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From the Brink of Failure to UPSC-CSE AIR 10

Ujjwal Priyank's Story of Grit, Comebacks, and Unshakeable Belief

INTERVIEW

Ujjwal Priyank's journey to securing All India Rank 10 in UPSC-CSE 2025 is not just a story of success—it is a powerful narrative of resilience, setbacks, and determination. From narrowly missing the final list after reaching the interview stage to failing in Prelims the very next year, his path was anything but smooth. Yet, what sets him apart is his unwavering belief in himself and his refusal to give up. His journey stands as a reminder that in competition, perseverance often matters more than perfection.

Q: Tell us about your background and what inspired you to aim for UPSC.

A: I first came to know about the UPSC examination during my school days, when I learned that it is the gateway to prestigious services like IAS and IPS. My biggest inspiration has been my mother, who has always supported and guided me, and Acharya Kishore Kunal Ji, the founder of my school. Listening to him and observing his personality left a deep impression on me. Academically, I completed my schooling in Patna and later pursued B.Tech in Computer Science from JECRC University, Jaipur. My father manages agricultural work at home, and my mother, now a homemaker, was previously a teacher. Being an only child, I always received focused guidance and encouragement from my family, which played a crucial role in shaping my aspirations.

Q: When did you start preparing, and how did your attempts unfold?

A: I began my UPSC preparation in September 2022 with complete clarity that this was the only path I wanted to pursue—I didn't keep any backup options. My first attempt was both encouraging and heartbreaking at the same time. I managed to reach the interview stage, but when the final list came out, my name was missing. I had fallen short by just around 25 marks, with a total score of 928.

The second attempt was even more difficult to process because I couldn't clear the Prelims at all. Going from the interview stage to not clearing the first stage of the exam was a major setback, and it tested my confidence deeply.

However, throughout this phase, I held on to one belief—that if I stayed consistent and honestly worked on my weaknesses, success would eventually come. I treated failure as feedback rather than defeat. That mindset helped me stay grounded and focused. Finally, in my third attempt, everything came together, and I secured Rank 10.



That moment made the entire journey—every setback, every doubt—completely worth it.

Q: How did identifying your shortcomings and learning from past mistakes shape your preparation and eventual success?

A: My journey made me realise that success in the UPSC examination is not about studying endlessly, but about studying with clarity and purpose. After facing setbacks in consecutive attempts, I understood that the issue did not lie with the examination itself, but with certain gaps in my preparation. I took a step back and carried out an honest assessment of my performance. It became clear that I lacked depth in current affairs, my optional subject preparation was not sufficiently thorough, and my answer-writing practice needed significant improvement.

Once I identified these shortcomings, I addressed them in a structured and disciplined manner. I began following reputed newspapers more diligently to strengthen my current affairs. I devoted adequate time to my optional subject and made answer writing a regular part of my preparation. In addition, I analysed previous years' questions in detail and approached mock tests with a focus on learning rather than merely scoring marks.

This process unfolded over a period of nearly three and a half years and gradually refined my preparation. I came to understand that UPSC preparation is a journey of continuous improvement—where clarity develops over time through consistent effort and reflection. One of the most valuable lessons I learnt was that revision and consistency hold far greater importance than constantly seeking new study material. Ultimately, it was this ability to recognise my weaknesses and work on them diligently that proved decisive in my success.

Q: What was your overall preparation strategy, including your daily routine, approach to resources, and role of coaching?

A: My preparation strategy was centred around clarity, consistency, and discipline rather than rigid structures. I did not follow a fixed daily timetable, but I ensured that I consistently met my daily targets. At the start of each day, I would decide what needed to be covered—be it revision, note-making, or answer writing—and made sure those tasks were completed. I preferred studying during quieter hours, particularly in the afternoons and late at night, as it helped me maintain focus and minimise distractions.

In terms of resources, I consciously kept my sources limited and reliable. Instead of referring to multiple books, I focused on standard materials such as NCERTs for History and Geography, Laxmikanth for Polity, and Nitin Singhania for Economics. My emphasis was on revising these sources multiple times rather than constantly adding new material, as revision is key to retention and conceptual clarity.

As far as coaching is concerned, I relied primarily on self-study to build my fundamentals. I used online platforms for conceptual understanding when required. However, I did recognise the importance of evaluation and practice, which is why I joined a coaching centre in Patna specifically for mock tests. In my view, coaching is not indispensable, but structured guidance and regular testing play a crucial role in refining one's preparation and improving performance.

Q: What was your strategy for Prelims, and how should aspirants deal with setbacks at this stage?

A: One of my biggest learnings for Prelims was the critical importance of Previous Year Questions (PYQs). In my earlier attempts, I had not given them the attention they deserved, which reflected in my performance. This time, I analysed

PYQs thoroughly to understand patterns, recurring themes, and the nature of questions being asked. Alongside this, I practiced mock tests regularly, focusing on improving both accuracy and time management. This balanced approach helped me perform much better.

At the same time, it is important to understand that Prelims has become increasingly unpredictable, so failure should not be taken personally. Instead, it should be treated as constructive feedback. Aspirants must carefully analyse where they fell short—whether due to conceptual gaps, insufficient revision, or poor time management. Once these areas are identified, they can be addressed systematically. The key is to remain adaptable, learn from mistakes, and not lose confidence in the process.

Q: How did you develop your answer-writing and essay-writing skills for the Mains examination?

A: Writing regular mock tests played a crucial role in this process, as it helped me understand how to present answers within the given time and space constraints. Over time, I learned to be



more precise, organise my thoughts better, include relevant points, and maintain a clear and logical flow in my answers.

For essay preparation, I adopted a slightly different but equally structured approach. I went through answer copies of previous years' toppers to understand how to frame and structure essays effectively. I practiced writing around 8–10 essays and had them evaluated. One habit that helped me significantly was revisiting my essays after a couple of days to critically analyse them. This allowed me to identify my mistakes, refine my arguments, and improve my overall writing style. Together, consistent practice and self-evaluation helped me build confidence and competence in both answer writing and essay papers.

Q: How was your interview experience?

A: Since it was my second interview, I felt more comfortable and confident. The

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