

Interview date: 05-04-2017, Afternoon session.

Interview board: Air Marshall Bhonsle sir, 5th (second last) to enter, entered at 5.15 PM

Background: B.D.S from Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Belong to Bharuch, Gujarat.

Optional subject: English Literature.

Employment and work-ex (if applicable): 8 months at a charitable trust hospital in Bharuch.

Domicile: Gujarat.

Hobbies: Playing tabla; Listening to rock and metal music.

Warning: Long post.

C: Welcome Mr. (last name).

Me: Good evening sir, good evening ma'am, everyone.

C: Please have a seat.

Me: Thank you sir.

C: How're you feeling? All right?

Me: Yes sir.

C: So, for the next 30 minutes, we'll be having a conversation and judging your personality. We hope you'll cooperate with us.

Me: Definitely, sir.

C: So, after doing graduation as a Bachelor of Dental Surgery, you haven't been doing anything since 2013? What've you been doing?

Me: Sir, I've been preparing for the civil services examination.

C: But why did you leave practice?

Me: Sir, I started preparing while I was practicing. Then I realized that I needed to devote more time to the examination if I hoped to clear it one day. That is why I left practice.

C: Okay, and you play tabla on the side, is it?

Me: Yes, sir.

C: And you have an Upantya Visharad in it?

Me: Yes, sir.

C: What is that exactly?

Me: Sir, obtaining a Visharad is equivalent to a B.A. It usually takes 8 years of training to obtain that. Upantya is the penultimate exam and is also referred to as B.A. Part 1. I have obtained that certificate.

C: Tell me how tabla differs from other instruments.

Me: [fumbled a bit while trying to form a coherent sentence] Sir, tabla is a percussion instrument. While other percussion instruments consist of two playing surfaces in one single instrument, table consists of a pair of drums having one playing surface each. This results in a wider variety and intensity of sounds that can be produced.

C: Tell me something about its origin. How did it originate?

Me: Sir, there are several theories, none of which has a conclusive proof.

C: What are they?

Me: Sir, the first theory is that the mridangam, played in South India was split into two sometime during the 18th century. The other theory is that the instrument has been known to South India since before Christian era. Several sculptures in South India depict people playing instruments resembling the tabla.

C: I have heard something else.

Me: Sir, another theory is that the tabla originated in north India, from the popular instrument pakhavaj. The proof cited for this is that the tabla players in Punjab are still referred to as 'Pakhaji', implying someone who plays the pakhavaj.

C: I had heard that the tabla originated from Arbistan and was brought to India from there. They could not put drums on camel-back and that is why they split the drums into two. Is it true?

Me: Yes sir, that is one theory, but I think that holds true for bigger drums and war drums such as nagara etc. Tabla is a small instrument and it cannot be used as a war drum, so that theory also cannot be considered conclusive.

C: Okay, tell me some other percussion instruments.

Me: Sir, in north India, we have pakhavaj, dhol, dholak etc., and in south India we have mridangam, khol etc.

C: Chenda, haven't you heard of Chenda?

Me: I'm sorry sir, I have not heard of it.

[Baton passes to M1, a lady member, most probably from English literature background]

M1: Why this shift from dentistry to civil services?

Me: Ma'am, I've always had diverse interests since childhood and after practicing dentistry, I realized that I did not want to limit myself to dentistry for the rest of my life. Since civil services provides me diverse opportunities, I decided to pursue this course of action.

M1: But if you've always had diverse interests, then why go for dentistry in the first place?

Me: Ma'am, to be very honest, I belong to a middle-class family and like all middle-class parents, my parents also aspired that their kid (not son :P) should become a doctor or an engineer. Moreover, my grandfather was a dentist, and this led me to go for dentistry.

M1: Okay, so literature. Who's your favourite author?

Me: Jeffrey Archer.

M1: Umm, would you consider him as literature? I don't.

Me: Ma'am he is a contemporary author who writes thriller novels which appeal to a lot of people, me included. So I would certainly include him in literature.

M1: Okay. Have you heard about Milton? Read him?

Me: Yes ma'am.

M1: Have you read Paradise Lost?

Me: Yes, ma'am.

M1: What was his other poem?

Me: Ma'am, Milton's other poems are Comus, Samson..

M1: No no, the *other* poem.

Me: Ma'am, after Paradise Lost, he wrote Paradise Regained.

M1: So what are the major takeaways from the poem?

Me: Ma'am the basic theme is about Man's disobedience and the consumption of Forbidden Fruit by Even and Adam, as a result of which they were banished from the Garden of Eden.

M1: So, the takeaway?

Me: Ma'am, the major takeaway is that if mankind would've obeyed God and not consumed to Forbidden Fruit, then they could've lived in Paradise for all eternity, but disobedience led to adverse consequences.

M1: No, the major takeaways are regarding predestiny and (something which I don't remember).

Me: Okay, thank you ma'am.

M1: Tell me some Romantic era poets.

Me: Ma'am, William Wordsworth, William Blake, John Keats, Shelley.

M1: Have you heard of Bloomsbury Club?

Me: [couldn't hear it properly] Sorry ma'am, I have not.

M1: Bloomsbury club? Virginia Woolf?

Me: Yes ma'am, I can recall having read about that, but I don't remember who else was a part of the club.

M1: Okay, so what kind of syllabus do they have these days for English literature?

Me: Told. She looked pointedly and smirked when I mentioned Virginia Woolf in Paper 2. So I reiterated that I had read about the Club while reading about Woolf, but I could not recall it at that time. She said okay.

[Reading my DAF carefully, on the service preference page; and pointedly ignoring that I had IFS as my first preference]

M1: So, you belong to Ahmedabad, right?

Me: Ma'am I belong to Bharuch. I was born in Ahmedabad and later attended college there.

M1: Okay, so which state would you like to serve in when you enter service?

Me: Ma'am, I would like to serve in Gujarat, my home state...

M1: Forget it, you're not getting Gujarat. They don't give Gujarat that easily.

M3: He has neighbouring states next.

Me: Yes ma'am. I have placed Gujarat and the neighbouring states as my top preferences, since I am familiar with the language and cultural milieu etc...

M1: But you'll need to learn a new language so that can't be an excuse..

Me: Yes, ma'am. Language is not an issue for me. After the neighbouring states, it doesn't matter whether it is north or south or north east, I would like to serve in whatever cadre I'm allotted, because all states provide equal opportunity to do good, meaningful work.

M1: Have you played tabla on stage?

Me: Ma'am I've played it twice.

M1: When?

Me: Ma'am I learnt table while I was in school, so I played it twice during the annual cultural festivals of my school.

M1: Okay.

[Baton passes to M2]

M2: I find this very strange and intriguing – this shift from dentistry to civil services.

You must have filled preferences for service, right? IAS, IPS, IRS etc etc? [Yes, sir] So, suppose you're allotted IRS customs. Would you still prefer it to being a dentist?

Me: Sir, IRS customs is also a diverse job with a good career progression. It offers opportunities in various domains such as narcotics, indirect taxes etc. I would prefer it to being a dentist.

M2: But do you think you'll be serving the society better by being a customs officer than as a dentist?

Me: Sir, according to me, any person who does his/her job with dignity and diligence is serving the society. In dentistry we have tangible benefit to the society whereas it is intangible in customs.

Thus, I would not be serving the society better or worse as a customs officer, I would be serving the society in equal measure, as a dentist or as a customs officer.

M2: [Long question, nearly 2-3 minutes] Okay, so recently there have been elections in several states. Now in UP, it has been reported that there are improvements in the law and order situation. Ground level machinery is the same, law and order functionaries are the same, people are the same, infrastructure is the same, [a few more XYZ things have not changed etc etc]. So tell me, why is it that law and order situation improves during some governments and deteriorates during some governments?

Me: Sir, first and foremost is political will. It cannot be denied that a certain section of the political executive does pressurize the law and order machinery to serve its own vested interests. This is what hampers the efficiency of the law and order. Since the new government has got an overwhelming mandate of the people, there is a sense of urgency to show tangible results on the ground, which would have led to improvements in the law and order.

M2: So the crux is that if political will is there, it improves law and order, otherwise it doesn't, is it?

Me: Sir, another point that I forgot to add earlier is the degree of freedom that is given to the permanent executive. The people on the ground are aware about the domain and know what needs to be done to achieve the results. If the elected government acts as a motivator and a facilitator for the bureaucracy and the administration, then there would be an improvement in the law and order situation.

[Baton passes to M3]

M3: So, you belong to Bharuch. It is an ancient city and it used to be a famous port in ancient times etc, no? [Yes, sir]. So tell us something about it, what was it called?

Me: Sir, the ancient name for Bharuch was Barygaza or Barugaza. It was the port by which the Indian subcontinent traded with Romans and the entire Europe. Then the port gradually shifted southwards towards Surat, but still during the 17th century, it was still used for trade and it was called “Broach” at that time.

M3: Okay, so you mentioned that the port shifted southwards. Why does it happen? You know there was a port even earlier, north of Bharuch?

Me: I cannot recall it at present, sir.

M3: Have you heard of Lothal?

Me: Yes, sir, Lothal was a port in the Gulf of Cambay during the Indus Valley Civilization.

M3: Right, so from Lothal to Bharuch to Surat to Mumbai, and nowadays the ships have stopped coming to Mumbai also. What do you think is the reason for this southward shift of ports?

Me: I cannot think of a reason at the moment, sir.

M3: Do you think the need for a greater draft..

Me: Yes, sir increasing size of the ships with time has led to the need for deeper harbours.

M3: So larger ships are a reason, no?

Me: Yes, sir, one of the reasons. Thank you, sir.

M3: So, literature. What contemporary Indian authors have you read?

Me: Sir, I’ve read Amish Tripathi and Ashwin Sanghi.

M3: Are you aware about Amish’s theory on the origin of Saraswati river?

Me: [mumbled a bit while trying to recall. Couldn’t.] I’m sorry sir, I cannot recall it at present.

M3: His theory on Aryans?

Me: I can’t remember it, sir.

M3 looked at me pointedly.

Me: Sir, I’ve read the Shiva trilogy...

M3: Haan, it’s there in the book itself.

Me: Sir, I read it a long time ago so I am not able to recall it.

M3: What other author did you mention?

Me: Sir, Ashwin Sanghi.

M3: He was the one who wrote on Rama, isn’t it?

Me: Sir, he wrote the Krishna Key.

M3: Okay, what else?

Me: Sir, he also wrote a crime fiction with James Patterson..

M3: Haven’t you read Amitav Ghosh or Shashi Tharoor or other such authors?

Me: Sir they’re on my reading list but unfortunately I haven’t read them yet.

M3: Okay, have you been following Shashi Tharoor’s lectures on British rule and all?

Me: Yes sir, I have.

M3: Do you agree with what he says about the British rule?

Me: Sir I agree with the conclusion that whatever the British did was to further their colonial ambitions

and interests and impoverish India. Sir, but at the same time it cannot be denied that they did bring technology here, which, we can say, helped in an easier industrialization post-independence.

M3: But he says no, that the cost of railways here was 10 times that of US..

Me: Yes sir, the words that he used were that one does not need to be colonized in order to be industrialized.

M3: So, you agree with what he says?

Me: Yes sir, I agree with whatever Mr. Tharoor says with respect to the colonial rule. The British rule was extremely detrimental to our progress, and our citizens suffered countless atrocities due to the colonial occupation.

M3: Have you read any war stories etc.?

Me: Sir, when the commemoration of the centenary was going on a couple of years ago, I had read a few articles in the newspaper. Beyond that I have not read any stories.

M3: So, WW1, right? DO you know how many soldiers we contributed?

Me: Sir I'm unable to recall the exact figure at present, but we contributed a lot of soldiers.

M3: We contributed in bullion also, you know?

Me: Yes sir, but I would not know the actual figures for those, since I read it a long time ago.

M3: Okay, so you're a dentist, and you get posted in any rural area in Gujarat or anywhere else. What will you do to improve dental outcomes?

Me: Sir, the first thing is awareness. People need to be made aware that there are several dental diseases and most of them are treatable. From my limited experience in practice, I can say that most of the rural population knows only one treatment – removal of the tooth...

M3: No but even during British times there are documents that say that Indians are dirty and they don't clean their teeth often. How will you change this?

Me: Sir, people need to be advised on proper oral hygiene and consequences of poor oral hygiene..

M3: So how will you do it? Will you issue a diktat that "People of rural India, be advised that you need to keep your teeth clean.." [All started smiling] HOW will you create awareness?

Me: Sir, we have to conduct dental awareness camps from time to time, we need to provide them free treatments wherever possible. Sir, ASHAs are the ground level workers that spread awareness about various diseases. Tasking them with spreading awareness about dental diseases is a very good way to spread awareness..

M3: And? In schools?

Me: Sir, in schools we need to conduct regular checkup and counsel the parents on how to maintain the kids' oral hygiene. We can provide preventive restorations to the kids and also identify problems such as malocclusion which can thereafter be nipped in the bud.

[Baton passes to M4]

M4: India's life expectancy is 63% for males and 67% for females. What was the reason for such a spike in life expectancy post-independence?

Me: Sir the two reasons were better nutrition and better access to healthcare services. It is obvious that if people get proper food and are able to avail treatments for ailments, they'll live longer.

M4: Was decrease in maternal mortality due to childbirth a factor?

Me: Yes sir, it is one of the factors.

M4: What else will you do to improve life expectancy?

Me: Sir, first we need to create a robust public sector healthcare system by increasing the public spending on healthcare. Nearly 70% of all medical expenditure is borne by Indians out of their own pockets. This deters them from availing tertiary healthcare services and procedures that may prolong life.

Sir, the second thing is that people are very stressed nowadays due to multiple reasons. So we need to de-stress them and change the lifestyles. Third thing is that the rapidly increasing pollution due to urbanization etc also has a tangible effect on the health of the people.

Thus, there is no one-point solution. Increasing life expectancy needs a holistic approach and concerted action across various domains.

M4: Recently I read somewhere that India will surpass China's population by 2050. So what to do about it? How to control this population?

Me: Sir, again awareness plays a major role here. Couples need to be explained that it is better to raise one kid whom they can provide healthcare and education for properly, instead of giving birth to 5 kids whom they may not be able to educate or provide for.

Moreover, people in rural areas harbour several myths such as using contraceptives or contraceptive devices will lead to cancer etc. So such myths should be dispelled with. [Could not remember the word "vasectomy" or else would've added that as well.]

M4: Okay, doctors are not going to rural areas. What will you do about that?

Me: Sir, any long term solution must involve motivation, because anything done by coercion will not last long. We have seen that several states instituted mandatory rural postings for fresh MBBS graduates but they all have been met with stiff resistance and non-compliance.

Sir, the doctors have to be incentivized to go to rural areas. If they are provided a lifestyle commensurate to one that they would enjoy in cities, or even a percentage of it, they would be willing to go.

Another thing is lack of infrastructure and support staff. Without adequate nurses, pharmacists etc, these doctors would not be able to do their job properly and would therefore prefer not to go.

Sir, if these things are provided, then doctors would prefer rural areas since they get better exposure and a wide variety of cases that they would not ordinarily see in urban areas. In fact, several of my friends cited these very reasons for not preferring rural postings.

[Chairman again..]

C: Okay, Dr. [last name], now that your interview is over; we're finally seeing a smile on your face. It seems you're relaxed (everybody laughs).

Me: Sir, actually I smile all the time inside but my face is such that it looks as if I'm not smiling.

C: So, should we start the interview again? (all panellists laugh again)

Me (laughing): Sir, if you deem it necessary, then by all means do.

C: No no, it won't be necessary. So tell me, how will you spend this evening?

Me: Sir, my dad is here for the interview. So we'll probably have dinner together.

C: Nice. There are several nice movies, so go out, watch a nice movie with your dad, and enjoy the evening. Okay?

Me: I will, sir. Thank you sir; (nodded at everyone). 😊

Duration: 30-35 mins.

Analysis/comments:

1. Very very cordial board, can put anyone immediately at ease. Comfortable chair, large room, small round table. Chairman was sitting probably 6 feet diametrically opposite to me.
2. No questions on why IFS despite 3 of the 5 panelists reading my entire DAF in detail and focusing on service and cadre preferences (they are sitting so close that it is possible to see what page of your DAF they are reading.)
3. No questions on IR, hardly one question on current affairs, no CA factual questions.
4. Most of the questions related to DAF and background.
5. Didn't fumble except in the first question. Looked at all members from time to time, especially during long answers.
6. Could've handled a few questions better.
7. Worried about the multiple "I can't recall" answers to M3 regarding Indian authors. :/
8. Somehow it seems as if I'll either get very high (190+) marks or very low (~120) marks. Only result will tell. But the fear of the unknown has gone. Prelims prep begins from 20th April.