

A Study on UPSC-CSE Aspirants and Their Conflicts in Clearing the Preliminary (Level 1) Phase of Examination

Abstract:

Introduction:

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.

Materials and 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. 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.

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

32

33 **INTRODUCTION:**

34 The UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) is one of the most prestigious and competitive
35 examinations in India, attracting lakhs of aspirants every year. The examination process is
36 rigorous and consists of multiple stages, with the Preliminary (Level 1) phase acting as a
37 crucial screening test. This stage, which includes General Studies Paper I and CSAT, is often
38 perceived as one of the most challenging due to its vast syllabus, unpredictability, and intense
39 competition^{3,10}.

40 In recent years, preparation hubs such as Rajendra Nagar have become central to UPSC
41 preparation, where aspirants from diverse academic and socio-economic backgrounds gather to
42 pursue their goals. While the examination demands strong academic preparation, it also
43 involves significant psychological and emotional challenges. Aspirants frequently experience
44 stress, anxiety, fear of failure, and pressure from family, society, and financial conditions^{2,11}.

45 Stress has been identified as a major factor influencing academic performance, with both
46 positive and negative effects depending on its intensity⁷. Moderate stress may enhance
47 motivation and focus, whereas excessive stress can lead to anxiety, reduced concentration, and
48 poor performance⁶. Additionally, financial burden and societal expectations further contribute
49 to psychological distress among students preparing for competitive examinations¹³.

50 The preparation process is often prolonged and uncertain, requiring aspirants to maintain
51 consistency and motivation over extended periods. This uncertainty, coupled with repeated
52 attempts and fear of failure, leads to internal conflicts that significantly affect mental well-
53 being and decision-making⁴. Furthermore, concepts such as self-efficacy and personal belief
54 systems play a crucial role in determining how aspirants cope with these challenges¹⁴.

55 From a sociological perspective, the experiences of aspirants can also be understood through
56 the framework of Max Weber, who emphasized the role of rationality and social action in
57 human behavior¹⁵. Aspirants often balance goal-oriented preparation with value-driven
58 expectations such as prestige, social recognition, and family approval, leading to internal
59 conflict.

60 **NEED OF THE STUDY:**

61 Preparation for the UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) is not merely an academic activity
62 but a complex psychological journey influenced by multiple internal and external factors.

63 Every year, over 10–12 lakh aspirants appear for the Preliminary (Level 1) examination, but
64 only around 1–2 lakh candidates clear Paper 1, and even fewer, about 50–60 thousand, clear
65 Paper 2 (CSAT), highlighting the intense competition and the high stakes involved³. Aspirants
66 often face high levels of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty due to the competitive nature of the
67 examination and the limited success rate.

68 Many aspirants relocate to coaching hubs, where the costs of tuition, accommodation, and
69 living add significant financial burden. Financial stress has been shown to adversely affect
70 academic performance and mental health¹³. In addition, family expectations and societal
71 pressure further intensify emotional strain².

72 Research indicates that while moderate stress can motivate aspirants and enhance focus,
73 excessive stress negatively impacts concentration, decision-making, and overall
74 performance^{6,7}. The uncertainty and repeated attempts create fear of failure and concerns about
75 future career prospects⁴. Despite the growing number of aspirants, limited studies address the
76 psychological conflicts encountered during the preliminary stage, with most research focusing
77 on academic strategies rather than mental well-being.

78 **AIM OF THE STUDY:**

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

81 **OBJECTIVES:**

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

85 **MATERIALS AND METHODS:**

86 A quantitative research approach with a descriptive survey design was used. The study was
87 conducted among 40 UPSC aspirants in Rajendra Nagar, selected using non-probability
88 convenient sampling technique.

89 Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 7 questions administered
90 through Google Forms. The tool included questions related to perceived difficulty, role of

91 stress, sources of pressure, fears, importance of Plan B, and preparation strategies. The
92 questionnaire was simple, self-structured, and focused on capturing perceptions of aspirants.

93 The demographic variables included gender, age, and field of study. Out of 40 participants, 23
94 (57.5%) were male and 17 (42.5%) were female. Majority 32 (80%) belonged to the age group
95 of 20-25 years, while 8 (20%) were between 25-30 years. Most aspirants 28 (70%) were from
96 Arts background, followed by 7 (17.5%) from Science and 5 (12.5%) from Commerce.

97 Data were analysed using descriptive statistics including frequency and percentage.

98 **RESULTS:**

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

Questions	Response	Percentage
Q1: Is clearing UPSC difficult?	Yes	87.5%
	No	12.5%
Q2: Role of stress	Severe Stress	42.5%
	Moderate Stress	50%
	Mild Stress	7.5%
Q3: Source of pressure	Financial	42.5%
	Family	30%
	Society	22.5%
	Friends	2.5%
Q4: Fear among aspirants	Future uncertainty	67.5%
	Losing out	25%
	Image/prestige	7.5%

Questions	Response	Percentage
Q5: Plan B required	Yes	77.5%
	No	22.5%
Q6: GS Paper I strategy	Yes, with minimum stress	60%
	No, without minimum stress	40%
Q7: CSAT Paper 2 strategy	Practice with zero stress	82.5%
	Practice with some stress	17.5%

100

101 **INTERPRETATION:**

102 The survey shows that most UPSC aspirants (87.5%) perceive the exam as difficult. Stress is
103 significant, with 50% finding moderate stress motivating and 42.5% experiencing severe stress.
104 Financial burden (42.5%) and family expectations (30%) are the main pressures, while fear of
105 future uncertainty affects 67.5% of aspirants. Most (77.5%) value having a Plan B. For
106 preparation, 60% believe GS Paper I can be cleared with minimal stress, and 82.5% prefer
107 stress-free practice for CSAT, highlighting the need for structured preparation and effective
108 stress management.

109

110

111

112

113

114

115

116

117

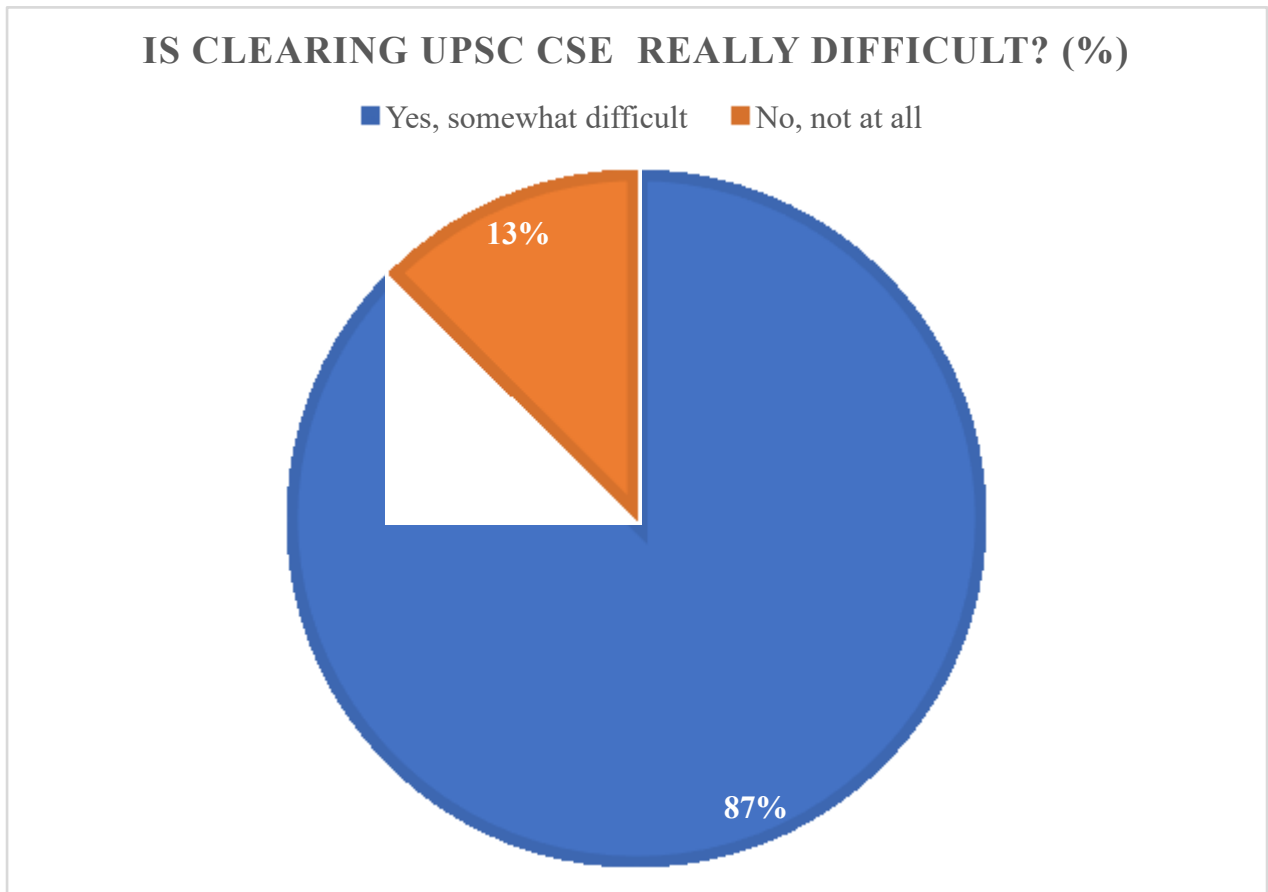
118

119 **Difficulty level of UPSC CSE according to aspirants**

120

n=40

121



122

123 **Figure 1: Perception of Aspirants Regarding Difficulty of UPSC Examination**

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

127

128

129

130

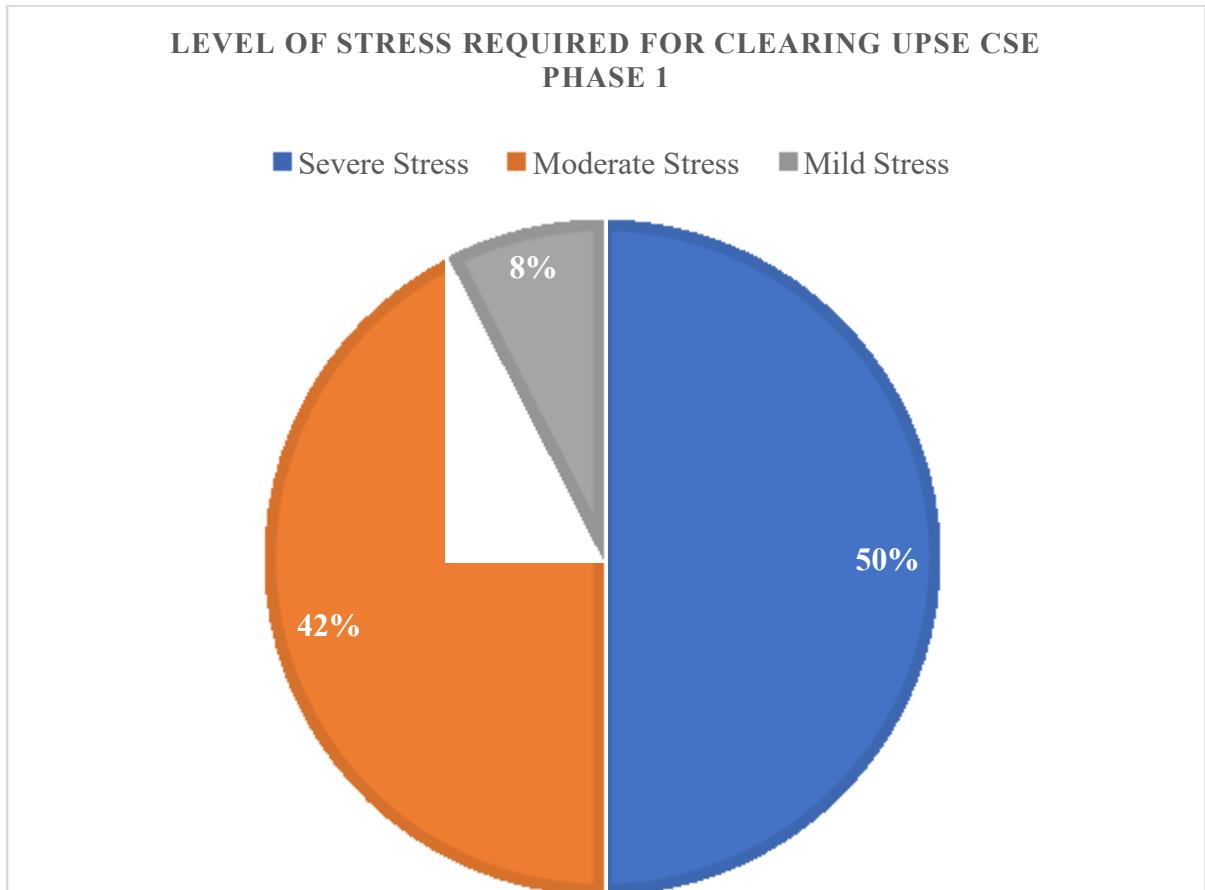
131

132

133 **Role of stress while clearing preliminary examination**

134

n=40



135

136

137 **Figure 2: Level of stress required for clearing the UPSC CSE Phase 1**

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

143

144

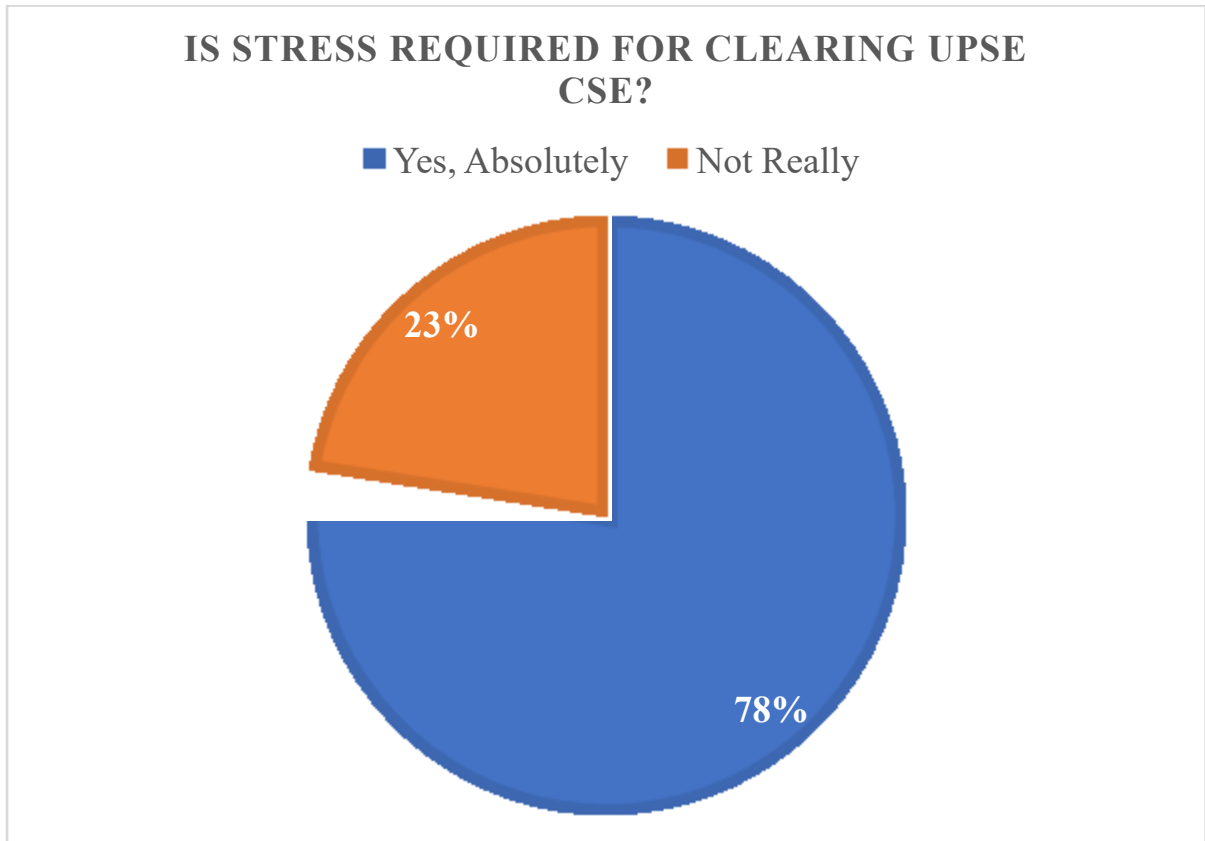
145

146

147 **Need for Plan B while preparing for UPSC CSE**

148

n=40



149

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

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

155

156

157

158

159

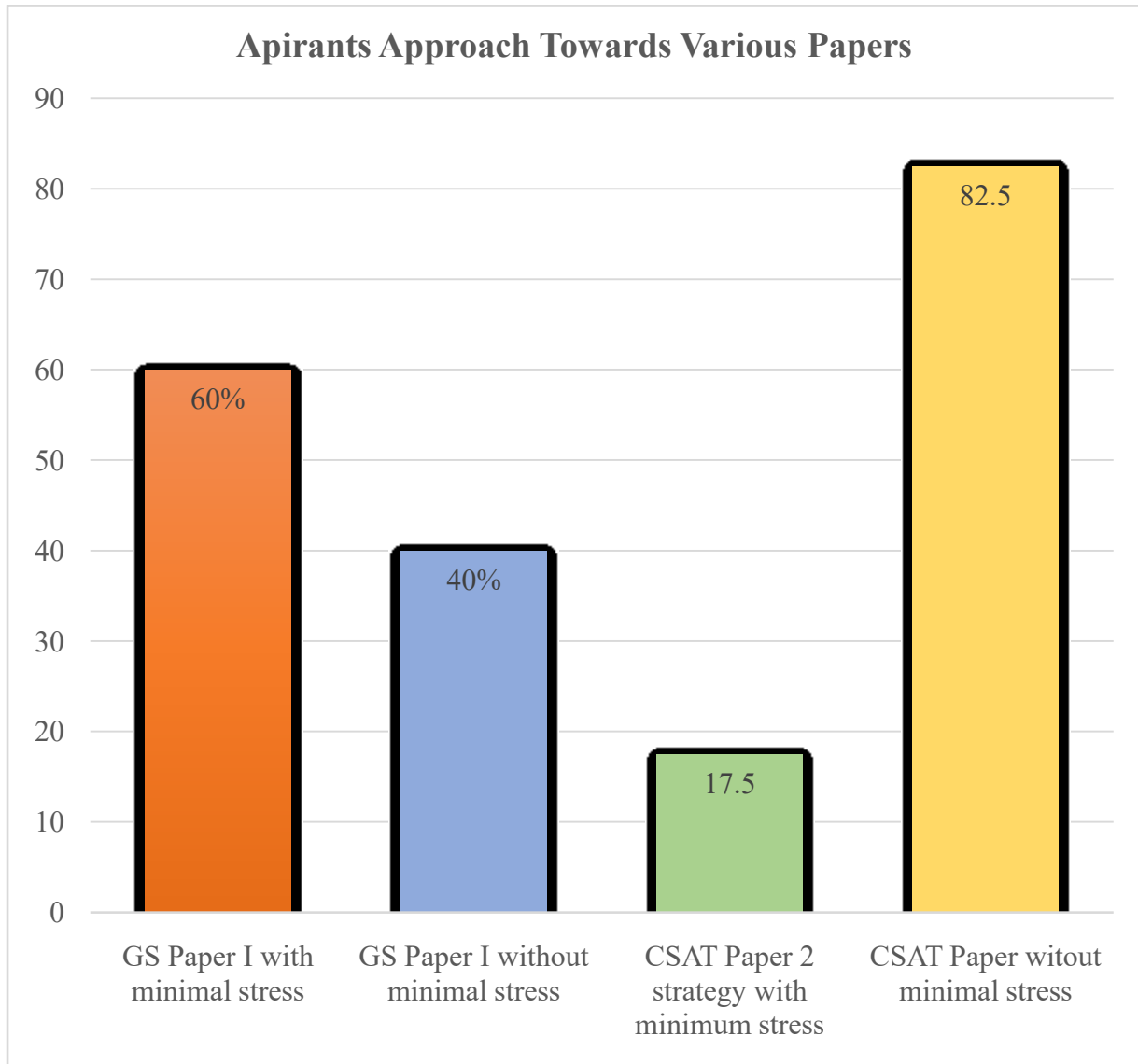
160

161

162 Aspirant's Approach to GS Paper I and CSAT Preparation

163

n=40



164

165 **Fig 4: Aspirant's Approach to GS Paper I and CSAT Preparation**

166 The figure illustrates the strategies adopted by UPSC aspirants for handling stress during
167 examination preparation. For GS Paper I, 60% of aspirants believed it could be cleared with
168 minimal stress, while 40% felt otherwise. For CSAT Paper 2, 82.5% preferred practicing with
169 zero stress, whereas 17.5% practiced with some stress. This highlights a strong preference for
170 stress-free preparation, especially for CSAT.

171

172

173 **DISCUSSION:**

174 The present study explored the psychological conflicts faced by aspirants preparing for the
175 UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE). The findings reveal that most aspirants perceive the
176 examination as difficult, reflecting its competitive nature and uncertain outcomes.

177 Stress was identified as a significant factor influencing performance, with most aspirants
178 indicating that moderate stress is necessary for motivation. However, excessive stress may
179 negatively impact preparation. Financial pressure emerged as the primary stressor, which may
180 be attributed to the high cost of preparation and living expenses in areas like Rajendra Nagar.
181 Family and societal expectations further contribute to psychological burden.

182 The dominance of fear related to future uncertainty highlights the emotional challenges faced
183 by aspirants. The majority preference for having a Plan B indicates a rational approach towards
184 managing uncertainty and career risks.

185 The findings also suggest that structured preparation and stress management can help aspirants
186 perform better, as a significant proportion believed GS Paper I can be cleared with minimal
187 stress. Additionally, the preference for stress-free practice in CSAT emphasizes the importance
188 of a calm and focused mindset.

189 **CONCLUSION:**

190 The study concludes that UPSC aspirants face multiple psychological and situational conflicts
191 during preparation for the Preliminary Examination. Stress, financial burden, fear of future
192 uncertainty, and societal expectations are major challenges influencing their performance.

193 While moderate stress can act as a motivator, effective stress management and structured
194 preparation are essential for success. The importance of having a backup plan highlights the
195 need for realistic and practical approaches to career planning.

196 Overall, addressing psychological well-being along with academic preparation can
197 significantly improve the chances of clearing the Preliminary stage of the UPSC Civil Services
198 Examination (CSE)

199 **LIMITATIONS:**

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

204 **IMPLICATIONS:**

205 The findings have implications for:

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

210 **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

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

215 **REFERENCES:**

- 216 1. Kumar S, Bhukar JP. Stress level and coping strategies of college students. *J Phys Educ*
217 *Sport Manag.* 2013;4(1):5-11.
- 218 2. Deb S, Strodl E, Sun J. Academic stress, parental pressure, anxiety and mental health
219 among Indian high school students. *Int J PsycholBehav Sci.* 2015;5(1):26-34.
- 220 3. Singh R, Kumar A. Study of stress and adjustment among civil services aspirants. *Int J*
221 *Indian Psychol.* 2017;4(3):112-8.
- 222 4. Verma R, Gupta A. Psychological distress among competitive exam aspirants in India.
223 *Indian J Health Wellbeing.* 2018;9(2):245-9.
- 224 5. Mishra S, McKean M. College students' academic stress and its relation to their anxiety,
225 time management, and leisure satisfaction. *Am J Health Stud.* 2000;16(1):41-51.
- 226 6. Lazarus RS, Folkman S. *Stress, appraisal, and coping.* New York: Springer Publishing
227 Company; 1984.

- 228 7. Yerkes RM, Dodson JD. The relation of strength of stimulus to rapidity of habit formation.
229 J Comp Neurol Psychol. 1908;18(5):459-82.
- 230 8. Kumar A, Nayar KR. COVID-19 and its mental health consequences. J Ment Health.
231 2021;30(1):1-2.
- 232 9. Rajkumar RP. COVID-19 and mental health: A review of existing literature. Asian J
233 Psychiatr. 2020;52:102066.
- 234 10. Gupta R, Singh S. Role of stress in academic performance among students preparing for
235 competitive exams. Int J Res Med Sci. 2019;7(6):2305-9.
- 236 11. Sharma B, Wavare RR. Academic stress due to depression among college students. Int J
237 Adv Res. 2013;1(5):25-9.
- 238 12. Kaur S. Comparative study of stress among professional and non-professional students. Int
239 J Educ Psychol Res. 2014;3(1):35-8.
- 240 13. Agarwal S, Singh A. Financial stress and academic performance among students. Int J Soc
241 Sci Econ Res. 2018;3(7):3456-62.
- 242 14. Bandura A. Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. New York: Freeman; 1997.
- 243 15. Weber M. The theory of social and economic organization. New York: Oxford University
244 Press; 1947.
- 245
- 246