

Date of the UPSC Personality Test: March 22 2017

Head of the UPSC Personality Test Board: Arvind Saxena

Duration of the interview: almost 30 minutes, first candidate in the forenoon session

Background of the candidate:

Home state: Punjab

Education: B.E. (Hons.) Mechanical Engineering

Work experience: two years at an American Manufacturing firm

Optional subject: Philosophy

Hobbies/Interests: Calligraphy, Bhangra and Giddha, Gym workouts, Photography

Attempt at UPSC CSE: second

Outcome of earlier attempts: CSE 2015 – not in the merit list (Written score: 687; Personality test: 179 – Board headed by Chhattar Singh)

UPSC CSE Personality Test 2016 details:

Disclaimer (?!): The conversation was not as smooth as it might seem while reading.

CP: Chairperson

M: Member

C: Candidate

As this was my second time at the UPSC interview, I was more excited and less nervous than the previous time. When the bell rang, the peon confirmed the call and asked me to enter.

C: May I come in, Sir?

CP: Please come in.

(As I entered, I saw a lady member there, so I wished her 'Good morning' first and then greeted the rest of the members. There were total five members, including the Chairperson, sitting on a round table. They asked me to take the seat, which was place diagonally opposite to the Chairperson. I pulled the chair a little out and sat comfortably.)

CP: (looking at my DAF) Hmmm... you are from Punjab

C: Yes, Sir

CP: You studied engineering at B.I.T.S. Pilani, and then you worked at... XYZ Ltd. For six months. What is this company?

C: Sir, it's a joint venture between at Indian firm and an American firm

CP: What do they do?

C: Sir, they make transfer cases. *(His expression said he wanted to know further, so I continued)*

Sir, transfer cases are installed along with the gear box, in the vehicle's engine.

CP: Okay. Then you moved to ABC Ltd. And you were there till 2014, for two years. Why did you quit then?

C: Sir, to prepare for the Civil Services Examination

CP: Okay. So you are saying bye bye to Mechanical Engineering

C: No, Sir, not at all. I am going to use my engineering skills in whichever jobs I pursue further.

CP: Okay. Since you are applying for this sector, what do you think are the challenges of the civil services in the present age?

C: Sir, since a lot many changes are happening in our country, civil services face a lot of challenges. There is a challenge in the economy, with the implementation of the GST – the Goods and Services Tax – nearby. Then the ensuing demographic dividend – it needs to be skilled. Then the law and order situation is a challenge, given the diversity of our nation. We also face internal and external security threats. *(I tried to cover the job roles of IAS, IPS, IFS, IRS broadly, given these were my first four preferences. I took 1-2 second pauses in between and also looked at other members while speaking)*

CP: Okay. You must have heard about 'less government and more governance'. What do you understand by that? Does it mean less number of government officials?

C: Sir, less number of government officials is one aspect of it.

CP: So tell me about your understanding of this phrase.

C: Sir, in my understanding, it means that the government will vacate or move away from the spaces that can be handled better by the private sector, for examples, sale of PSUs – the Public Sector Units – to the private hands. Government would concentrate more on policy making etc.

CP: Okay. So that means empowering the private sector.

C: Yes, Sir. We can say that.

CP: Okay. So let me take this a little further. That means expanding the private sector and shrinking the government sector.

C: Yes, Sir, to an extent (*I nodded reluctantly*)

CP: Hmm. So why do you want to move from a sector that is going to expand to a sector that is shrinking?

C: (*I was a little unsettled by this question. I took a pause for 3-4 seconds and began my reply*) Sir, because I feel I fit better in civil services. This will provide me opportunities to explore various other sectors such as education, health etc. Corporate sector is good, no doubt, but I feel I find more satisfaction in dealing with the public, in facilitating the procedures and processes for the private entities. Civil services will let actualize my potential better.

CP: Alright. Do you read? What do you read?

C: Sir, there is no particular genre. I pick up books randomly.

CP: What did you read recently?

C: Sir, recently I finished reading 'An Era of Darkness' by Shashi Tharoor. Before that, I read 'Argumentative Indian' by Amartya Sen. Before that, I read Sheryl Sandberg's 'Lean In'.

CP: Do you read newspapers? What do like to read in those?

C: Sir, I like reading about social and political issues, about International relations etc.

CP: Any blogs, columns?

C: Sir, I follow C Rajamohan who writes for the Indian Express, I read Brahma Chellaney. Both of them write on international issues. I also follow Shiv Visvanathan, who writes in The Hindu about social issues.

CP: Did you read Shiv Visvanathan's article yesterday?

C: No, Sir, I did not happen to read that.

CP: Okay. You might have read about the actors filing their returns worth 20-30 crore rupees or more. That means they must be earning hundreds of crores. Do you think it is fair? (*It was that day's Indian Express' front page news*)

C: (*I took a pause of few seconds*) Sir, I think I am no one to judge.

CP: (*He exchanged a light moment with another member and said*) Why won't you judge! They earn so much. What do you think about it?

C: Sir, I think it is a matter of demand and supply. Since a lot of people follow them, channels and media get lot of attention and hence is their income so high.

CP: Still, do you think it is fair?

C: Sir, frankly speaking, I don't think it is fair.

CP: Okay. (*Directs the next member in the panel to proceed with his questions*)

M1: Your optional subject is Philosophy. Do you think in this era of science we don't need philosophers? Can scientists replace philosophers?

C: No, Sir, I don't think so. Philosophers give theories, while science looks for validation. Science can explain the Big Bang Theory but who caused the Big Bang is the matter of Philosophy. If science is practical, Philosophy is theory. When a theory is proven wrong, we proceed to next theory and look for its validation with science.

M1: Okay. But there are so many myths that mislead people. What is your take on that?

C: Yes, Sir, there are myths. But these need to be curbed and are curbed by the process of education, by development of human mind. Education is the way out of myths. (*His expressions seemed like this was not what he was asking, and I felt it too, so I added*) Sir, I think I am deviating from your question.

M1: Yes, you are. I wish to know that when philosophy leads to myths, why shouldn't we get rid of it? *(I am unable to actually recall what he was trying to ask. I could not get it then and I am still unable to figure out it now. I think I went blank for a moment)*

C: Sir, could you please explain it with an example?

M1: Okay. You can take the example of the Eastern and Western worlds. In East, people believe in Maheshwar – who danced and hence the world came into being, while in the West, research is being done on atomic particles to explain existence of this world.

C: *(I was still unable to figure out what to say)* Sir, even in the West also beliefs are related to myths. In fact there are many parallels in Eastern and Western beliefs. *(Gauging his expressions again, I could figure his dissatisfaction)* I am really sorry, Sir. I think I am unable to get your question. *(Though I had lost my way here but I did not let my confidence down. I did not feel apologetic and maintained my poise.)*

M1: That's alright. *(He passed the baton to the next member)*

M2: You are from Punjab. Industries in Punjab are not doing that well in the recent past. What do you think are the reasons?

C: Sir, I think the reasons behind this are: high electricity tariffs; the freight equalization scheme which provides comparative advantage to neighbouring states etc. *(Before I could say further, the member seemed to say something.)*

M2: But the reasons you are saying are applicable to the steel industry. I am asking about small and medium industries and enterprises. Do you agree that their business is down?

C: No, Sir, I beg to differ. As such, Punjab is largely an agrarian state. Size of industries is small. Further, labour costs are also rising. Land is a problem too.

M2: But even the textile industry of Ludhiana is down.

C: I feel that it reflects the general trend of Indian economy. Textile industry is down all over India.

M2: *(He did not seem pleased with my answer. Nevertheless he proceeded further)* What do you think can be done to develop rural areas of Punjab?

C: Sir, first of all, we need to make agriculture sustainable because that is the major source of livelihood. We need to improve the extension services, encourage practices such as drip irrigation, zero tillage etc. Then we need to educate youth. Agriculture education should be encouraged, given that a lot many youth are moving abroad. Further, skills like mobile phone repair should be given to make the youth employable. Infrastructure of Punjab is good comparatively. We need to use it more efficiently.

(He was nodding along. As I was about to finish, another idea occurred. I took his permission to continue, after a pause of few seconds.) Sir, we can also commercialize Bhangra, given its increasing popularity the world over.

M2: Okay. *(He asked the next member to proceed)*

M3: Good morning.

C: *(I was a little surprised as to why he wished again. Nevertheless, I bowed my head in response and smiled)*

M3: I will pick up two challenges that you have mentioned already i.e. economy and external security. First, let's take up economy. What are the challenges there in?

C: Sir, as I have already mentioned, challenges for the economy are: implementation of the GST, training of the demography dividend that is due. It is very crucial to make them employable...

M3: That's alright. Can you tell how the government is going about it?

C: Sir, we have schemes such as Skill India, Stand up India, Start-up India etc. for that.

M3: What else? What is the government doing about investment?

C: Sir, we are promoting FDI – Foreign Direct Investment. Lot many changes are being made to the FDI policy...

M3: Okay. What else? Have you heard of Make in India?

C: Yes, Sir.

M3: What is it?

C: It is the flag bearer of our government's call to foreign countries to come and invest in India. It will create jobs in manufacturing sector...

M3: Okay. Can you suggest one sector that has a lot of potential for employment?

C: Sir, from the top of my mind, I can think of textile sector. Would you like me to elaborate further on this?

M3: Yes, go ahead.

C: Sir, for textiles, we would be encouraging growth of cotton – which will help Punjab's cause as well (*I mentioned this since we had earlier discussed about Punjab's agriculture*). Cotton crop is more suitable than paddy cultivation. Further, plucking of cotton would employ many labourers. Then, when we process cotton, we need labour in mills. Also, women in households can earn by taking out four to five hours every day to stitch clothes etc.

M3: Okay. What else needs to be done, talking about economy? What do you think about infrastructure? Where can we generate the employment?

C: Sir, in infrastructure, Housing for All Scheme comes to my mind. It will not only provide employment but also roof on the head of many people.

M3: Government has recently made a major change regarding housing. Can you tell me what it is?

C: (*I was unable to recollect it. I took a pause for 4-5 seconds*) Sir, I am not aware of it, I think.

M3: They have changed the...

C: Oh yes, they have declared it under infrastructure sector...

M3: Yes, so it will be beneficial for the housing projects. So you are aware of it.

C: Thanks to you, Sir.

M3: Alright. Anything else regarding infrastructure?

C: Sir....

M3: Do you know about freight corridors?

C: (*Thinking, pausing, replying*) Yes, sir. There are projects like Sagarmala initiative, Bharat Mala...

M3: But these are not freight. Oh, but these can be that also. Okay. Have you heard about dedicated freight corridors?

C: Yes, Sir.

M3: What are these?

C: (*Thinking, pausing, replying*) Sir, these are dedicated rail links, for freight movement – making the transport faster...

M3: Can you name a few? What comes to your mind talking of corridors?

C: Sir, as such bullet trains come to my mind, thinking of corridors but those are for passenger traffic. Of dedicated freight corridors, I can think of Delhi – Mumbai Freight corridor, Mumbai – Chennai freight corridors etc. (*This conversation was without many breaks as the member was nodding along and completing my sentences. He also said in between that I am going in the right direction. I cannot recollect the exact point though.*)

M3: Now, let's move to external security. What do you think are the challenges there?

C: Sir, we face challenges from both the state and non-state actors. I think, non-state actors are more challenging than the state actors.

M3: What all comes under non-state actors?

C: Sir, firstly, the terrorists... (*Before I could finish the list, he asked a leading question*)

M3: Recently, few countries have banned any device larger than a mobile phone to be carried along in the flight. Do you support this decision? (*It was that day's news. The US and the UK had banned such devices on flights flying out of a few select countries*)

C: Sir, when it comes to public safety, I think this step can be taken. And anyway, people are allowed to carry their devices in their...

M3: (*nodding along*) ... check-in baggage. Alright. What else?

C: Sir, other threats are organized crime, human trafficking, fake Indian currency notes...

M3: How should we handle these?

C: Sir, our intelligence agencies need to be very active and vigilant.

M3: Hmm... you are so far talking about just one end of the spectrum. What is the other end?

C: Sir. (*thinking*) I think NGOs – non-government organizations are a threat too.

M3: How?

C: Sir, for example we can take the recent case of Islamic Research Foundation. Such NGOs work in a hidden manner and can radicalise people, making the job difficult further for our intelligence bodies.

M3: Okay. (*He passed on to the last member – who was a lady*)

M4: You mentioned about Punjabi youth seeking to move to Canada and other countries. What do you think is the reason behind this?

C: Ma'am, I think the reasons behind this are better standard of living there, better wages and also, when the youth see their peers who come back from these countries, they get inspired to go abroad too. They do not see agriculture as an option. They go abroad and engage as drivers, waiters etc.

M4: But they can do these jobs here too.

C: They can, Ma'am. But they won't do it here.

M4: Why?

C: Ma'am, as far as my understanding of Punjab's youth is concerned, they see it against their prestige to engage in these jobs in India. When they come back from other countries, people don't ask what they do but how much they have earned. And these jobs pay well there.

M4: But then cost of living is also high there.

C: (*lowering my voice, as not to sound disrespectful*) Then, Ma'am, standard of living is also high there.

M4: You have been to the US for a competition. You were in California. Sometimes they say California and Punjab are similar. What were your observations during your stay?

C: Ma'am, firstly, I would like to take that as a compliment (*Everyone had a light moment*). As far as infrastructure is concerned, Punjab has done well. But I think there are differences. Ma'am, I was there for six days and most of the time, I was on the college campus. People were nice and open to conversations. Since I have studied in B.I.T.S. Pilani, I did not find that many differences, since our college culture was similar. About Punjab colleges, there might be differences. But I cannot really say much. Other observation is that people don't stare there.

M4: But that is because they are used to all kinds of clothes...

C: No, Ma'am. It is not that. Here also, when we visit posh areas, using the word 'posh' not in a negative sense, people don't stare but in other public places they do. That is a difference.

M4: Okay.

C: And other thing that I can think of is the public transport. It is much better in India. I was confined to the campus due to the lack of public transport. In India we have so many avenues of public transport – bus, train, autos etc. These are the differences I can think of as of now.

M4: Okay. Recently, an Australian research centre has received signals from the universe that show that there might be aliens out there. What do you think about aliens?

C: Ma'am, I think it would be exciting.

M4: Why? How?

C: Ma'am, if aliens are out there, I would like to understand how they have developed differently from human beings. Do they have solutions to our problems? For example, we have so many inequalities among humans on Earth. Do they have similar issues? I would like to understand such things.

M4: Okay. We are talking of colonising moon. What do you think about it?

C: Ma'am, if we are running out of space from Earth then why not?

M4: We have space on Earth. There are also ideas about making houses on water. How do you see this idea?

C: Ma'am, we have to see for the sustainability of such projects. We have to see that we should not damage the environment. We should look for its effects on other animals etc.

M4: Okay. When it comes to such things, who should be given the primacy – humans or animals?

C: Ma'am, we are moving from the era of human rights to animal rights. Also, humans being the most intelligent of all beings also have the responsibility towards other beings. We should adopt sustainable methods. I do not support any gradation i.e. humans should be first, then animals and then other organisms.

M4: Okay.

CP: Okay. Thank you.

C: Thank you, Sir. Thank you all (*I got up from the chair and bowed a little in respect. Then I moved the chair slightly towards the table, turned around and left the room*).

Overall experience: After exiting the room, I felt good and happy. There were a few light moments. I think both the Board and I had a good time. Analysing and re-analysing and re-re-analysing the whole conversation sometimes makes me feel that it could have been better – I could have said this or I could have phrased it in other manner and so on. But then there is no end to this unless the final outcome is known. Fingers crossed.