how much time were you able to devote to your studies? What quality and quantity of time does this type of exam really require? What was your routine? Saturday, Sunday was your holiday, so how was the weekday routine different from the weekend?

**Animesh:** Okay. So I used to wake up very early, and I used to go office a bit late. I used to go office at 10:15, 10:30. I had taken a flat very near to my office so that commute was not an issue. And I used to study from 6 to 10. In four hours, I was getting 3, 3 and a half hours.

And then I was able to go to office by 10:15, 10:30 and return at 6:37. And then I was getting around 2, 2 and a half hours in the evening. So on a good day, 5 hours was the target, but there were many days in which I was not able to. I was extremely tired to continue.

**Avinash:** So no fun, no movies, drinking, and OTTs, and all those.

**Animesh:** I did. I mean, every day in dinner, I'm a huge fan of Big Bang Theory.

So I would have watched Big Bang Theory literally every day. And, obviously, I had to sacrifice a lot of these social lives that I had. I was always very extroverted as a kid in college. I was very popular. Everything I had to cut down, but I did I think I did the balance between everything.

**Avinash:** Mhmm. Answer, I think, there was a question related to answer writing as well because answers, I think, play a very important and integral role in the entire preparation, but I got it that you did it simultaneously while preparing for mains and current affairs. Would you like to mention any important pointers for aspirants to keep in mind while writing answers?

**Animesh:** So in my opinion, you can start it from 1st week itself if you have content. People think they cannot start it until they have studied everything. In my case, when I used to study current affairs during the week, I used to answer questions on those topics. You need to practice. You cannot just wait for the entire syllabus to be completed because you will never get that time. So you can integrate it, you can try after one month at least. and try to give tests as answers. Not like answer writing for continuous 2 to 3 hours. I was giving tests which was my answer writing, and I used to sit back at my evaluation to assess areas of improvement. So for me, answer writing was giving test. So that is something that I would say to the aspirants. You can start early and integrate with their usual test series.

**Avinash:** A very important thing that's coming out from this that whenever we prepare for a competitive exam, let's say we are practising MCQs, if we do it in a time-bound manner, it becomes a mini test in which we learn about time management and how much to write, how to write, etc, rather than blindly practising, practicing, practicing, and that is what he also did.

Essay writing is another crucial aspect. How to handle the essay paper? Because, of lately, the essay topics are very abstract. What were the topics on which you wrote essays? I don't recall the exact topic, but the first topic was something on, decision making where your decision making requires both your intent and reasoning.

**Animesh:** I'm not very sure what was the exact topic, but there was something on decision-making and leadership. And the second was on patriarchy, how it does not just harm women but also men. Both the topics I enjoyed writing. And, for essay, I knew that I had an act for writing. So I probably was overconfident, so I did not prepare early.

But after prelims, what I did is that every day before sleeping, I used to refer 1 topper's notes, topper's copies. And I used to make take a snapshot of any good point that they have mentioned, any good anecdote, an example, and made a compilation and went through them again and again. And wrote around 10, 12 essays before the actual exam and, understood that what what are my mistakes, how can I make it interesting? One unique thing I think I would have done for essay is that I sent it across to my friends, college and school friends who are not doing UPSC or any competitive preparation. And I was to ask them, are you getting bored?

And they were giving me honest feedback. They told when they did not feel like reading further after some paragraph.

Like I'm lost, not able to understand further. So then I would I used to get good feedback from my friends who had nothing to do with UPSC.

**Avinash:** So what that means is that, you know, while you were preparing all through this one and a half, two years, you were on your own. I mean, there was no coaching support or mentorship as such.

**Animesh:** I had taken a mentorship course. I, had a mentor who was there to help me. But, we had a pact that he does not spoon feed me. It was always I was going to him and he was always available, for every of my doubt, but I did not, I believe that this exam is something that you cannot be spoonfed.

**Avinash:** So mentor was some somebody who had already cleared the exam or it?

**Animesh:** No,no, it was somebody from the institute. Somebody from the institute. Somebody cleared up, cleared in the interviews. She had appeared in the interviews. Extremely great help, but I would believe that no mentor can actually spoon feed you.

**Avinash:** So after after writing the mains examination, were you, you know, sure that you would be able to get through? What was the gut feeling?

**Animesh:** For MAINS, it was only, one part of the exam that I was confident that I'll make it through. And if you I would not have made through in MAINS, then I would have felt extremely dejected because I felt my answer writing skills and the open test that I'm giving, I was getting good scores. So I felt prelims, I was I was sure I will not get through. Interview, I was bit doubtful in the 3rd after.

**Avinash:** Oh, so for prelims, you were not sure that you will get through? I did not check my answer keys as as well. How? What was the score you got?



**Animesh:** I scored an 86. This time the cutoff is 75. But the problem was I had, in CSAT, I had an issue. I attempted only 37 questions. But why, you know, there is a talk in the market that B.Tech students can easily clear CSAT portion. I had the overconfidence as well. 2023 paper broke that overconfidence. And CSAT was something extremely different and I had a tough time. And I had always relied on maths. And maths was my strong subject. I used to do only maths and reasoning and used to score above 100.

But that day, I was unable to do maths. In first 20 minutes I was able to do only 2 questions. And I understood I have to rely on.

**Avinash:** The message is that CSAT paper is not to be taken lightly. This is applicable for engineering graduates as well. People think that it is quite easy for engineering students to clear the CSAT paper but here we have an engineering graduate, UPSC CSE 2023 topper who is saying that he did not have the confidence that he would sail through prelims, and in fear of this, he did not even check his score.

Very, very interesting. Very interesting. Another thing that we would like you to answer, during the entire process, while we are preparing for any exam, we have to basically take care of two things, one is taking academic inputs, another is to emotionally manage ourselves. How do you handle the fear, the uncertainty, the demotivation during UPSC? All these emotions like fear, uncertainty, demotivation, and especially in your case wherein you said that you lost your parents while, you know, all this thing was happening.

**Animesh:** So for me, like, my mother was there while the preparation and but we had, her treatment going. And cancer as a disease is extremely ugly that more than the disease, the treatment gives you more pain. So for me, it was like, I have succeeded as soon as possible because it was already, when it was diagnosed, we knew that it was a stage 4 cancer and the prognosis is extremely poor and we do not have a lot of time left. So for me, every time I had this fear and I had this anxiety and everything, I had like I would want to do this as soon as possible so that she would be able to see this.

She could not, but that was a push every time when I felt dejected and doubted whether I would be able to succeed. And in comparison to her pain, what she was going through both physically and mentally, my UPSC pain seemed very trivial. So she was my source of motivation when I used to have any doubts regarding my preparation.

**Avinash:** How do you stay motivated? How do you stay motivated when you have lots of ups and downs? Because it's a big journey. And especially I'm still not able to, you know, internalise it. Your parents, you know, your mother's treatment was going on, and as you said, that keeping treatment in itself is a very, it is even worse than the disease itself. How do you stay motivated? Was it the only way your mother the source of inspiration or?

**Animesh:** The immediate inspiration, obviously, my mother, and as I said, I knew that I do not have a lot of time. So whenever I thought of taking breaks, I reminded myself, it was like I do not know what would happen tomorrow. So that was an immediate inspiration. But I think the second part, I think that level of self-awareness I had gotten that I had a mantra that I'll control the controllables. There's no point worrying about what would happen with my.

There was no point in, like, being with full of anxiety that whether I'll be able to clear this or not because that's not in my hand. The only thing that I had control over is that to prepare. That's it. So I used to shut my brain when I used to get a lot of negative feelings, the a lot of overthinking that I'll just control the controllables.

**Avinash:** So control the controllables. That's the learning out of this aspect.

You did not have much peer pressure because as you said, you did not have many friends. How do you control, you know, the kind of guilt related feelings? Feelings like I did not study enough, others are enjoying, I did more fun today, I wasted 2 hours on OTT. How do you control that guilt which, you know, eats you from inside?

**Animesh:** Correct. So one point is that I had, nobody in the circle community circle pertaining to UPSC, but I am very thankful to my school friends who were I was in touch literally every day.

And every 2-3 days we used to do video calls. They used to do to check up on me. So, I had this guilt as well that I am talking to them a lot, that I was going out. I also suffered from guilt that today I watched a lot of OTT shows and films. But then I used to tell myself that this too is important.

At the end of the day, do not make UPSC your entire life, which we did, which I did as well. But with guilt it becomes maybe, like, to bounce more higher, I'll have to go back a little downwards sometimes. There were days when I used to read nothing, do nothing. So I think that was necessary so that the next day becomes more productive. And so, if you are having fun, don't do it with guilt, do it without guilt. Even if one day gets wasted, it is alright, you can become more productive in the next 5 days because you took a break.

**Avinash:** So today, we live in the world of distraction. And so how do you how do you how do you remain track on how do you remain on track and how do you stay away from distraction? This mobile, this device, which we all of us carry is, you know, keeps us, makes sure that we are never on track. How to handle these things related to distraction?

**Animesh:** I mean, I think I had a lot of self control because I did not, I was not away from social media. I was active on Instagram and everything. But I had the self control that I have to use it only for 30 minutes a day. So very simple strategies, I was an active on Instagram, but I did not have the app of it. Because in the app, the UI is so good that you become addictive.

I used to use it in the browser. In browser, it becomes very difficult to use. You yourself would feel like putting down your phone after 10-15 minutes. So small things, when I'm studying, I used to make sure that my phone is kept in the cupboard. So those things, I ensured I have self-control but not in a way that I am completely away with it. I think you should have a social media presence as well, so that you do not get burnt away easily. So I had a balance between both of these things. But in self-control was a major difference.

**Avinash:** Any specific moment in your journey which was enlightening or which was transformative? Many times, you know, what happens is that we realise something profound while sitting idle but that changes the course of the entire journey. Anything like this happened? Or was it, you know, always slow and steady wins the race, patience, perseverance?

**Animesh:** So for me, I think every transformative movement was happening every 3 months because that's when, in cancer, we have something called PET scan where you get the scans of your body and understand how much of the cancer has been increased or reduced. And every 3 months, my mother used to go for a PET scan and, the report used to be worse than the previous report. It used to be that the cancer has increased further. And I was the one who

was facing the doctors at the front and, and the schedule of this 3 months was such that it used to be 10 days before prelims, 10 days before mains, and 10 days before interviews. So for me, those were the transformative moments every report being worse than the previous, a reminder that there was very little time.

So, I mean, it's I understand it's not a fun conversation, but for me, that was enlightening that I have to double up my preparation now because you never know.

**Avinash:** Any unconventional advice which you got from your mentor?

**Animesh:** I'm not really sure if I'll be able to recall something about unconventional.

**Avinash:** What do you think? While preparing, should aspirants have a backup plan because you said earlier, that the Indian Oil job that you had was your backup. So should all aspirants have a plan B or a backup or not?

**Animesh:** For sure. And I think it's just not enough to have a plan b, but to be prepared about what you will have to do to get that plan b because plan b is not like, let's say, I had thought this would not happen, then I'll do management consultancy. But it's not like you will wake up tomorrow and say that I did not qualify UPSC but still give me a job because I have read so much.

You'll have to prepare for an exam. You'll have to give CAT or ZAT or everything and then maybe you'll get or not get through. So everybody who's starting the preparation, have a plan about how many years you will dedicate to your preparation, who will finance me, where will I stay, who will be my emotional support for that. Those are things.

**Avinash:** Had you thought that you would qualify in the first attempt itself?

**Animesh:** No. I had this mind that I'll give 3 attempts.

**Avinash:** So another interesting thing has come up even toppers do not feel they will be able to crack it in their first attempt. And this is unlike other examinations. Like, for example, if you talk about those underweight examinations like NEET and JEE, you know, you must have given them, it is easy to predict there that such and such individuals will qualify. UPSC or CSE is unlike that. In this exam, even toppers don't know till the last moment. They do not know whether or not they will qualify but they top amidst this confusion. So that's the very interesting part of this.

**Animesh:** The point is in every other competitive exam, it's a range. If you get a score of rank 1 or rank 10,000, you'll get some seat in some college. Here, either you make it or don't make it. There's there's no range that you'll go through because it's too binary in UPSC. So that's the difference, and it's very uncertain and very subjective in nature.

**Avinash:** Any interesting incident in the interview? Any point where you got stuck or any interesting topic that came up? Or was it a normal smooth interview?

**Animesh:** My interview as, as opposed to everybody's else's "it's very conversational and it's not like a Viva but like a conversation", mine was more like a Viva.

Like, he was asking question and I was giving answers. Extremely cordial board, extremely comfortable, they made me feel comfortable. But I did not feel like I'm having a conversation. It was like a question and answer. And, one thing that I was taken aback was that one of the members, asked me a lot of questions that I had studied during my college days, like, core computer science about operating systems, time complexity of algorithms and all, which is usually not asked.

**Avinash:** Were you prepared for that?

**Animesh:** No. Not really prepared because these are the question that we never heard that they ask about that. We can be asked on technology in general, but not very theoretical concept that we would have studied. So I was able to answer a couple of them because, as I said, I was thorough at IOC. We used to work with those concepts. But, yeah, the point being that in interview, things can be very unexpected and subjective.

**Avinash:** Top three misconceptions about UPSC preparation, which you would like to debunk, which a lot of students actually believe in. You would like to crash them or bulldoze them and you would say that this is not right.

**Animesh:** The first is you need a coaching, which I personally believe that no, you don't. Like, you do not require a foundational coach. Coaching could be helpful and I believe will be helpful, but it's not neither a necessary nor a sufficient reason to crack. So that's a myth that coaching is extremely essential.

2nd is you have to come to Delhi to, do the preparation.

I was just fortunate that I had been posting in Delhi, but I was miles away from RN (Rajender Nagar) and Mukherjee Nagar. So, Delhi is not inevitable for their preparation.

And 3 is getting cut off from everything. I think what matters more than every book combined is more than that, you require a strong support system in terms of your friends, in terms of your partners, your family, anybody. I think that's very, very important.

And you just cannot just shut yourself and make yourself within a cocoon. So be social and hold on to these people who you love and they love you.

**Avinash:** So thank you, Animesh. It was quite interesting, and I also learned a lot of things from this short talk. And I hope it helps all the aspirants who are preparing for the civil services examination. Thank you and bye-bye.

**Animesh:** Thank you. Thank you so much, sir.