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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A STUDY ON UPSC-CSE ASPIRANTS AND THEIR CONFLICTS IN CLEARING THE PRELIMINARY (LEVEL 1) PHASE OF EXAMINATION

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Key words:-

Stress, UPSC aspirants, preliminary examination, psychological conflict, Plan B.

Abstract

Background: The UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) is one of the most prestigious and competitive examinations in India, requiring extensive preparation and resilience. The Preliminary (Level 1) phase acts as a crucial screening stage, where aspirants often experience significant psychological conflicts such as stress, fear of failure, and pressure from family, society, and financial conditions. Aspirants preparing in hubs like Rajendra Nagar encounter intense competition and uncertainty, which influence both their mental well-being and performance.

Aim: The study aims to examine the psychological conflicts experienced by UPSC Civil Services Examination aspirants during the Preliminary stage, with a focus on stress, fear of failure, and socio-economic pressures. It further seeks to analyze the role of stress in preparation, identify major sources of pressure, and assess the perceived importance of having an alternative career plan (Plan B) in enhancing aspirants' performance and mental well-being.

Methods: A quantitative research approach with a descriptive survey design was used. A sample of 40 UPSC aspirants was selected using non-probability convenient sampling technique. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of 7 questions administered via Google Forms. The tool focused on perceived difficulty, role of stress, sources of pressure, fears, importance of Plan B, and preparation strategies. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage).

Results:- Out of 40 aspirants, 23 (57.5%) were male and 17 (42.5%) were female. Majority 32 (80%) belonged to the age group of 20-25 years, while 8 (20%) were between 25-30 years. Most participants 28 (70%) were from Arts background. The findings revealed that 87.5% aspirants perceived the examination as difficult. Regarding stress, 42.5% reported it plays an extreme role, while 50% believed moderate stress is necessary.

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Financial pressure (42.5%) and family pressure (30%) were the major stressors. Fear of future uncertainty was reported by (67.5%) aspirants. Majority (77.5%) agreed that having a Plan B is important. About 60% believed GS Paper I can be cleared with minimal stress, and 82.5% preferred stress-free practice for CSAT.

Conclusion: The findings reveal that UPSC aspirants experience significant psychological conflicts, particularly related to stress, financial burden, and future uncertainty. Effective stress management, structured preparation, and the inclusion of alternative career planning (Plan B) are essential for improving performance and overall well-being.

Introduction:-

The UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) is one of the most prestigious and competitive examinations in India, attracting lakhs of aspirants every year. The examination process is rigorous and consists of multiple stages, with the Preliminary (Level 1) phase acting as a crucial screening test. This stage, which includes General Studies Paper I and CSAT, is often perceived as one of the most challenging due to its vast syllabus, unpredictability, and intense competition^{3,10}. In recent years, preparation hubs such as Rajendra Nagar have become central to UPSC preparation, where aspirants from diverse academic and socio-economic backgrounds gather to pursue their goals. While the examination demands strong academic preparation, it also involves significant psychological and emotional challenges. Aspirants frequently experience stress, anxiety, fear of failure, and pressure from family, society, and financial conditions^{2,11}. Stress has been identified as a major factor influencing academic performance, with both positive and negative effects depending on its intensity⁷. Moderate stress may enhance motivation and focus, whereas excessive stress can lead to anxiety, reduced concentration, and poor performance⁶. Additionally, financial burden and societal expectations further contribute to psychological distress among students preparing for competitive examinations¹³. The selection and preparation process is often uncertain, requiring aspirants to maintain consistency and motivation. It is coupled with fear of failure, leads to internal conflicts that significantly affect mental well-being and decision-making⁴. Furthermore, concepts such as self-efficacy and personal belief systems play a crucial role in determining how aspirants cope with these challenges¹⁴. From a sociological perspective, the experiences of aspirants can also be understood through the framework of Max Weber, who emphasized the role of rationality and social action in human behavior¹⁵. Aspirants often balance goal-oriented preparation with value-driven expectations such as prestige, social recognition, and family approval, leading to internal conflict.

Need of The Study:-

Preparation for the UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) is not merely an academic activity but a complex psychological journey influenced by multiple internal and external factors. Every year, over 10–12 lakh aspirants appear for the Preliminary (Level 1) examination, but only around 1–2 lakh candidates clear Paper 1, and even fewer, about 50–60 thousand, clear Paper 2 (CSAT), highlighting the intense competition and the high stakes involved³. Aspirants often face high levels of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty due to the competitive nature of the examination and the limited success rate. Many aspirants relocate to coaching hubs, where the costs of tuition, accommodation, and living add significant financial burden. Financial stress has been shown to adversely affect academic performance and mental health¹³. In addition, family expectations and societal pressure further intensify emotional strain². Research indicates that while moderate stress can motivate aspirants and enhance focus, excessive stress impacts concentration, decision-making, and overall performance^{6,7}. The uncertainty and repeated attempts create fear of failure and concerns about future career prospects⁴. Despite the growing number of aspirants, limited studies address the psychological conflicts encountered during the preliminary stage, with most research focusing on academic strategies rather than mental well-being.

Aim of The Study:-

To assess the conflicts and psychological factors affecting UPSC aspirants in clearing the Preliminary (Level 1) phase of examination.

Objectives:-

- To assess aspirant's perception of UPSC examination difficulty
- To determine the role of stress in clearing the Preliminary examination
- To identify major sources of pressure among aspirants

Methods:-

A quantitative research approach with a descriptive survey design was used. The study was conducted among 40 UPSC aspirants in Rajendra Nagar, selected using a non-probability convenient sampling technique. The number of previous attempts made by aspirants ranged between 2 to 5 attempts. All participants included in the sample were

enrolled in coaching centres, indicating a structured preparation environment. Additionally, nearly 5% of the aspirants had previously cleared the Preliminary examination, though not on their first attempt, reflecting prior exposure to the examination process. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 7 questions administered through Google Forms. The tool included questions related to perceived difficulty, role of stress, sources of pressure, fears, importance of Plan B, and preparation strategies. The questionnaire was simple, self-structured, and focused on capturing the perceptions of aspirants. The demographic variables included gender, age, and field of study. Out of 40 participants, 23 (57.5%) were male and 17 (42.5%) were female. The majority, 32 (80%), belonged to the age group of 20–25 years, while 8 (20%) were between 25–30 years. Most aspirants, 28 (70%), were from an Arts background, followed by 7 (17.5%) from Science and 5 (12.5%) from Commerce. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics including frequency and percentage.

Results:-

Table 1: Distribution of Responses among UPSC Aspirants n=40

SR NO	QUESTIONS	RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
1	Is Clearing UPSC CSE difficult?	Yes, somewhat difficult	87.5
		No, not difficult	12.5
2	Role of Stress	Severe Stress	42.5
		Moderate Stress	50
		Mild Stress	7.5
3	Sources or Causes of Pressure	Finances	42.5
		Family	30
		Society	22.5
		Friends and Peer group	5
4	Fear among Aspirants	Uncertainty of the Future	67.5
		Losing Out	25
		Image/ Prestige	7.5
5	Is Plan B required?	Yes	77.5
		No	22.5
6	Strategy for GS Paper	Yes, approach with minimum stress	60
		No, approach without any stress	40
7	Strategy for CSAT Paper	Practice without any stress	82.5
		Practice with minimum stress	17.5

Interpretation:-

The survey data highlights that UPSC CSE preparation is widely perceived as challenging, with 87.5% of respondents considering it difficult, which itself contributes to psychological pressure. Stress emerges as a dominant factor, with 92.5% of aspirants experiencing moderate to severe stress, indicating that it is an inherent part of the preparation process rather than an occasional issue. Financial constraints (42.5%) and family expectations (30%) are the leading sources of pressure, outweighing societal and peer influences, which suggests that practical and immediate concerns affect aspirants more than social comparison. The most significant fear among aspirants is the uncertainty of the future (67.5%), followed by the fear of losing out on opportunities, reflecting anxiety about long-term stability rather than social image. A substantial 77.5% believe in having a backup plan, showing a shift towards pragmatic thinking. In terms of preparation strategy, most aspirants prefer managing stress rather than eliminating it, especially for General Studies, while CSAT is approached with relatively less stress due to its practice-oriented nature. Overall, the findings indicate a balance between ambition and caution, where aspirants acknowledge challenges but adapt with practical strategies and effective stress management strategies.

Difficulty level of UPSC CSE according to aspirants n=40

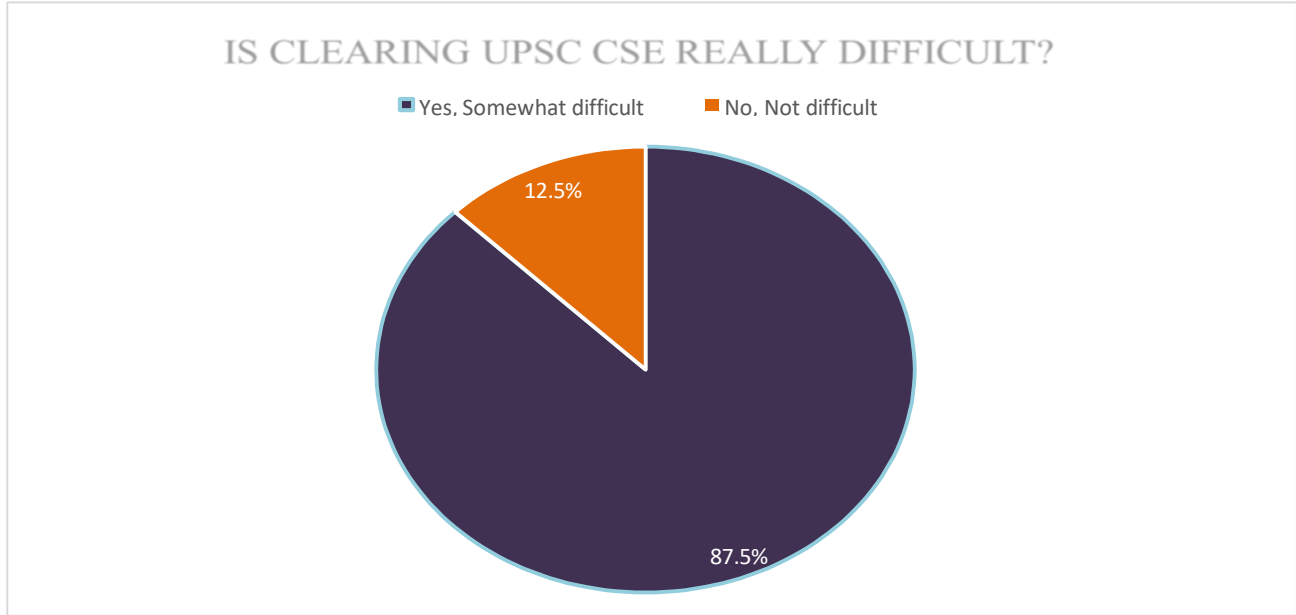


Figure 1: Perception of Aspirants Regarding Difficulty of UPSC Examination

Figure 1 shows that 87.5% of aspirants perceive the UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) as difficult, while only 12.5% consider it not difficult. This indicates that the majority recognize the exam as highly challenging, reflecting its competitive nature and vast syllabus.

Role of stress while clearing preliminary examination n=40

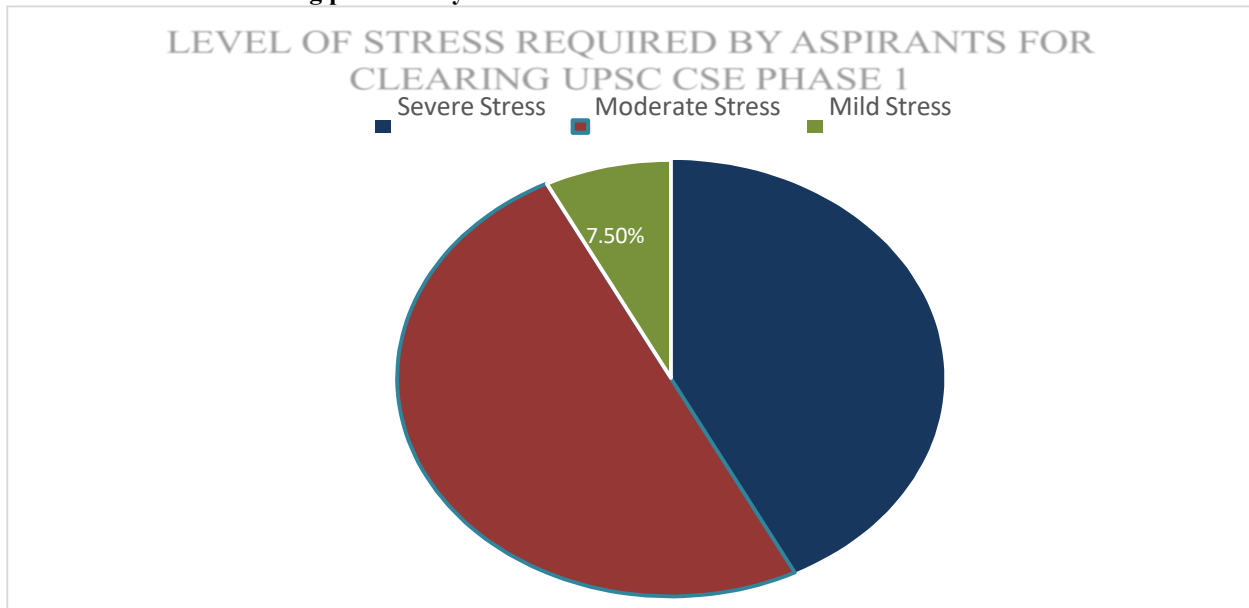


Figure 2: Level of stress required by aspirants for clearing UPSC CSE Phase 1

Figure 2 shows that 50% of aspirants believe a sufficient level of stress is required to clear the UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) Preliminary Examination, while 42.5% feel stress plays an extremely significant role. Only 7.5% reported that minimal stress is sufficient. This indicates that most aspirants perceive stress as an important factor influencing performance, with moderate stress being considered optimal.

Need for Plan B while preparing for UPSC CSE n=40

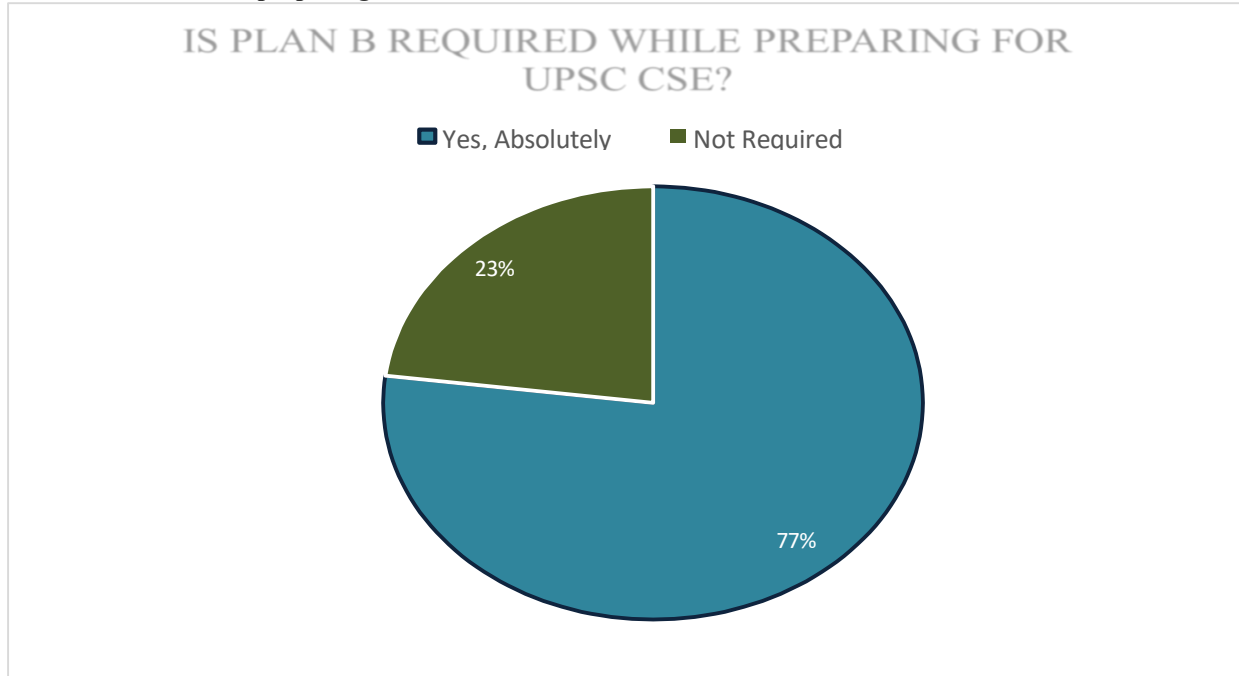


Figure 3: Need for Plan B while Preparing for UPSC CSE

Figure 3 shows that 77% of aspirants believe a Plan B is necessary while preparing for the UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE), whereas 23% do not. This indicates that most aspirants prefer having a backup plan due to the uncertainty and competitive nature of the examination.

Aspirant’s Approach towards GS paper and CSAT paper Preparation n= 40

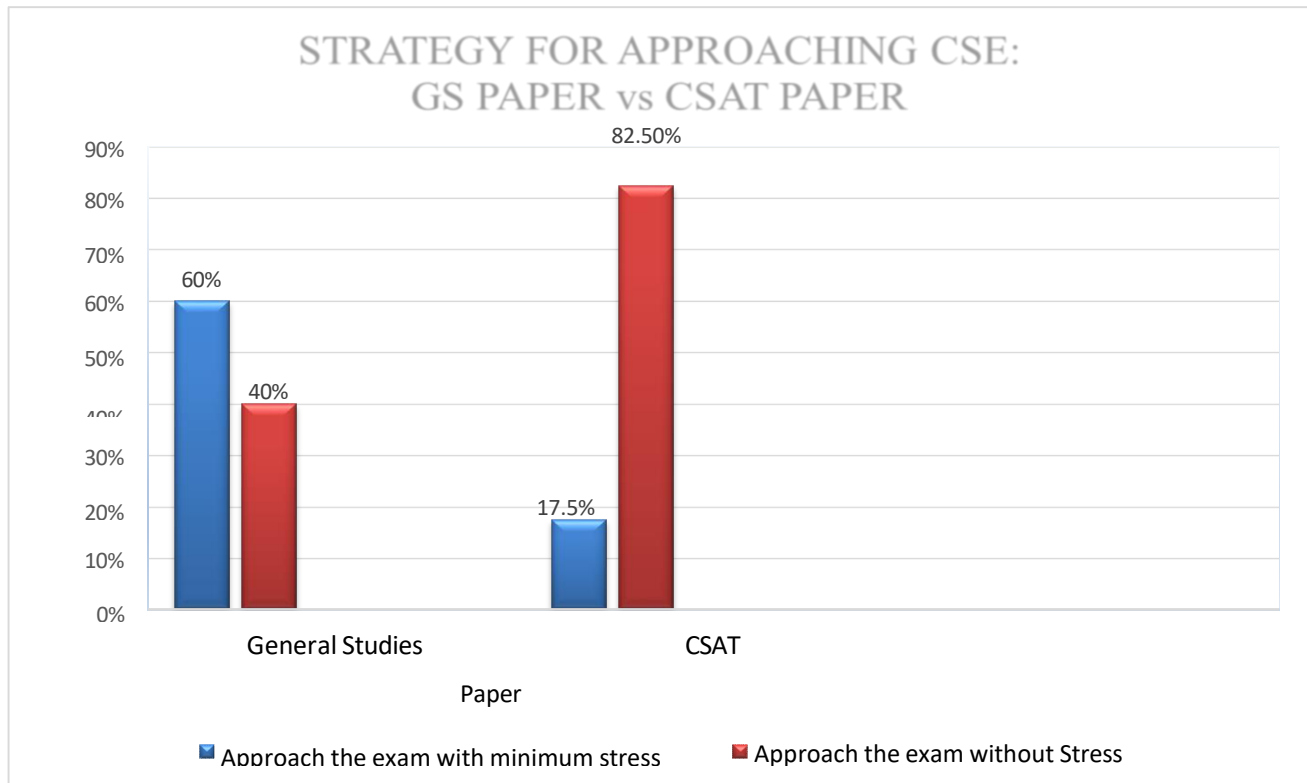


Fig 4: Aspirant's Approach towards GS Paper and CSAT Paper Preparation

The figure illustrates the strategies adopted by UPSC aspirants for handling stress during examination preparation. For GS paper, 60% of aspirants believed it could be cleared with minimal stress, while 40% felt otherwise. For CSAT paper, 82.5% preferred practicing with zero or no stress, whereas 17.5% preferred to be approaching the paper with minimum stress. This highlights a strong preference for stress-free preparation, especially for CSAT.

Discussion:-

The present study explored the psychological conflicts faced by aspirants preparing for the UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE). The findings reveal that most aspirants perceive the examination as difficult, reflecting its competitive nature and uncertain outcomes. Stress was identified as a significant factor influencing performance, with most aspirants indicating that moderate stress is necessary for motivation. However, excessive stress may negatively impact preparation. Financial pressure emerged as the primary stressor, which may be attributed to the high cost of preparation and living expenses in areas like Rajendra Nagar. Family and societal expectations further contribute to psychological burden. The dominance of fear related to future uncertainty highlights the emotional challenges faced by aspirants. The majority preference for having a Plan B indicates a rational approach towards managing uncertainty and career risks. The findings also suggest that structured preparation and stress management can help aspirants perform better, as a significant proportion (60%) believed GS Paper I can be cleared with minimal stress. Additionally, the preference for stress-free practice in CSAT emphasizes the importance of a calm and focused mindset. An important dimension emerging from the study is the presence of gender-specific psychological pressures. While both male and female aspirants face academic stress, female aspirants often encounter additional societal expectations such as marriage timelines and safety concerns in preparation hubs, which may affect mobility, peer interaction, and overall well-being. In contrast, male aspirants face relatively less societal scrutiny regarding age and marriage but experience greater pressure to achieve financial stability.

Despite these differences, the findings suggest that effective stress management should remain the primary focus for all aspirants. Developing strategies to minimize and regulate stress can enhance concentration, consistency, and overall performance in the examination. In this context, having a "Plan B" should be viewed as a supportive backup rather than the central focus—providing psychological security without diverting attention from preparation. Thus, a balanced approach that prioritizes stress management while keeping an alternative option in place can help aspirants sustain motivation and perform more effectively.

DECISION MATRIX: PLAN B DEVELOPMENT FOR UPSC ASPIRANTS

Align Your UPSC Subjects with Alternative Professional Qualifications to Reduce Existential Dread of Failure

HOW TO USE THIS MATRIX

- 1 Identify Your Strong Subjects**
Based on interest, score & comfort.
- 2 Match with Related Fields**
Explore alternative careers that use the same knowledge base.
- 3 Choose Suitable Qualifications**
Shortlist professional courses/ certifications that add employability.
- 4 Build Parallel Competence**
Allocate weekly time for skill-building alongside UPSC preparation.
- 5 Reduce Dread, Increase Focus**
A strong Plan B reduces fear of failure and helps you focus better on your main goal.

UPSC SUBJECT STRENGTH AREA	CORE SKILLS YOU DEVELOP	RELATED ALTERNATIVE PROFESSIONAL FIELDS	RECOMMENDED QUALIFICATIONS / CERTIFICATIONS (PLAN B OPTIONS)	HOW IT SUPPORTS YOU B
POLITY & GOVERNANCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analytical thinking • Understanding institutions • Law & policy awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law • Public Policy • Governance Consulting • NGO / Social Sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LL.B. / B.A. LL.B. • Master in Public Policy (MPP) • Diploma in Governance • Certificate in Human Rights 	Strong alignment with your preparation; useful in policy research, advocacy and public institutions.
GEOGRAPHY & ENVIRONMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spatial understanding • Data interpretation • Environment awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental Consulting • GIS & Remote Sensing • Urban Planning • Disaster Management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • M.Sc. in Geography / Environment • GIS Certification • Diploma in Disaster Management • Sustainability Certification 	High demand in govt., consultancies, and environmental organizations.
ECONOMICS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative ability • Data analysis • Economic reasoning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finance • Data Analysis • Economics Research • Banking / FinTech 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • M.A. / M.Sc. in Economics • CFA / FRM (Finance) • Data Analytics Certification • PG Diploma in Banking & Finance 	Opens high-growth careers in finance, analytics and research.
HISTORY & CULTURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research & writing • Critical analysis • Perspective building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journalism • Content Writing • Heritage Management • Academia / Research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PG Diploma in Journalism • Content Writing Certification • M.A. in History / Culture • Heritage Management Course 	Useful in media, content, academia and cultural organizations.
MATHEMATICS & REASONING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logical reasoning • Problem solving • Quantitative aptitude 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data Science • Actuarial Science • Teaching (Maths) • Operations / Analytics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • B.Sc. / M.Sc. in Mathematics • Data Science Certification • Actuarial Science (IFoA/IAI) • B.Ed. + Teaching Exam 	Strong scope in analytics, IT, teaching and operations.
SCIENCE (Optional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scientific temper • Research skills • Technical understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research & Development • Biotechnology • Quality Assurance • Health & Public Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • M.Sc. in Sciences / Biotechnology • Clinical Research Certification • PG Diploma in Public Health • Quality Management (Six Sigma) 	Wide opportunities in labs, pharma, healthcare and research.

KEY TAKEAWAY

A Plan B is not a second choice; it is a safety net that protects your well-being and builds your future. Develop it in parallel, but keep your primary focus on clearing UPSC.

GOLDEN RULE

One focused attempt + One strong skill = Less fear, More focus, Better performance.

“ Prepare for your dreams, but prepare yourself for every possibility. Stay focused today, stay secure tomorrow. ”

Conclusion:-

The study concludes that UPSC aspirants face multiple psychological and situational conflicts during preparation for the Preliminary Examination. Stress, financial burden, fear of future uncertainty, and societal expectations are major challenges influencing their performance. While moderate stress can act as a motivator, effective stress management and structured preparation are essential for success. The importance of having a backup plan highlights the need for realistic and practical approaches to career planning. Overall, addressing psychological well-being along with academic preparation can significantly improve the chances of clearing the Preliminary stage of the UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE)

Limitations:-

- The study was limited to 40 UPSC aspirants
- Conducted only in Rajendra Nagar
- Based on self-reported data
- Limited number of variables assessed

Implications:-

The findings have implications for:

- Mental health support for aspirants
- Coaching institutes and educators
- Policy-making in competitive exam preparation
- Future research in aspirant psychology

Recommendations:-

- Similar studies can be conducted on larger samples
- Comparative studies across different cities can be done
- Interventional studies on stress management can be carried out
- Longitudinal studies to assess impact on performance

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