

Competitive exams in India: Are we testing the right parameters?

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SUMMARY

India's top exams for management, civil service roles and the like have been testing skills that have little to do with real-world performance. Do we need managers who cracked a speed test called CAT or officers who memorized vast data troves to secure a UPSC rank? This only holds the country back.

As the adage goes, "Whatever gets measured gets managed." This principle is evident in education, professional recruitment and performance evaluations worldwide. The metrics we prioritize influence how individuals prepare, perform, and are judged.

Every management consultant will tell you this. Ironically, management education is one area where we have never stopped to ask whether we are testing the right skills.

The Common Admission Test (CAT) and similar entrance exams for management institutes test for two areas of competency: *One*, English vocabulary and comprehension. *Two*, solving arithmetic and logic problems. In both, the latter especially, the test is mostly of speed. At best, it is like an IQ test.

But is speed really the requirement? It is almost the last skill required in the field of [management](#). I cannot think of a single business where the critical difference between success and failure is a gap of a few minutes in the speed of decision-making.

Business leadership demands strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, collaboration, calculated risk-taking, long-term vision and even street smartness. None of these has any correlation with the ability to solve arithmetic problems within a few seconds.

Possibly, that is why most successful entrepreneurs do not have formal management education. Those of another generation like Dhirubhai Ambani or Richard Branson never even completed [college](#). Even contemporary entrepreneurs, from Vijay Shekhar Sharma of Paytm to Ritesh Agarwal of Oyo, did not opt for management education.

Another exam with such a disconnect is for the civil services held by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC). Think of that whole system objectively, shorn of its halo and glory, and you will realize how flawed and absurd it is. It tests candidates' ability to memorize reams of information across subjects like history, geography and current affairs, alongside some analytical skills.

The first problem is that it serves as a single gateway to a wide array of careers: Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Police Service (IPS), Indian Foreign Service (IFS), Indian Revenue Service (IRS), etc, each requiring distinct skills and aptitudes.

Which service successful candidates end up in is simply a function of their ranks in the exam. And they can't afford to give up a job because it does not fit their aptitude or interest, as there is no guarantee that they would be able to qualify again.

This leads to bizarre mismatches. A candidate with a background in literature and no interest in finance could be assigned to the IRS, tasked with handling complex tax policies, or the Indian Audit and Accounts service to face a lifetime of numbers.

Similarly, someone with no aptitude for outdoor work might end up in the IPS, where fieldwork and crisis management are key. Someone may join the IFS and become a diplomat despite struggling with public speaking and cross-cultural [communication](#)—skills essential for diplomacy. Such mismatches can lead to inefficiency, frustration and suboptimal outcomes for the country.

IAS officers, often considered the backbone of India's bureaucracy, are frequently rotated across unrelated domains: labour one year, agriculture the next, and finance thereafter. It ends up becoming a power game where little knowledge or subject matter-related skills are required to do a good job. Also, higher-ranked officers with little domain knowledge could even try to sabotage the career of juniors who have better skills and may outshine them.

In certain surveys, IAS officers have themselves expressed how they felt underprepared for technical roles due to a lack of domain-specific training. With fast changing technologies, this skill gap has become even more glaring.

On the other hand, the IAS lobby is very power- and hierarchy-conscious, and will not let go of posts that have traditionally been held by IAS officers.

In contrast, most countries tailor their recruitment processes to specific job requirements. In the US, federal agencies like the Internal Revenue Service or State Department conduct targeted hiring, assessing candidates for skills relevant to the role. For example, accounting for tax officials and diplomatic aptitude for foreign service. Singapore's civil service, renowned for its efficiency, uses a combination of aptitude tests, interviews and role-specific assessments.

These systems prioritize individual fit over a one-size-fits-all approach, resulting in better governance. I have been told by people who have represented India in global forums that Indian officers often come across as less competent mainly because they lack specific expertise.

India's current system, rooted in colonial-era practices, puts learning by rote and general knowledge over practical skills. The British designed the Indian Civil Service to produce loyal administrators, not specialists, and the UPSC exam retains this legacy.

Coaching institutes thrive by training students to 'crack' the CAT or UPSC through short-cuts and rote, not by fostering critical thinking or leadership. That is how incentives work. As I write this, I have little hope that the system will change for the better. Entrenched interests are likely to prove too strong.

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