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## Medium of Instruction and Preparing for the Civil Service Examination: The Hindi Medium Disadvantage?

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the language-related challenges encountered by Hindi medium aspirants while preparing for the civil services examination (hereinafter CSE) in India. A steady rise in the number of candidates opting for Indian languages in the CSE was noted, particularly those who chose Hindi, with the number of exam-takers in Hindi going from 11.7% in 1979 to 42.2% in 2007. Furthermore, the success rates of regional medium aspirants in the CSE have been reportedly low (Singh, 2022). The lack of study material in regional languages and faulty translations of question papers have been repeatedly cited as the main reason. The study attempted to explore these issues through qualitative data collected using one-on-one and group semi-structured interviews with CSE aspirants (n25) and teachers (n2) in Delhi. The research provides insights into the problems non-English aspirants face and intends to inform students, teachers, educational institutions, and policymakers, potentially leading to policy decisions aimed at re-establishing a balance in the success rates of students from all education backgrounds in this highly competitive examination.

**Keywords:** Civil Service Examination, CSE Aspirants, Hindi Medium, Language-Related Challenges, India

### 1. Introduction

India has attempted to incorporate its distinct multilingualism in the education system through the three-language policy, which promoted the learning of two Indian languages along with English, although proper implementation remains a distant dream. The National Education Policy 2020 encourages multilingualism by offering primary education in the mother tongue, an initiative backed by research (Awopetu, 2016; NCERT, 2006; UNESCO, 2003). However, the ground reality is slightly different. The number of languages functioning as the medium of instruction has gone down from 67 to 33 (Rao, 2008), with the ever-increasing demand for English medium education in India (Rao, 2016). The question is, how sustainable is the selection of regional medium instruction when it comes to higher education and career opportunities? Language continues to function as a marker of social and academic privilege, disproportionately affecting students from regional-language backgrounds.

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital provides a useful framework to understand the structural disadvantages faced by these students. Cultural capital refers to the non-economic assets that individuals possess, which contribute to their social mobility and success in society. These assets include knowledge, skills, education, habits, tastes, and cultural practices that are often passed down from one generation to the next and are valued differently depending on the social context (Tramonte & Willms, 2010). Cultural capital is one of the key forms of capital in society, along with economic capital (wealth and financial resources) and social capital (social networks of influence and support). These forms of capital are interconnected and often reinforce one another. For example, someone from a higher socioeconomic status (economic capital) would also be educated from elite institutions (cultural capital), which, in turn, enhances their social networks (social capital).

Bourdieu (1977) argues that the educational system reinforces social inequalities, as the higher-class individuals possess cultural capital that is inculcated by their families, and education adds to this cultural capital. Even though this theory has been criticized on several grounds (Goldthorpe, 2007) such as overlooking the potential of individuals for upward mobility through education or personal effort, cultural capital has been shown to play a role



in examination scores (Sullivan, 2001; Scherger & Savage, 2010; Tramonte and Willms, 2010). Although Bourdieu's assumption of higher education levels among parents translating into higher cultural capital may not be always true, the current study found that to be the case, with this being a widespread belief among the participants as well. This concept becomes relevant when we talk about the CSE and the disadvantaged position of students from underprivileged backgrounds. Those with higher parental education levels had access to career guidance, educational resources and elite schooling.

The disadvantages faced by Hindi-medium aspirants were a recurring theme in the first author's doctoral fieldwork on language attitudes. Several highly educated participants from Hindi-medium backgrounds shared their struggles in navigating elite academic spaces. One of the interviewees stated, 'Since 1950, no HMI student has ranked AIR 1 in the UPSC exams', calling attention to the challenges regional medium students face in competitive exams, a sentiment frequently voiced by others. Discussions on online platforms such as Quora and Reddit abound with such dilemmas of regional medium students. A widespread belief persists that clearing the CSE in regional languages is considerably more challenging. The number of toppers from Hindi medium backgrounds is so low that when they do succeed, they make headlines. Preparatory websites like IAS Passion have a separate section for Hindi and regional medium students, where they repeatedly report the alarming decline in the success ratio of Hindi medium students (*Performance of Hindi Medium in Civil Services Exam, 2018*). In recent years, changes in the exam pattern sparked debate on how the CSAT cripples the regional medium and humanities students, however, studies dedicated to investigating the challenges faced by such students remain scarce. The research attempted to address the gap by exploring the issues CSE aspirants preparing in Hindi medium are facing. The following research questions were investigated.

1. What are the language-related challenges faced by regional medium students while preparing for the UPSC examination in India?
2. How does the absence of representation and role models from similar linguistic backgrounds impact the motivation and self-belief of regional medium students UPSC aspirants?

## 2. Methodology

The qualitative research was conducted in Delhi, famously known as the hub of UPSC preparation in North India. The first author collected data as part of her doctoral research, securing permission from a prominent coaching institution dedicated to Hindi-medium students. The study included twenty-seven participants: twenty-five UPSC aspirants and two teachers from one of the largest coaching centers for Hindi-medium students. The participant details are given in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic and Educational Background of Participants

Participant Group	Number	Age Range	Gender	Education Level	Preparation/Teaching Experience
CSE Aspirants	25	22-31	20M, 5F	Bachelor's (18), Master's (7)	6 months to 5 years
Faculty Members	2	40-45	2M	Master's (2)	10+ years of teaching for the CSE

The participants, aged 22 to 31, were from lower-middle and middle-class families and included 20 males and 5 females. Participants represented diverse geographical and socioeconomic backgrounds. They hailed from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, all with Hindi as their first language and as their chosen medium for the CSE. The study focused exclusively on Hindi-medium students, as Hindi is the most commonly used regional language in the CSE (Tangirala, 2009). Participants had varying levels of preparation experience, ranging from six months to four to five years, with some having reached the personality test stage, the final phase of the examination. Most participants were enrolled in two major coaching institutions targeting Hindi-medium students, while others were associated with different in-person or virtual coaching institutions or were preparing independently. Given that the majority of Hindi-medium aspirants relocate to Delhi for structured coaching, the participant pool was selected through snowball sampling to reflect the linguistic and regional diversity of Hindi-



medium CSE candidates nationwide. However, snowball sampling may introduce selection bias, as participants tend to recommend peers within their own networks, potentially limiting diversity in perspectives. To mitigate this, efforts were made to include aspirants from multiple coaching centers and those preparing independently. The study also included two faculty members from an esteemed coaching institution catering specifically to Hindi-medium students. Both teachers had over ten years of teaching experience in addition to their years as CSE aspirants.

## 2.1 Data Collection and Analysis

For data collection, interviews were conducted in both formal and informal settings, including coaching institution premises, private residences, and public spaces. One-on-one interviews lasted 30–60 minutes, while a group interview was approximately 90 minutes long. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded, and notes were taken to capture contextual details. The data was analyzed inductively, and the themes that emerged during content analysis are discussed in subsequent sections. Verbatim statements were translated into English for reporting, and participants were assigned codes (P1, P2 and so on) in order of their appearance in the text to maintain anonymity.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1 Language and Education

#### 3.1.1 Quality of Education and Learning Styles

Despite the measures to develop literacy, reading levels in India have declined, with the number of Grade V children in govt schools who can read at Grade II level falling from 44.2% in 2018 to 38.5% in 2022 (ASER, 2023). While the textbooks become more and more complicated, their language skills remain far from satisfactory, hence they turn to rote learning, their only means to get better grades, often the main focus of the stakeholders. This reliance on rote learning shapes their learning styles and hinders analytical skills, a trait required for the CSE in general and CSAT in particular (LaDousa, 2018; 2021). This issue was highlighted by students and teachers alike. Moreover, the examination system in the state-run Hindi medium universities added to this problem. Annual examinations instead of semester-based exams—a common practice in universities offering education in Hindi—promoted rote learning, as the participants mentioned that they memorized the guidebooks one month before the exams and managed to pass them. This often meant that even after doing a postgraduate in a subject, they lacked in-depth knowledge. P1, a master's degree holder in Political Science laments the state of higher education in HMI institutions. He highlights the paradox that, despite possessing an advanced degree in the discipline, he is required to study fundamental concepts such as the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. He further emphasizes that postgraduates are expected to teach undergraduates, yet he finds himself relearning the basics.

#### 3.1.2 Language proficiency

The participants had finished their schooling with Hindi as the medium of instruction. They had to go into a university setting that mainly used English as a medium of instruction, primarily in the case of those who were pursuing a STEM or technical course. After struggling to cope with this switch to English medium for the initial years of their higher education, when such participants started their CSE preparation, they were doubly disadvantaged. They were not proficient enough in English and had lost touch with their former medium of education, Hindi. P2, who had done his Master's from the topmost technical institution of the country, shares a feeling that resonated with other aspirants as well; 'We are not proficient in either Hindi or English at the level which is being demanded (by the CSE). This is the biggest problem'.

This low linguistic proficiency was the root cause of several issues, including the essay writing paper that the students were struggling with. The participants mentioned that they were unable to recall the appropriate words while writing. They deemed 'bilingual classes' responsible for this. Such classes were conducted considering the mixed demographic of students coming from different mediums of instruction and linguistic backgrounds. In these classes, the teachers tend to use English terminologies while teaching, which meant Hindi medium students had to study twice as hard, first to understand it in Hindi and then to recall the Hindi terms in exams. In the group interview,



the participants were making jokes about how difficult 'shuddh' (pure) Hindi is. They were asking me questions such as 'what is beauty parlour called in English' or 'what is 'भेषज' (Bheṣaja)? Then proceeded to question, 'who knows such words?' along with providing me the answers- 'जादुई मुख कायापालत केन्द्र' (Jādu'ī mukha kāyāpalat kēndra) and 'pharmacy'. The participants went on to provide examples of why translation can be so tricky. P3 elaborates 'When we talk about secularism in English, it means religion will be separate from government matters, simple. But when we talk about secularism in Hindi, some people translate it as धर्मनिरपेक्ष (Dharmanirapekṣa) and some as पंथनिरपेक्ष (Panthanirapekṣa), which are two different things'. The teachers also pointed out that poor reading and writing skills render the preparation process even more difficult for regional medium students.

## 3.2 Resources

### 3.2.1 Differences in Learning Materials and Coaching Strategies

Following CSE's footsteps, the coaching institutions also provided poorly translated versions of the English materials. The participants reported that test solving was often overlooked in Hindi-medium coaching institutions, with English-medium coaching institutions starting the test series from June-July onwards after the Prelims, while in the Hindi-medium batches, these tests start relatively late. The lack of practice puts them at a disadvantage as compared to their English-medium counterparts. The participants also mentioned that the focus on subjects differs when it comes to Hindi medium students. They reported being taught several classes for science and tech, which meant fewer classes for participants they felt were more important such as internal security. The participants questioned this prioritization of participants after all, as P4 puts it; 'What is more important for an administrative officer, internal security or science?'

### 3.2.2 Scarce and Complicated Web Resources

The participants as well as the teachers called attention to the lack of online resources and problematic Google search results in Hindi. The language of the search results was extremely confusing, leaving the students bewildered and even more confused. The participants also mentioned how Hindi circumlocuted and was very wordy in explaining things as compared to English, as P5 comments; 'Google provides the exact explanation of things in one go in English, while it can't provide a proper explanation of things in Hindi even after multiple attempts.' They also pointed out that although YouTube offers resources for Hindi medium students, the current affairs videos are all in English because of the increased viewership that comes with it.

### 3.2.3 Limited Options for 'Optionals'

Although the scarcity of material in Hindi has been eliminated to a great extent over the past few years, the problem remains when it comes to optional subjects. Unlike English medium students who can select the optional they have specialized in or have an interest in, the participants mentioned that regardless of their interests and educational backgrounds, they had to opt for Hindi literature, History, Philosophy, Geography, or similar subjects because of the lack of resources and teachers for other subjects in Hindi. P6 had a degree in Mathematics but he was forced to study history, a subject he had no interest in because neither resources nor coaching were available in Hindi for Math. Other participants mentioned having interests in subjects such as anthropology, which they claimed 'had a very short syllabus' but again, language became a hurdle.

## 3.3 Translation

### 3.3.1 Translation of the Question Paper

Poor translation of the question paper has been repeatedly cited as the major problem faced by regional medium students (LaDousa, 2021), with the participants humorously describing it as from 'Mars'. Faulty translations such as 'khambha' (electrical pole) for the North Pole were pointed out by the students and teachers. The students suggested having a committee of experts to assess the comprehensibility of the translated paper. Providing a solution, Awanish Sharan, an IAS from a Hindi medium background, advises reading the question paper in English as well to deal with the confusing errors (While attempting Prelims, 2021), however, the participants mentioned that



this takes too much time in a limited time-based exam environment, leaving even less time to solve the questions. Moreover, while evaluating and in case of any discrepancy in the question paper, the practice is to refer to the English version of the paper.

### ***3.3.2 Lost in Translation in the Personality Test***

More often than not, the test panel will have officers from non-Hindi backgrounds. Even though a translator is provided, they are unable to convey their sentiments and thoughts properly, as P7 puts it;

If you speak five sentences, the translator will not translate all five. He will summarize its meaning. No matter how well you speak, it is not the same when it is translated. So, while the English medium student will be able to convey his emotions and passions, we can't. Who will they select?

Most participants revealed that they had not thought much about the personality test and were focused on clearing the prelims and main exams first.

## **3.4 Guidance**

### ***3.4.1 Lack of Guidance***

The teachers pointed out that the Hindi medium students lack the proper guidance and are often underconfident in themselves hence they quickly take unsolicited advice, focus on accumulating resources, and spread themselves too thin. The senior aspirants also pointed this out and joked about their fellow aspirants having so many books that they had to rent mini trucks just to carry them when they changed their accommodation. Rather than the lack of materials, the bigger issue was which materials to refer to. Some participants mentioned that they were so accustomed to rote learning that initially they resorted to merely rote-learn the materials provided by the coaching and were not even aware that they were supposed to read NCERT books. P8, one of the senior aspirants pointed out; 'That is why the rate of Hindi medium students qualifying in their first attempt is very low. After 4-5 attempts they realize what they are supposed to study and by then they are left with 1 attempt.'

### ***3.4.2 Role Models***

Role models were found to not be such an important aspect of the preparation, although the lack of toppers from Hindi medium was hypothesized to be demotivating. The Bihari participants mentioned having KK Pathak as a role model since he had revamped the education system in Bihar. The participants from other states mentioned having recent year toppers as role models such as Ravi Kumar Sihag (AIR 18) and Sunil Kumar Dhanwanta (AIR 22) as they had proved that Hindi medium students can excel in the CSE. Two participants mentioned having toppers from the English medium as their role models. P9 points out that the demotivating fact about the CSE was that Hindi medium participants couldn't get through the Prelims exam; 'People are being selected from Hindi medium backgrounds, but the thing is that Hindi medium students are not able to qualify for the Prelims. Prelims eliminates most of the Hindi medium students.'

### ***3.4.3 Additional pressure for female candidates***

The female candidates, particularly those hailing from rural families faced additional challenges. As they were the first females in their families to go outside their hometown for studies, their relatives often questioned this decision. They mentioned being on a deadline as they were already getting matches for marriages, and as P10 puts it 'if they (her family) get a good match, they will not say no'. They were anxious to at least qualify for the Prelims test, to prove to their families that their decision and financial investment were not being spent in vain.

## **3.5 Family and Cultural Capital**

Apart from the medium of instruction, family background was also an important factor. Those from Hindi medium backgrounds often had uneducated parents or parents with basic education. Although these parents leave



no stone unturned to educate their children, however, as the participants reported, the Hindi medium students often miss out on the kind of guidance the English medium students get from their parents, hence they are left to blindly seek out what career path to follow. P11 comments that even the grandparents of the last 3 AIR one rank holders are educated. The impact of cultural capital is evident in the experiences of Hindi-medium aspirants preparing for the UPSC. Those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, whose parents had higher education levels, were more likely to have access to career guidance, elite schooling, and institutional support—advantages that translated into stronger preparation and confidence. Bourdieu's (1977) argument that the educational system reproduces social hierarchies is particularly relevant here. The participants' narratives revealed that the challenges of Hindi-medium aspirants extend beyond language barriers; they include a lack of exposure to dominant academic norms and a perceived gap in the legitimacy of their credentials. This aligns with prior research on how cultural capital influences examination outcomes (Sullivan, 2001; Scherger & Savage, 2010; Tramonte & Willms, 2010). Although some participants demonstrated resilience and self-learning strategies, Hindi-medium aspirants are at a systemic disadvantage, as they struggle to acquire the linguistic and symbolic capital valued in spaces like the UPSC.

### 3.6 Other Issues

#### 3.6.1 CSAT: Another hurdle

The participants pointed out that the kind of questions being asked in the CSAT become even more complex when they are in Hindi, hence posing a significant hurdle to those from the Hindi medium background, a concern backed by previous literature (Bansal, 2016; Kohli, 2016; Kumar, 2015). Some participants highlighted the futility of CSAT in the CSE exam as it favoured STEM and English-proficient candidates (Kumar, 2015).

#### 3.6.2 Structure of Hindi

The participants repeatedly mention how wordy Hindi is, with it having twice as many alphabets in its script which means they have to write more to convey the same meaning. This issue was raised by several senior aspirants as well. Writing answers in a limited amount of time was challenging enough, but the Hindi script made it more difficult. Other participants mentioned how they had to put horizontal lines<sup>1</sup> above each Hindi word which took more time. The Hindi resources were poorly translated and too lengthy compared to the English ones:

P7: If you look at the Hindi and English content, you will get scared just by looking at the Hindi magazine. I have appeared for mains, and I have noticed that the same content which is 30-35 pages in English is 65 pages long in Hindi.

## 4. Conclusion

Although UPSC permits the usage of scheduled Indian languages in the CSE, it often comes with several challenges. The rate of successful Hindi medium students has been constantly decreasing ever since changes in the exam pattern, discouraging other aspirants. The problem is even worse for students from other regional languages. In line with previous literature (LaDousa, 2018; Saroha, 2023; Singh, 2022), the current study found a range of obstacles that Hindi-medium aspirants face, ranging from low linguistic proficiency, ineffective learning styles, scarce cultural capital, and poor translation of the question papers and resources. To address the problems, immediate and long-term solutions are required. The proper translation of exam papers and resources will provide immediate relief. Long-term solutions call for improvement in the school education system, moving the focus from rote learning to developing critical thinking. However, the small sample size of the study and restriction to Delhi-based aspirants means that although the findings are contextually rich but not statistically generalizable. Future research can incorporate a larger and more geographically diverse sample, including candidates preparing for the CSE in other Indian languages like Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, and Marathi. Additionally, a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with large-scale survey data, would offer a more extensive understanding of these issues.

<sup>1</sup> The horizontal lines put on top of alphabets in Devnagari script, known as शिरोरेखा (shirorekha).



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### Author Contribution Statement

Sadaf Khan -Investigation, Methodology, writing Original Draft, Writing -Review & Editing. Thapasya Jayaraj -Conceptualization, Supervision, writing Original Draft, Writing -Review & Editing. Both the authors read and approved the final version of this manuscript.

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### Data availability

Data analysed in this study are not publicly available. However, these could be obtained from the corresponding author on a reasonable request.

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