

# Miles to Go Before You Win

It was the monsoon of 2012 when I arrived in Delhi and headed straight to college. Initially enrolled in B. Com (Hons.), I was instructed to join and later apply for a change of course to B.A. (Hons.) Economics since I had now qualified in the fourth cut-off list. However, my encounter with the administration left me shaken. I was informed that the Economics course had already exceeded its expected admissions, rendering it impossible for me to switch at this stage. This news left me incredibly anxious, but after persistent pleas, a faint glimmer of hope emerged. The administration offered me a solution - if the Head of Department (HOD) of Economics (Hons.) recommended my transfer, the college would facilitate the change. It was a slim chance, but I clung onto it with determination.

This marked the first test of my resolve and perseverance in the city of Delhi. Determined to secure the HOD's recommendation, I started skipping most of my B. Com (Hons.) classes and stationed myself outside the staff room, hoping for an opportunity to speak to her. For over a week, I followed this routine, patience wearing thin. Finally, the moment arrived, and I seized it. The HOD listened patiently as I poured my heart out. I promised her that if granted the transfer, I would top all six semesters of college. While I'm not sure if she truly believed me, my unwavering perseverance seemed to have an impact, and she agreed to recommend my transfer. Finally, I found myself sitting in the class for B.A. (Hons.) Economics, and I resolved to fulfil my promise.

As luck would have it, I exceeded even my own expectations, topping 5 out of the 6 semesters! However, settling in Delhi presented its own set of challenges. My monthly pocket money amounted to a mere

3000 rupees, encompassing travel, food, clothing, and miscellaneous expenses. To save on rent, I moved in with my cousin's brother's family, though it meant residing about 20 kilometres away from the college. My preferred mode of travel was non-AC Delhi government buses, as a monthly pass only cost 100 rupees. Somehow, I managed to make ends meet, but the greatest hurdle I faced was the absence of friends in college.

### **The Barrier of English Language**

College holds immense significance in a person's life, not just for shaping their career but also for moulding their personality through a plethora of experiences over the span of 3-4 years. However, I found myself missing out on these transformative experiences due to one major obstacle - my inability to communicate confidently in English. It wasn't that I didn't know the language; rather, I lacked fluency, which made me hesitant to engage with others, especially in a South Delhi college where fluent English seemed to be the norm.

Three months passed, and I realised that I couldn't let this barrier hold me back any longer. It was time to take action. I decided to confront my fear head-on. I chose one person (who happens to be a dear friend), and scripted a complete 5-minute conversation, envisioning her possible responses. The following day, I mustered all my courage and spoke to her, discovering that the language barrier existed only in my mind. If only I had found this courage earlier, I wouldn't have missed out on three months of potential friendships and experiences.

This realisation motivated me to break down the language barrier with others too. I discovered that it was merely a matter of having the courage to bring out the best in myself, regardless of how insignificant or daunting the concern might have seemed at the time.

## **Laying the Foundation**

During my first two years of college, I prioritised my academics and actively engaged in a myriad of extracurricular activities to develop my personality. I developed my habit of reading newspapers and staying updated on the current news. Recognizing the importance of having a backup plan, I focused on excelling in college too. But, with the low success ratio of the UPSC CSE, I decided to start my preparations in full swing only from the last year of graduation, keeping a solid Plan B in mind.

As my UPSC CSE journey began, I found myself lacking crucial information about the exam - the syllabus, exam pattern, book list, optional subjects, and the number of services offered. Nevertheless, driven by my aspiration to be an IAS Officer, I pressed on, believing that I would learn as I progressed. Seeking guidance, I joined a coaching institute in Tilak Nagar, strategically opting for evening and weekend classes to harmonise with my regular college commitments. Over four long years of preparation and four attempts, my dream eventually transformed into reality, but not without numerous trials and valuable life lessons.

## **Law as Optional Subject**

I started my coaching classes post college from 6pm to 8pm in the evening every day, with additional classes on weekends (both Saturday and Sunday) from 10 am to 2 pm. This coaching was primarily for General Studies (both prelims and mains) only. On the decision to opt for an optional paper, I was advised to wait for a couple of months and get exposed to all the subjects that needed to be studied for the exam so as to make a more informed call. I liked the approach and decided to do just that. But eventually when I had to decide the subject, I was faced with a choice of going for Law, Political Science or History, since these were the only three subjects that were taught in my coaching.

I could have joined some other coaching for the optional paper, but I was short on time on a regular basis and I wanted to save some time on travel.

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Moreover, I was convinced by the teachers there that aspirants from all streams and educational backgrounds opted for Law as their optional subjects and did well too (my senior from college was one such example). I decided to opt for Law as my optional subject, moving away from the plan where I was destined to choose Economics as my partner in this journey of becoming an IAS Officer. Fearing backlash, I didn't inform my elder brother as well.

Although I managed to do well in Law optional both times I wrote the main exam (my cumulative optional scores were 306 and 304 respectively), in hindsight, I feel I should in fact have opted for Economics as my optional companion. The simple reason being that I liked reading Economics, I knew I could do well in it and I wasn't the least bit acquainted with Law at the time when I made this choice. In fact, Economics as an optional subject is more scoring as compared to Law in CSE on an average. However, the reasons I continued with Law were because I liked the subject and I didn't have enough time to switch and prepare another optional subject.

### **First Taste of Failure**

In 2015, right after graduating from college, I attempted the UPSC CSE for the first time. Though I gave it my all, I felt unprepared for the exam. The night before the Prelims, my anxiety was palpable, but wise words from my coaching teacher remained with me – 'even candidates attempting the exam for the fourth time often know only 50% of the paper initially; the rest lies in one's calm and composure'. Bolstered by this advice, I faced the exam with newfound confidence. However, my performance fell short of my expectations, and I missed

qualifying by just a mark or two. Despite experiencing my first taste of failure, I didn't lose heart, knowing I could improve with better preparation.

### **Making Decisions, Embracing Challenges**

Preparing for my second attempt, I weighed the option of dropping a year to solely focus on the civil services. However, considering my personal goals and approach to life, I believed it would be more efficient to utilise my time by pursuing additional endeavours. As I had performed well in Economics during my graduation, I earned direct admission to the prestigious Delhi School of Economics (D-School) based on merit. Enrolling in the MA (Economics) program at DSE allowed me to be part of an institution that had nurtured legendary scholars like Amartya Sen, Kaushik Basu, Jean Dreze, and Manmohan Singh.

I shifted to a rented house in the University North Campus (Vishwavidyalaya), though my coaching still remained in Tilak Nagar. My daily routine now involved attending college, heading to coaching, and returning home by around 9:30 pm. The weekends followed a similar pattern. However, I encountered challenges at DSE due to the intense course material and teaching methodologies. The first semester proved particularly tough and competitive. To give an idea, out of 250 students that joined the course, the average number of students who passed the first semester in the maiden attempt was just 125!

### **Qualifying the Mains**

As mentioned earlier, my preparation for the UPSC CSE began during my last year of college, and I attempted the exam for the first time in 2015, immediately after graduating. I had to make sacrifices in attending college classes, focusing only on the essential ones to pass my exams, as my priority was the CSE. Balancing both commitments

was a challenge, but I managed by studying the course material daily to keep up with the college curriculum.

In 2016, I attempted the CSE Prelims again and in this second attempt, I qualified for the Mains examination. This brought me immense joy. However, as I prepared for the Mains, I faced an unexpected hurdle. Just 15 days before the Mains were scheduled, the Delhi School of Economics (DSE) released the timetable for the 3rd semester exams, which coincided with some of the Mains examination dates. Despite trying various arrangements, I had no alternative but to choose between the two. The CSE Mains was my dream, and I couldn't let it slip away. Consequently, I had to skip the college exams and focus solely on the CSE Mains.

While I managed to clear the 1st, 2nd, and 4th semesters of my master's degree, the third semester became a regretful challenge that I couldn't clear in the subsequent two years, despite my best efforts. Although I regret not obtaining that one degree I put so much effort into, I found consolation in clearing the CSE Mains examination that year. Well, you win some and lose some!

Though my performance in the Personality Test (interview) fell short of my expectations, my Mains score was sufficient to secure me a spot in the list of selected candidates for the UPSC Civil Services Examination 2016; I got All India Rank 366. I was allocated to the Indian Audit and Accounts Service (also known as the CAG service). Achieving this milestone was undoubtedly significant, yet I yearned for more. My journey was far from over; I knew I could do more. The ultimate goal was to become an IAS Officer, which demanded two more years of relentless dedication.