

Myth Of Safe Optional Paper For Civil Service Examination

The pattern of the Civil Services Mains examination has been designed to test the ability of the candidate to apply the acquired knowledge obtained through study of various subjects as indicated in the syllabus to solve problems and issues. This may be appreciated from the fact that it is a test for intake of future administrators and policy makers/executors for the country. It is not a test for intake of researchers and academicians who have obtained a high degree of specialization in a particular subject.

A trend analysis of the nature of questions asked in the Civil Services Main Examinations over the last decade indicates a well-thought and gradual paradigm shift from straight forward questions to such questions which require interpretation of the acquired knowledge and a reasoned, well-thought application of mind.

Thus the tilt is towards finding those who have developed ability of problem-solving rather than those who have faith in memorizing set answers and trying to push the set answer down the throat of examiner, irrespective of the demand of question being asked in the examination. So the hidden dictum written on the wall is loud and clear that the system is up with continuous evolving techniques to select independent rational minds rather than well-tutored robots.

What should be the basis for selection of optional subject?

The design of the Civil Services Mains Examination with four paper of General Studies, one paper of essay and two papers of the same optional subject is largely rooted in the subjectivity with possibility of existence of different interpretations at the same time. Thus the subjective world comprise of many different shades of grey, rather than the objective world which can exist in black and white.

The choice of the optional subject shall be a well-thought and reasoned decision, largely based on the following considerations:-

(i) Humanities subject such as Geography, Political Science & International Relations, Public Administration etc prepares the mind for a subjective interpretation of the complex real world. Thus the selection of humanities subject gives a natural edge to a prospective candidate to do well in General Studies and Essay paper as it enables the candidate to gradually evolve analytical and writing ability, an indispensable requirement for getting success in this examination.

(ii) The First Paper of each humanities subject invariably deals with the core principles and theoretical construction of that subject. This requires reading of authentic text books written by leading Indian and Western authors in that subject. Further, reading of NCERT books of Class XI and XII in that subject (if available) marks as a starting point only, not an end in itself. Generally it has been seen that those who pick up a humanity subject for the first time in their academic life only to prepare for this examination, tend to do better than those who have done graduation, post-graduation and further specialization in that subject. The reason for this dichotomous situation is quite obvious as the design of the civil services mains examination is to identify potential administrators not potential researchers and academicians.

(iii) The Second Paper of each humanities subject invariably deals with application of concepts and theoretical constructions learnt in the first paper in day to day issues which affect the life of people in Indian set-up. Thus the nature of the second paper is highly generalistic, giving an impression that it is as good as a general studies paper. This in itself is a big catch as the urging tendency to write a general answer without application of the concepts learnt in the first paper leads to an award of a poor score, which in turn diminishes the chance of getting through this examination with the flying colors.

(iv) Both papers of any humanities subject offers a huge potential for obtaining maximum score as it thrusts an open challenge before the candidate to demonstrate his/her analytical skill of problem-solving by integrating and weaving together basic concepts and theoretical constructions learnt in the first paper with the current trends evident in news at national and international level and government policies.

(v) However, most of the candidates look at this opportunity from a prism of confusion and over reliance on the stereotyped tutoring and study material and seldom make an effort to develop the right analytical skill of a

problem-solver. So this is a challenge, if accepted with zeal and enthusiasm, the success will definitely embrace. Thus the aim shall be to become an analytical problem solver rather than a well-tutored mechanical robot.

Correlation between choice of optional subject and general studies

(i) The syllabus of the general studies in itself is as huge as an ocean. Thus the requirement is to swim on the surface of the ocean and to avoid deep-diving, which may take you back to the starting point.

(ii) The key approach for general studies is to identify and read authentic text books more than twenty times rather than reading hundred different materials for one time. The first approach draws an analogy with swimming on the surface and covering the whole horizontal expanse of the ocean. Hence it enhances your precision, thereby increasing number of questions which can be attempted in prelims with greater degree of accuracy and lesser degree of errors. The second approach is as good as deep diving where efforts have been made and output is in haywire with uttermost degree of confusion coupled with vicious circle of failure and deep frustration.

(iii) In this backdrop, the question arises that the selection of optional subject shall subtract from the syllabus of general studies or it should stand as an addition to the syllabus of general studies. In the case of latter, degree of effort is likely to increase without the optional subject giving any gainful contribution to the general studies. So in this context humanities subject emerges as a good choice for the optional subject which minimizes the burden of general studies and assist in developing writing-skill, a quintessential requirement for getting success in this examination.

How a Beginner should zero-in for an optional subject?

(i) It is advisable for any beginner to take a glance of the last five year question paper of the second paper of the optional subject, being generalistic in nature, it gives a broad sense of the subject.

(ii) Thereafter, the candidate shall make an assessment for the choice of the optional subjects based on his/her level of comfort and interest vis-à-vis the nature of questions asked in the second paper. In case, a beginner is yet indecisive to assess his/her own level of comfort and interest, then he/she shall continue to study different subjects for general studies for some more time, the assessment potential will gradually develop and will show the way. Thus till that time a candidate shall learn to have patience and perseverance.

Myth of Optional Subject Trending High

(i) The nature of this examination is to identify and select potential administrators, who have learnt, developed and inculcated ability to lead. Thus the choice of an optional subject shall be purely and solely on the basis of one's own interest, not on the trends.

(ii) For a sake of argument, if an optional subject is trending then almost more than fifty percent of the candidates appearing in that subject shall score sufficiently high, say 55% to 60%.

(iii) However there are only few who manage to score in the bracket of 55% to 60% and more in every optional subject and thereby guaranteeing their success in this examination. It means that these few must have made some extra effort to develop the required analytical problem-solving approach. However, the majority of the rest continued to be tutored robots, reading stereotype material and writing answers with flying language but low in content and analysis.

Do we have a safe optional paper?

The answer to this question lies in the concept of relativity, which indicates that the concept of safe optional paper will vary as per the interest and level of comfort of a candidate with that particular optional subject.

In simple words, the level of interest and comfort, a candidate have with an optional subject makes it a safe option. A choice solely based on trends and herd mentality, may have the highest possibility to ruin the whole preparation.

Last Piece of Advice

In this examination with cut-throat competition, every marks count, so a candidate shall not put himself/herself in a disadvantageous position by making wrong selection of the optional subject.

There may be a possibility that a particular paper may be trending high in terms of result and thus it may create an indispensable pull of attraction, which may be difficult or near impossible to resist.

This is the moment where the skill of analytical mind has to be used, wherein the decision shall be based on the candidate's level of comfort with that optional subject. To end this discussion, the decision shall be based on one's sheer interest and liking, not on impulse and trends as one who loves his/her game will have the ability to innovate and create and that is what is required in this examination.