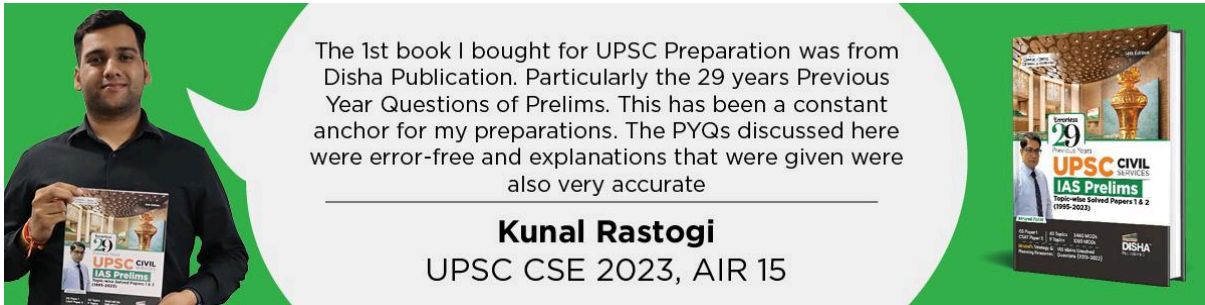


Toppers' Talk - Kunal Rastogi (Transcript)



Avinash: Hello everyone, I welcome you all on behalf of Disha Publications. Today we have a very interesting guest with us, Kunal Rastogi. Kunal has topped UPSC CSE 2023 with an AIR 15. Kunal comes from Lucknow, his father is a bureaucrat. He graduated from BITS Pilani with a degree in civil engineering. The journey of Kunal from an aspirant to a UPSC topper has been just like a rollercoaster ride wherein he has seen a lot of ups and downs, and some of them are very surprising. He cleared prelims and mains and went up to the interview stage in his first attempt, in his second attempt he couldn't even clear the prelims examination but he still did not lose hope and in his third attempt, he not only cleared the exams but also topped UPSC CSE with an AIR 15. The story of Kunal is a story of patience and perseverance. In this conversation we will not talk about routine topics like syllabus, pattern, trend, how to select an optional, how to write answers, or how to attempt the paper, but rather we will deep dive, into his strategy and secrets of Kunal to understand how do you go about cracking India's toughest examination and that too almost effortlessly. So, welcome Kunal, it is great to have you and I would like to start the conversation just for understanding and to set the context right if you can quickly describe your journey from an aspirant to almost topping the examination.

Kunal: Sir, the feeling is surreal but I don't think the journey's still over. Till now I get goosebumps, prelims are one week away and some of my friends are texting me, asking how to go about the examination. I still feel very afraid when I look at the paper, so I think the journey will always be embedded in my heart, perhaps now I'm a little more relaxed since I don't have to retake the exam, but that journey still has taught me a lot of lessons and will continue to inspire me to work even harder.

Avinash: So straight away coming to a question that is stuck in my mind is what is it about the prelims examination that students working hard for at least 11-12 months down the line aren't able to clear the exam? Why does it look so uncertain? So many toppers have told me that you can't afford to take the prelims lightly. So what makes this exam so uncertain or risky? Especially the prelims?

Kunal: Sir, unlike the other two stages, the mains and interview, the prelims is very uncertain. Not because of the wide canvas on which the questions may be asked but because of the pattern of questioning, they also change almost every year. Last time we noticed, 40-50 new questions were asked. Now, if one took it lightly and didn't practise, they might struggle to answer those questions correctly. If one has not looked at the PYQ (Previous Year Questions), one might not know the themes UPSC is asking. One can read everything under the sun but not what UPSC wants. So this raises uncertainty. The third thing is that prelims is difficult and uncertain so that it creates a playing field. So UPSC is always trying to ask questions from fields which weren't previously asked for so that everyone, whether from urban or rural areas, they all are in the same field. We sometimes

overcomplicate things, but UPSC asks questions straightforwardly, so we falter in those questions. So that is why prelims is uncertain but the more you focus, the better chance you have.

Avinash: Just for better understanding, let's take an example, let's take you. You cleared the prelims, you cleared the mains and you got decent marks so when one is clearing the examination with decent marks you can confidently say that the person has the knowledge, knows the subject and knows what to write. So why is it that even with in-depth understanding, and knowledge, students are struggling in the prelims? Is it because UPSC asks too much factual information which is hard to remember? If students are well-versed with the pattern and syllabus, why do they still struggle to crack the exam?

Kunal: Let me tell you the marks I scored in my second attempt. In my GS1, I scored 103 and in my CSAT I scored 65. I think the main reason why I didn't qualify in my second attempt despite of reaching the interview in the first, was because of my overconfidence. Probably because I cleared my prelims, mains, interview with ease. I thought that I don't need to study anymore, I know everything. But UPSC is so unpredictable that it humbles you constantly. Since I had given the interview in my first attempt, my knowledge of GS had been developed so I scored decently well. But in my CSAT, I didn't prepare much since I thought I'm an engineer I should be able to crack it easily, Due to this I failed in my CSAT. These parts in UPSC are so unpredictable that its impossible to predict in which part you'll struggle.

Avinash: It's very interesting and I've heard this a lot that engineers have an advantage in the Cset but as he said, UPSC surprises you in every stage so you cant afford to take it casually or lightly, be it prelims or be CSAT or whatever it is. If we talk about your second attempt, you didn't clear your prelims, i can imagine it must be shattering since you went up till the last stage in your first attempt. So how do you cope up with those emotions ? How did you manage to still stay focused with patience and perseverance? Since it wasnt like your second attempt was right after your first, it must have took a lot of time to get back up to reflect and come back stronger the next year. Did you ever feel like giving up or felt like its not in your cards?

Kunal: Sir, I could handle preparing for a year, but I failed the prelims in 2020-2022. After that, I realized that if I could pass the prelims, I could pass the whole exam too. But my desired results will come in 2024. A week ago, I thought ISI might be the end of the line for me. This made me reconsider whether this exam is right for me. Honestly, after failing the prelims, I knew the next step. I thought a lot about it that it's time to give up the test because the opportunity cost is so high I don't think I can afford it. Because then a career gap forms, and other avenues close down. But I realized that in the exams I prepared for, both prelims and mains, I scored decently well. I concluded that when I prepare and work hard for exams, I score well. In my second attempt, I couldn't succeed because, first, I had less time during the most difficult period, and second, I didn't prepare well due to my overconfidence. So, I decided to reduce these moving parts and give it one more year. I also thought that if I didn't try again, I might regret it for the rest of my life. If I dedicated one more year, maybe things would turn out differently. There was financial support from my parents, so there was no need to stress about it. They were ready to support me, and I think a combination of factors really pushed me to give it one last try. I decided to give it my best shot. If it doesn't work out, that's a different story.

Avinash: But was there any significant difference in your preparation method between the first, second, and third attempts, or did you stick to the same basic principles?

Kunal: No sir, it was completely different. My first attempt was in 2021. I started my preparation in January 2021, knowing the exam might be in May, so I wasn't preparing seriously that year. I was preparing for 2022 instead. But due to Covid-19, the exam was postponed until October. Then I decided to take the exam. Because I was short on time, I was just trying to gather pieces of information from wherever I could. There was no pattern, idea, or structured preparation, and luckily, I passed. Later, I realized the circumstances were completely different. In the first attempt, I was short on time, but in the third attempt, I had plenty of time. So, I had to change my strategy. In the first attempt, the biggest drawback I faced was a lack of practice. In my first attempt, I practiced very little for both the prelims and the main exams, which is why my marks weren't good. In the third attempt, I decided not to leave any stone unturned and practiced a lot, taking more than 80 main exams. Initially, in my first attempt, I probably only took 14 or 15 tests in total. So, I rapidly increased the number of tests this time. Secondly, in my first attempt, I focused on reading basic books like NCERT and others. However, by the third attempt, I realized I needed to change my approach. I couldn't rely solely on NCERT for two years. So, I began gathering additional books and resources to deepen and broaden my knowledge. This was something I hadn't done in the first attempt.

In my first attempt, I studied only engineering. In this regard, I hadn't encountered this specific question in the main exam, so I referred to previous years' papers (PYQ) and focused on understanding the key concepts of the syllabus. I tried to explore different dimensions from the data, aiming not for a mere course correction but for a broader understanding. On one hand, you delve deep into the subject, and on the other hand, you practice extensively.

Avinash: So whenever we talk about upsc, it's syllabus seems really haunting and endless, like a sea which doesn't have shore so anything under the sun can be asked or has been asked. So how do you manage wherein you are not aware about the breadth as well as the depth of the paper and how thoroughly can you explore them? How should one prepare for the syllabus? How do you decide which resources to use and what to skip? In other words, what actions to take and avoid? How should aspirants understand these criteria, and how should experienced individuals choose resources? What type of education is necessary?

Kunal: To give a brief answer, I'll divide it into two parts: one for prelims and the other for mains. So, I always knew that if you try to read everything inside, you won't retain anything because the syllabus is so vast. Secondly, I made a rule for myself that I will only revise what I can remember. I won't study from resources where I can't retain information for review. This isn't quite what I intended. Secondly, I never focused on Prelims; I always prioritized Mains. Many people prepare for both Prelims and Mains, but I did the least for Prelims compared to others. I always focused on the keywords of the syllabus and explore different dimensions. From this, I realized I could confidently tackle fifteen out of twenty fixed questions in both the main and preliminary exams. The remaining five questions are more unpredictable, but I believe there's a pattern to their randomness and chaos. Generally, I've observed a high strike rate of questions in the past three years' papers between Prelims and Mains. If you address two to three questions from these papers, you'll likely encounter around eighteen questions from the newspaper between Prelims and Mains and the Mains syllabus. I tackled the remaining two questions and left it up to fate. Whether it happens or not, I accepted that it was out of my hands.

Avinash: Did luck and god play a role?

Kunal: Yes, sir, this time luck was on my side. I believe luck supported me this time. There were a couple of questions that were similar to those encountered previously. So, I traced back to the source—a video game I used to play frequently, particularly fighting games where shorts were often mentioned. Now, looking back, I'm also saying the same thing: God works in mysterious ways, and perhaps my familiarity with those games came in handy there. For prelims, sir, I never maintained a specific booklist; I simply followed the booklist meant for mains. Afterward, I focused heavily on practicing for prelims, which I believe benefited me, even though the interview did not happen.

Avinash: One interesting takeaway from this conversation is a crucial point: as Kunal emphasized, I only studied what I could revise effectively. I avoided reading anything that I couldn't or didn't intend to revise. Absolutely, the key is a focused approach and clarity on knowing what to do and, more importantly, what not to do. When it comes to revision, note-taking becomes crucial because it dictates how effectively you can revise. Making notes is essential because revising such a vast syllabus directly from textbooks would likely be challenging. Did you make notes, if yes, was there any specific technique, what was going on your mind while making notes

Kunal: I believe I'm one of the rare toppers who never made notes, particularly. I've always believed in minimizing duplication of efforts. When I saw that others had already made extensive notes, I questioned why I should expend energy converting the same information into notes again. I chose to approach studying differently. For my optional subject, I had to make notes because the syllabus was specific and detailed. However, for general studies, essays, etc., I took a different approach. I read notes from top performers and extensively reviewed test series and various books, as I mentioned earlier. So, I wrote 80 tests covering every specific part of the syllabus. After completing a test, I would write my answers in a question-answer format and send them for evaluation. The evaluator would provide additional insights, and then I would review the model answers. I would incorporate further improvements into my test responses, turning each test into comprehensive notes. I revised these tests repeatedly, gaining a thorough understanding. This approach benefited me in several ways, notably by eliminating duplication of efforts.

Secondly, my notes were structured in a question-answer format, and thirdly, I covered all the keywords of the entire syllabus. I believe this method worked well for me. Another important takeaway is that note-making is not essential for everyone. It depends on how you prefer to prepare and what suits you best. Let's not buy into the myth that notes are universally important or necessary for success.

Avinash: Another crucial point I've gathered from this discussion is that assessment or testing shouldn't be limited to evaluating your understanding of the syllabus. Assessment is a vital tool for learning itself. We've just heard how Kunal used testing or practice as a tool to enhance his overall preparation.

Kunal: Sir, I'll add one more thing to this. One of my friends gave me a very interesting idea, which he called active recall. I was already doing it intuitively, but he institutionalized the concept. If you simply revise passively, you're just reading without truly ingraining the information. If you read something and then write it in your own words, whether through test series or any other method like answer writing practice, you're engaging in active recall. This method helps to retain information much longer. So please do not revise the book by just passively reading it. You try to write it in your own words and think about it yourself and trust me it adds a lot.

Avinash: So actually is a scientifically proven methodology. It is a scientifically proven research has shown that you know, how long you remember something depends a lot on active recalling, you know.

Kunal: Absolutely sir.

Avinash: As you rightly said, whether you're reading something passively or very actively, the key is to reproduce that information in your own words, using your own language.

Kunal: Sir, studying remains essential—it's just that rewriting it in your own words once can significantly extend your retention period. This is why test series are so valuable, as they provide an opportunity for active recall. As for how much study is required, it varies depending on individual needs and goals.

Avinash: Is it really necessary to burn the midnight oil, or is it more about finding the right approach? There are many myths about studying for ten, twelve, fourteen, or even sixteen hours. However, many successful aspirants have mentioned that it happened almost effortlessly for them.

Kunal: No, sir, I won't say effortlessly; if I had cleared it earlier, maybe it would have seemed effortless. I almost cleared it. No, sir, but I believe this exam demands dedication and effort. Now, if anyone understands one thing clearly, this examination is not just about knowledge; it's about wisdom. Some people acquire knowledge over six years but struggle with applying it wisely. Conversely, some clear it in their first attempt, where knowledge comes quickly, but they might lack the wisdom to apply it effectively. If it were solely about knowledge, the first six attempts would always trump the first attempt, but that's not the reality. As you mentioned, perhaps some are naturally gifted and develop wisdom effortlessly. However, for someone like me, it took three attempts precisely because I believe I gained a deeper understanding of how the country functions along the way. Essentially, this teaches you that as a bureaucrat, you need to master several skills. Someone once shared with me a valuable perspective: imagine standing in the middle of a road where representatives from six different sectors approach you. If you can communicate effectively with each of them, you possess the qualities of a bureaucrat. A bureaucrat must grasp diverse topics in a generalist manner, understand them thoroughly, and formulate policies accordingly. This is what the exam tests you on—it presents various challenges. If you can navigate and converse adeptly across all these topics, you're likely to clear it in your first attempt. Otherwise, it may take multiple attempts to succeed.

Avinash: Very interesting analogy indeed. The example you used to differentiate between knowledge and wisdom was quite profound and intriguing. How do you handle your preparation for current affairs, given its dynamic nature and the broad spectrum it covers, from current events to contemporary issues? How does your approach to current affairs preparation evolve across different stages of the examination?

Kunal: Sir, what I discovered was that during my first attempt, I was more knowledgeable about current affairs compared to my third attempt. So, I have been gradually reducing my current affairs reading and I attend and I think the precise reason for this is that there is a huge myth and people don't know why they are running after so much current affairs. There was a friend who was giving his first exam in college. He randomly quizzed us on current affairs and even asked about abbreviations right before the prelims exam and I realized that I hadn't studied anything relevant. This was a key observation: both of us took the exam, and the one who focused on studying current affairs never

encountered questions from UPSC on those topics. So, the biggest takeaway is not to just study random current affairs. The strategy should be to focus on ongoing themes in current affairs; for instance, if UPSC consistently asks about advancements in a certain technology every year, you should be well-informed about its developments. There's more value in understanding recurring themes rather than getting caught up in random current affairs, where even topics like quantum might only feature in a few questions. Unfortunately, some people exaggerate the importance of these topics. The 80 to 85 questions in the exam are typically static and well-curated. It's crucial to concentrate on those and be selective about the remaining few questions that may be about random current affairs. Now, what was my strategy for current affairs? I primarily relied on a few sources. First, I used the current affairs compilation provided by a reputable coaching institute, which covers yearly updates. Second, I read daily newspapers. Personally, I read a regional newspaper from Monday to Saturday and The Hindu on Sundays. Additionally, I found the Press Information Bureau (PIB) website very helpful. This website, managed by the Government of India, explains government schemes and initiatives in detail. So, I primarily used these three resources and didn't rely on anything else.

Avinash: One interesting insight I've gleaned from our conversation is that in UPSC preparation, there are various aspects to consider—prelims, mains, interviews, current affairs, essay writing, ethics, and more. What stands out clearly to me is the importance of strategizing our preparation according to what suits us best. It's crucial not to go against the tide or the rhythm of our own strengths and preferences. Whatever comes naturally to each aspirant in terms of their preparation methodology and strengths should be prioritized. While we can refine our approach by learning from and talking to many successful candidates, it's essential to align our preparation organically with what feels right and works efficiently for us. Just as our body operates with its own rhythm, our preparation should follow a similar pattern. Another interesting point we discussed before starting this interview: You have experience with competitive exams like JEE. After that, many of your friends will also be taking the CAT exam. What I'm interested in is how you distinguish between these three exams: JEE, CAT, and UPSC. What specific skills do they each aim to test, and why is there so much uncertainty surrounding only the UPSC exam? The JEE topper is already decided a year in advance, with criteria like their study location and ranking in the top hundred or double digits being crucial factors. When we consider these three exams—JEE, CAT, and UPSC—what do you think they aim to assess?

Kunal: I can discuss the differences between JEE and UPSC because I haven't taken CAT. In JEE, what I've observed is that they aim to identify the most brilliant minds in the country. While I didn't prepare extensively for JEE myself, I noticed that my friends who scored well demonstrated exceptional talent. They excelled in problem-solving, especially in mathematics, and they were able to strategize several steps ahead. These qualities are essential for engineers. If we look at the spectrum of all three exams—JEE, NEET, and UPSC—JEE has fewer questions but focuses more on analytical skills, which are crucial for engineers to solve problems effectively. NEET, on the other hand, has a larger number of questions, requiring quick decision-making and speed, with less emphasis on deep analysis. In UPSC exams, there's a notable element of uncertainty, reflecting the unpredictable nature of public service. Candidates must make informed decisions, be analytical, and demonstrate confidence in their responses. Despite the relatively fewer questions in UPSC prelims, it's often surprising who emerges as the top scorer, highlighting the unpredictable nature of the exam.

Avinash: Why is it that we get to know the NEET and JEE result one year before but it's not like with UPSC. I'm not able to satisfy my curiosity with this answer.

Kunal: Sir, because there is only written examination in JE, no matter what a person's personality is, it doesn't matter how the marks are going to get you in UPSC. If you see, then generally the interview plays a big role, even days are able. You convey your thoughts well some day you are. So you probably go up and down in that number. Secondly sir, what I think is that in UPSC, your maximum marking is 50 percent and the breadth in each stage of examination is very high, like if you look at JEE, there is only physics, chemistry, maths. By practising all three you will be able to get good marks. There are seven merit subjects in UPSC, two are for you and one is for your interview. Now it is not necessary that you top this case with that and plus, if a person who is very good in maths then he can top on the basis of maths. In UPSC you will have to score every examination well.

Avinash: Very true. So because of this I think maybe I was speaking to another UPSC topper and I got a very interesting definition. He said that every topper of IIT, every child of IIT is analytical. The person who cracks CAT shapes innovation in the form of a marketable product, defining its market value and consumer appeal. In contrast, someone preparing for UPSC considers how to integrate this product into society, making it socially and economically sustainable. They focus on ensuring the product's relevance and impact on a broader societal scale. So these are three distinct thought processes. Another crucial aspect of UPSC preparation, as seen in your case with its highs and lows spanning years, is managing emotions. How do you handle the emotional challenges throughout such an extended preparation period?

Kunal: I believe these emotions arise when you are deeply concerned about the outcome. During my first attempt, I was extremely anxious about whether I would succeed, how to approach the exam, and what the interview would be like. Naturally, these feelings overwhelmed me. By the time I started preparing for the third attempt, after facing results two years later, I realised these emotions were part of the journey. Reflecting on this journey helped me understand that dwelling on these emotions for another two years wouldn't benefit me. So why not forget about the result of the final examination and instead focus on the result of the next test you're taking? I divided my life into these small tests and concentrated only on their outcomes. I completely ignored the big picture of the UPSC exam. Many people inflate the importance of the exam to an extreme level, making it seem like it will change the world. While this might be motivational for some, it can also prevent you from focusing on actual, practical steps. When I started my third attempt, I cut off from distractions like social media and practised social isolation. I stayed in touch with one or two friends who were also preparing for the exam. I became very result-oriented, aiming to be in the top 10 or top 20 in every test. Additionally, I became a bit spiritual during this journey, finding solace in the belief that there is a higher power reassuring me that everything will be fine.

Avinash: Wonderful, wonderful. So I think these three things helped me a lot. Another aspect is dealing with feelings of guilt, like when I couldn't study enough, had too much fun, watched too much OTT, and my marks stayed low. Sometimes, people's opinions affected me, and I felt guilty. How do you cope with that?

Kunal: Sir, I didn't cope with it; I used it as motivation. Guilt, I think, is one of the strongest emotions humans possess. If you feel guilty for not being able to do something, it can drive you to work harder. It's like someone who goes to the gym every day and feels guilty for cheating a few times—this guilt can push them to be more disciplined. So, I used guilt as a motivating factor. If my marks were low, I felt guilty and thought, "I'm wasting time. Let's do better next time." I turned guilt into a positive motivator. It's very powerful.

Avinash: That's correct, just like fear, which has two meanings: you can either "Forget Everything And Run" or "Face Everything And Rise." Every emotion has two sides, and I chose to use them to my advantage. Can you describe any specific moment in your exam preparation that was particularly enlightening or transformative? Also, could you talk more about how you became a bit spiritual to stay on track during your preparation? You mentioned that this spirituality helped you avoid distractions, and I'd like to hear more about that.

Kunal: One significant lesson I learned from this examination is the power of originality. During my first attempt, like many others, I went through several mock interviews. These mock interviews tried to mould my personality into something it wasn't, and I tried to replicate this in the real interview. I believe I scored lower because of this. Then I had a eureka moment: whatever you do in life, do it authentically from your heart. Imitating someone else is a losing game because if you enter a battlefield that isn't meant for you, how can you expect to win? As for spirituality, during my preparation, I realised I needed a higher power to stay focused and avoid distractions. This spiritual connection gave me strength and reassurance, helping me stay on track and maintain a sense of calm and purpose amidst the challenges.

Avinash: If you try to pretend to be someone you are not, then you have let yourself down to a certain extent.

Kunal: Sir, another thing to consider is that if you copy someone else and achieve good marks, it might feel like your hard work paid off. But if you copy someone and still receive lower marks, it can lead to a feeling of disappointment. You might think, "I worked so hard, yet my scores don't reflect that because I tried to emulate someone else. Perhaps if I had stayed true to my own personality, my results would truly reflect my efforts." After this experience, throughout my preparation journey, I decided to view the achievements of toppers as guidelines. My approach was to treat my instincts and principles as my personal constitution, and the strategies of toppers as laws that I could adapt based on my own needs and circumstances. So, that was my realisation. I reaffirmed my commitment to originality, deciding that no matter what challenges life throws at me, I will never imitate anyone else. I will always trust my own instincts and beliefs, even if they turn out to be right or wrong; the key is that my intentions are always genuine and true to myself.

Avinash: So, what's becoming clear from our discussion is the importance of originality and aligning your preparation with your own natural rhythm and strengths. Instead of blindly following others' interviews or advice, I've seen many aspirants get overwhelmed by watching numerous interviews or feeling compelled to read every newspaper. Now, I'm not saying you shouldn't do those things. What I mean is, evaluate everything with an open mind and adopt only what truly fits with your unique preparation style and strengths. Trying to force yourself to follow someone else's path won't work—you have to go with your own flow to succeed.

Kunal: I'll give you another example, sir. This example applies to two situations. First, regarding notes: many teachers asked me if I make detailed notes or follow what others do. I told them, "Sir, I prepare notes in a way that I find most effective for my understanding." Second, and perhaps more importantly, in my General Studies paper, particularly GS 2 and my optional subject, there's considerable overlap. There's a common perception that you shouldn't draw from your optional subject knowledge for your general studies paper. But all the other coaching advisors gave me the same advice. However, I chose to stay true to my originality. I decided not to create artificial

boundaries in knowledge. If my optional subject knowledge could enrich my General Studies paper, I embraced it fully. Once again, I stuck to my principles and did what I felt was right. Had I followed others' advice, perhaps I wouldn't have scored well in General Studies. This experience reaffirmed to me that originality holds true value. Whether one fails or succeeds, staying true to oneself will always bear fruit in life.

Avinash: The message here is clear: amidst thousands of students preparing for the examination, there are also thousands of strategies. Instead of simply copying what others are doing, you need to discover your own unique approach. When you find your own methodology, that's when magic starts to happen. Everything aligns – your body, mind, and soul. Like when Yuvraj Singh hit 6 sixes in 1 over, it wasn't just because of talent. Yes, talent was there, but these moments are rare when everything falls perfectly into place. It's as if a higher force is guiding you, and things start to flow effortlessly on their own.

Kunal: Absolutely sir.

Avinash: Can you share any intriguing moments from your interview experiences? Surely, the question must have arisen about your journey from not clearing the interview the first time to making it to the interview stage later. Were there any notable moments from your most recent interview?

Kunal: Both interviews were notably distinct, underscoring the unpredictable nature of the process. My Detailed Application Form (DAP) was identical for both interviews, yet each interview was entirely different. I still vividly recall my first interview, where unexpectedly, one of the board members had evidently consumed an avocado that morning. Consequently, a significant portion of the interview, about ten to fifteen minutes, focused on various aspects related to avocados, a topic for which I was unprepared. This time around, however, my interview was much more straightforward and definite. There were a couple of moments where I felt I might have misspoken during the discussion. For instance, recently, my colleague asked me a hypothetical scenario: as a Joint Secretary in the Central Public Works Department, if a hundred crore tender was issued following all procedures, but a contractor approaches me a month later, claiming delays and offering a bribe of 50 lakh rupees, what would I do? I responded that since the allegations were only against the Secretary, I would handle it accordingly. I couldn't initiate any action without proper evidence and procedures. The second instance was when he asked about issuing the work order. I responded that I would issue the bill because it was the department's fault for the delay in issuing the order. However, after the interview, those around me pointed out that I had made a significant mistake. They emphasized that I should have been more vigilant and immediately initiated an investigation upon any complaint against the Secretary to uphold a corruption-free administration. Additionally, I should not have issued the work order due to potential complications that could arise. But what struck me was that such a stance could enable anyone to file false complaints and potentially victimize the Secretary without just cause. Secondly, I contemplated the importance of trust-based governance. Should I trust the contractor's claim or consider that it might not be his fault and rather a procedural mistake of the department? So that was my thought process, and this time I anticipated my score might be lower, but fortunately, I scored 193. I believe my approach resonated with the chairman.

Avinash: No, you maintained originality. Sir, often, when we fail to maintain originality, there can be significant clashes of thoughts. And when there's a clash of thoughts, your mind may urge you to act differently from what society or logic dictates. In such conflicts, the response tends to feel unnatural.

Kunal: Absolutely, sir. It might come across as mechanical rather than heartfelt and genuine.

Avinash: What are the top three misconceptions about UPSC preparation that you would like to clarify or debunk?

Kunal: Sir, the first misconception is that the UPSC exam covers everything under the sun, which isn't true. It actually focuses on a specific and targeted syllabus. If you've covered the basics well, there's a good chance of cracking it. Secondly, there's a misconception that you have to be buried in books all the time. Personally, I watched plenty of TV series, movies, explored new sports, and travelled extensively during my preparation. Because my father was transferred frequently, I made it a habit to explore local tourist destinations whenever we moved to a new place. I believe it's a misconception that you need to study by confining yourself to a room all the time, which needs to be dispelled. Thirdly, I see UPSC preparation as akin to a love story: understanding its nuances and requirements is essential for success. Treating it mechanically by just following the syllabus won't lead to success; you need to invest yourself and truly understand its demands to succeed.

Avinash: Wonderful! Thank you so much, Kunal. It's been incredibly insightful and enlightening speaking with you. I've learned a lot from our conversation and I'll certainly try to apply these insights. Wishing you all the very best in your endeavours. Thank you again!

Kunal: Thank you very much.