

Candidate : **Gitanjali Brandon**

Board : **Mrs. Rajni Razdan**

Date: 9th April.

Time: Forenoon Session (9 AM).

Brief background: I am a lawyer by training. I graduated from the National Law School of India University (NLS), Bangalore. I subsequently worked as a corporate lawyer (capital markets lawyer) for 2 years with one of India's premier law firms before deciding to write the UPSC Civil Services Exam. My Optionals are Law and Sociology. My first service preference is the Indian Foreign Service (IFS).

I was the first candidate to go in on 9th April.

I was ushered in by a staff member of the UPSC once the Board rang the bell from inside. I entered and wished Good Morning to everyone. The Chairperson (Mrs. Razdan, hereinafter referred to as "RR") asked me to take a seat. I thanked her and did so.

INTERVIEW

RR: Showed me my passport photo and asked me to confirm if that was me. She asked me to state my name and DOB. She also asked me my hobbies, while glancing through my Summary Sheet.

Me: My hobbies are- Reading (fiction and non-fiction- emerging trends in international affairs, gender issues and popular culture), debating, travelling and meeting and interacting with people.

RR: So many. These are perhaps interests, what are your hobbies?

Me: Well, Ma'am, I would say that primarily my hobbies are reading and debating.

RR: What kind of books do you like to read in fiction?

Me: I read widely, but my favourite genre is human interest stories- which show the triumph of the human spirit against all odds. Some of my favourite books are- To Kill a Mockingbird (Harper Lee), Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank (a memoir) and Catcher in the Rye by J D Salinger.

RR: You come from a water-deficient state like Rajasthan. Can you tell us some ways in which water can be conserved?

Me: I asked the Chairperson if I could take a few seconds to collect my thoughts on the matter.

RR: Yes, please take your time. (I paused for about 15 seconds)

Me: I would like to list the following ways in which water can be conserved:

- Promoting the efficient use of water by having a mechanism for charging people for the profligate and careless use of water- especially in case of over-exploitation of ground water in water-deficient areas and wastage of water in irrigation.
- Rain water harvesting- by building such structures on fields and farms as well as houses. Especially for a state like Raj where rain is erratic and minimal.
- Integrated watershed development
- Drip irrigation
- Community-based water management.

RR: Ok. Have you ever heard of euthanasia?

Me: Yes Ma'am. It refers to mercy killing- a process whereby a person who is terminally ill can ask to be pulled off life support or be administered a lethal injection to be put out of his/her physical suffering. I added that euthanasia is not allowed in India.

(The Chairperson raised an eyebrow at this point and I hastened to add).

Ma'am, the Supreme Court in the recent Aruna Shaunbaug judgement has given a very restricted interpretation to Euthanasia and allowed it in only very limited cases- to prevent it's misuse.

RR: Asked the next Panel Member (hereinafter, "M1") to take over.

M1: You mentioned Run-Off previously. What exactly is run-off?

Me: Run Off refers to the movement of water down the natural slope or gradient of the land. This water- after rains- carries away the top-soil with it, mingles with dirty drain water or goes all the way to the sea in a coastal area. Water is thus wasted and not available for immediate day-to-day use. To prevent this watershed development is adopted- through building bunds and anicuts to store the run off.

M1: Ok. Tell us what is meant by infrastructure?

Me: Sir, infrastructure is essentially of two types. Physical infrastructure such as- roads, highways, power projects, ports, dams etc and Social infrastructure- which includes health and education frameworks.

M1: In everything that you have mentioned- what are the commonalities, the basic points regarding infrastructure?

Me: Infrastructure forms the basic underlying structure or framework that is necessary for the efficient functioning of society. The commonality between the physical and social infrastructure is that both involve

significant expenditure for development, are big in scale, provide employment to various people. The govt often speaks about ways and measures to overcome the infrastructure-deficit for socio-economic development.

M1: Have you heard of the Gini Coefficient? What is it?

Me: Yes Sir. The Gini coefficient is an economic tool used to measure the level of equality in a society. The UNDP uses this in its annual Human Development Reports. It's measured on a scale of 0 to 1; where 0 means perfect inequality and 1 means perfect equality. India is somewhere in the middle.

RR: Asked M2 to take over.

M2: You are a student of Sociology? Have you read Maclver and Paige?

Me: Sir I haven't read it although I know of this book. I referred to Anthony Giddens and Haralambos and Holborn primarily.

M2: Maclver and Paige is a classic of Sociology.

Me: I nod respectfully.

M2: You listed some strategies for water conservation. Do you think planting more trees can also be a part of it?

Me: Yes Sir, undoubtedly. Afforestation leads to greater precipitation and also helps in preventing run off of the soil- leading to ground water recharge. Integrated water preservation techniques which include afforestation are very important.

M2: You mentioned that debating is one of your hobbies? Have you ever won any prizes for it?

Me: Yes Sir, I have won several prizes in debating- through school and college. I also represented my University- NLS, Bangalore at international debating championships like the Worlds University Debating Championship and All Asians Inter Varsity Championship.

M2: What was the topic during these debates?

Me: These competitions followed the Parliamentary style of debating. The topic was given 15 minutes before the actual debates. There were several rounds in each of these competitions- some of the topics were- intelligent design v Darwinism; and another was 'This House Will Not Wear Red'.

M2: Ok. You also said that you are interested in gender issues. I would like to ask you two questions in this regard- what do you think of reservation for women in Parliament? And also don't you think that working women end up neglecting the family and their children? Should women not focus more on domestic issues?

Me: May I respond to your second question first?

M2: Go ahead.

Me: Sir, I don't think that a working woman neglects her family or children. I have seen several examples of working women who manage to maintain a good work-life balance. Women are generally good at multi-tasking, and most women can easily balance the two if they prioritize and manage their time correctly.

Moving on to your second question on reservation for women in Parliament- I believe that given that women make up half the population their representation in Parliament is undoubtedly marginal. And towards that end reservation will help. And women representatives would hopefully try and mainstream gender issues in the public discourse. However, I would like to add two caveats to this point- 1) The often raised argument that reservation in parliament may serve to entrench women from political families and privileged backgrounds to garner more seats in parliament without significantly impacting gender concerns. 2) Countries like Rwanda and Pakistan that have reservation for women in their Legislatures do not do well on gender indices.

Hence, reservation in the legislatures can't be seen as a stand-alone measure. It has to be supplemented by various other schemes and programmes to empower women at the grassroots.

M2: Nodded and asked the next panel member to take over.

M3: Rajasthan is a semi-arid state. What are the other semi-arid regions in India?

Me: Sir- Rajasthan, The North-Western part of Gujarat (around the Rann of Kachch) and parts of the Deccan Plateau.

M3: Well, I come from Anantpur in Andhra and that is a semi-arid region. What do you think we can do to improve the utilization of these areas?

Me: I mentioned the following:

- Afforestation and water conservation to redress water scarcity
- Bringing water from a nearby source- through a canal or river-linking project (after due environmental impact assessment). I gave the eg of Indira Gandhi canal in Rajasthan and how that has really changes the economy and agriculture in the districts through which it runs.
- Using fallow waste-land for cultivation of bio-fuels like Jatropha
- Use of drought-resistant seeds.

M3: Do these drought-resistant seeds work at all?

Me: I can cite the instance of Rajasthan where the state govt has collaborated with the Govt of Israel (a semi-arid country) to share best-practices in drought-resistant and dryland farming. And in Rajasthan they are actually growing Olives and Strawberries these days.

M3: He looked surprised. Really?

Me: Yes Sir, I remember reading the CM also speaking about this a few months ago.

M3: But are these seeds really effective? (He looked sceptical)

Me: (Being a lawyer and having no intricate knowledge about such agricultural details, I decided to give a politically correct yet optimistic answer) Sir I suppose that it is a work in progress and ICAR and our agricultural scientists are attempting to develop better seeds.

M3: Hmm. You went to the best law college in the country. What is your view on the legal situation these days?

Me: Sir- the legal situation regarding a particular case or generally regarding the Rule of Law?

M3: The Rule of Law

Me: Sir, on paper we have very good legislations; it is the implementation that leaves much to be desired. I spoke of the massive judicial arrears, protracted legislation and delays that lead to a denial of justice. I mentioned the Govt has launched a few schemes and policies to tackle judicial backlog and make justice more accessible and speedy. I mentioned the National Mission on Legal Reforms and Access to Justice, National Litigation Policy, Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms to take off some of the burden of the judiciary- arbitration , mediation, Lok Adalats, Gram Nyayalayas, improving the infrastructure of subordinate courts, national arrears grid etc.

M3: (He was the most pleasant member in the Board, constantly nodding and smiling). What do you think is the one major problem with the implementation of Court orders in our country?

Me: Collusion between the subordinate functionaries and the executive machinery in-charge of implementation of court orders and powerful lobbies. I think what we really require is administrative will to be able to implement the law of the land and execute court orders in an effective and time-bound manner.

M4 asked mostly factual questions. I answered all but two regarding date when Islam came to India and some important event in 12th Century India

M4: What are your sources for staying in touch with important events?

Don't you think English news-papers are more oriented towards urban news? Where do you get rural news from?

A famous dignitary visited a place in your state recently, which place and who was the dignitary? (This was with reference to Zardari's visit to Dargah Sharif in Ajmer).

Who was the saint whose Dargah it is? (Khwaja Mouinuddin Chisthi)

Was he from India originally? (No, he came from Iran and settled in India to preach Sufism)

Which century did he come in? (12th century)

Luckily I knew all of the above because I've visited Dargah Sharif but he asked me 2 more questions on History which I did not know.

M4: What other important event happened in 12th Century?

Me: I mentioned one but turns out that it happened in 14th century (*RR pointed that out*)

M4: Which year did Islam come to India and how?

Me: Sir, I would not like to hazard a guess with respect to that.

M4: Isn't History your subject?

Me: No Sir, Law and Sociology (*this is after I had explicitly stated in the beginning of the interview that my Optionals are Law and Socio and all other members had asked me a few questions pertaining to those. It had also clearly come up that I am a law graduate from NLS, Bangalore...but for some reason M4 was under the impression that History is my subject!!!*)

RR: Islam came to India in 786 AD. Mohd. Qasim was responsible for the introduction of Islam to India. Thank you and good luck.

Me: Thank you Ma'am.

** Note: I was disappointed that they did not ask me anything regarding IFS or foreign affairs because I was very well-prepared on that front and since not many people opt for IFS as their first choice I thought questions on that area would be a given. I suppose since I was the first candidate that morning the panel did not have the opportunity to go through my form properly and perhaps it did not register that my first preference is IFS. Also, because of the nature of their questions I did not get an opportunity to bring this up myself.*

Also, there were no questions on why I quit my lucrative corporate law firm job or any questions on corporate/ capital markets law or even regarding why I want to join the civil services (I had expected questions along these lines because previously some of my seniors with similar profiles had been quizzed on these aspects).

Having said that, I think that I answered all questions put to me reasonably well and I was articulate and poised. So, although I did not know two factual history-based questions in the end and did not get asked any questions regarding the IFS or capital markets (which are my strongest areas) I think my interview went well. Fingers crossed now 😊.