

Jnana Prabodhini Competitive Examinations Centre, Pune.

Celebrating journey of its alumnus on account of Tridashakpurti Varsha 2025-26 (30 years of establishment)

Smt. Mrunmai Joshi

- Presently working as Deputy Secretary, D/o Economic Affairs, M/o Finance, New Delhi (as of Aug 2026)
- IAS - 2013 Batch (Kerala Cadre)
- JPCEC-2009 Batch
- B.A, Fergusson College Pune - 2009 Batch
- Masters in Public Policy, University of Oxford as a Chevening Scholar
- Previously worked at the Union Cabinet Secretariat and in various districts & departments of the Kerala under diverse responsibilities.



Mrunmai Joshi is an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer of the 2013 batch of Kerala cadre. Presently, she is posted in New Delhi at Depart of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance under the Central Deputation.

Early Ambitions and Education

For Mrunmai, the path to public service was clearly envisioned from a young age. Around the ninth or tenth grade, the decision to pursue a career in UPSC, specifically aiming for IAS, was firmly made. This aspiration was driven by a desire to be part of the government system and to effect positive changes to the lives of the sub altern.

Mrunmai's clarity extended to preferred services within UPSC, focusing only on IAS or IFS (Indian Foreign Service), with a readiness to explore other options outside of UPSC if these didn't materialize. This foresight guided her educational choices, leading to Arts at Fergusson College, Pune, where Political Science and History were chosen as subjects. These subjects were strategically picked as they were also intended to be optional subjects for the UPSC

examination. Prior to college, in fact, as early as high school, Mrunmai was already familiar with UPSC specifics, including optional subjects, general studies, question patterns, and essay topics, through magazines like Competition Success Review, etc.. This foundational knowledge solidified the decision to pursue Arts and to select Political Science and History as optional subjects.

Initial Preparation and Forays into Journalism

Formal preparation for UPSC began earnestly while in her last year of BA in 2009. Earlier, after 12th grade and during the first year of BA, Mrunmai undertook a foundation course at Chanakya and Unique Academy, which supplemented college studies. This early engagement provided a formal induction into the UPSC preparation process.

During college, another significant experience was writing for Times of India's "Pune Plus" supplement. Here, she used to cover hyper local stories relating to civic issues, profiling important personalities in the town, etc. Initially, journalism seemed an interesting profession, but after about one and a half to two years, a repetitive nature became apparent. Her association with Times of India continued for three years. This stint with Times of India, spanning from the first to the last year of college, was very helpful as it developed writing skills, boosted confidence in public interaction, and enhanced awareness of social issues.

In 2009, Mrunmai formally joined Prabodhini, anticipating the first UPSC attempt in 2011 at the age of 21.

Jnana Prabodhini and the UPSC Journey

The choice of JPCEC was deliberate and well-informed. Having been in Pune since her college years, the name Prabodhini was well-known. At that time, Prabodhini stood out for its comprehensive batches and its aspirational value. A notable aspect was its non-commercial approach; it did not advertise itself or its students, conducted interviews for inducting students in classes, distinguishing it from other institutions. This focus on merit and a non-commercial ethos deeply impressed Mrunmai.

Admission to JPCEC in 2009 involved an entrance exam and an interview conducted by Vivek Sir. This selection process, along with Prabodhini's commitment to consistent classes

and systematic module progression, reinforced the institution's reputation. Mrunmai noted a clear distinction from other classes where such consistency was lacking.

For UPSC preparation, Prabodhini offered a full-year course covering prelims, mains, and interview preparation, including Political Science as an optional subject. For History, the second optional, initial guidance was sought at Synergy, but more importantly from Bhushan Deshmukh Sir at Unique Academy. Tukaram Jadhav Sir at Unique Academy provided long term guidance and mentorship for Political Science Paper. What was impressive was that, JPCEC also encouraged students to seek guidance elsewhere if beneficial, demonstrating a collaborative spirit. For instance, Mrunmai was advised by Savita Tai herself to consult Atul Lande Sir at Synergy for History and Tukaram Jadhav Sir for Political Science.

Experiential Learning during Preparation

The preparation phase included unique experiential learning opportunities. As part of the interview preparation's "Prerna Batch," Mrunmai participated in district training in Pune, choosing it for relevance and to save time over distant locations. This training offered first-hand exposure to the workings of Anganwadis and Gram Sabhas, revealing real-world issues like gender segregation and the realities of school learning, leaving a lasting impression. Another memorable aspect was the mock interviews conducted among students, which, despite not being formally evaluated, proved highly valuable for understanding self-presentation and questioning techniques.



Mrunmai with JP batchmates during Prerana batch village visit.

UPSC Attempts and Navigating Challenges

The first formal UPSC attempt was in 2011, after full-fledged preparation which began in 2009. The 2009 batch itself saw Mrunmai undertake a "zeroth attempt" or "minus one attempt", for her, which yielded good results, with Mrunmai being among the toppers.

This first attempt saw Mrunmai complete the entire cycle: Prelims, Mains, and Interview. However, a significant challenge arose with the Political Science optional, which was also the graduation subject. For some inexplicable reason, she ended up scoring unexpectedly low marks (68) in Paper One of Political Science, despite Paper Two receiving 158. This drastically pulled down the overall rank, preventing entry into the list for the desired IAS service. The Paper One for Political Science in 2013 was simple, resembling a graduation paper, making the low score inexplicable. This experience was shared by others, with friends and batchmates receiving similar low scores in Paper One, suggesting a systemic issue.

The second attempt, however, all worked well and was successful, leading to the allocation of the Kerala cadre.



Mrunmai and other UPSC rankers of JP along with Dr. Vivek & Dr. Savita Kulkarni after the announcement of results in 2013.

Despite common biases and opinions from others who found Kerala "not regarded as a good cadre", Mrunmai found it "very interesting" due to its progressive nature and high literacy. The reasons for Kerala's lower preference among some, as understood later, were quite distinct: Kerala is "not feudal" and its "people are educated and aware," which meant that traditional "perks and privileges" associated with administrative power (like grand gestures or

unquestioning reverence) would be "compromised". This lack of a "hazoori" (servility) culture meant that "everything will be questioned," which some officers found challenging. However, Mrunmai viewed this as ideal for a democracy and for administration, seeing it as a strength rather than a weakness.

The personal experience in Kerala was "unparalleled" and "excellent," marked by respect for work and views, and a clear lack of discrimination as a young female officer. While initial hurdles included learning the language, once Malayalam was grasped, the experience became enriching.

Initial Administrative Challenges in Kerala

Challenges in Kerala began with the personal adjustment of moving alone to a "totally different land," a reality often glossed over during preparation. Beyond personal adjustment, the professional landscape presented its own set of hurdles: people viewed officers with "a lot of expectations and more than expectations with a lot of scrutiny". In Kerala, this was particularly intense; people were scrutinizing, but perhaps not with high expectations, needing to be convinced of an officer's capability.

The initial days were about "proving oneself," understanding "red lines," and building a reputation. This involved navigating interactions with people, from knowing "how much to talk to whom" to handling day-to-day issues and larger law and order challenges.

A key aspect of the work culture in Kerala was the high degree of "autonomy" given by superiors. Bosses would provide a "broader picture" but rarely micromanaged, expecting officers to make independent decisions. An example given was during a university student protest where the Collector simply instructed the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) to ensure the protest didn't escalate. When two students threatened suicide from a terrace, the SDM's independent handling of the situation was appreciated, unlike in other cadres where constant calls to superiors might be expected. This fostered a sense of responsibility and accountability among junior officers.

Autonomy and Accountability: A Balancing Act

The high degree of autonomy in Kerala administration created a unique dynamic, especially concerning accountability. As a junior SDM, she knew that if her decision backfires, the buck

stops at the Collector, this moral pressure in fact "makes you more responsible". Mrunmai observed that as a junior officer, the primary feeling was to "not make any mistake" to avoid causing problems for the boss or for that matter to anyone else.

Later, as a Collector, Mrunmai applied the same principle, delegating and giving autonomy to SDMs and Tahsildars, operating on the administrative principle that "once you give independence/ autonomy, once you give responsibility, the person acts responsible". Micro-management, conversely, leads to a lack of individual responsibility. This approach was met with positive results, with staff demonstrating responsibility and commitment, and going the extra mile to ensure the Collector faced no issues. Mrunmai emphasized that if a subordinate makes a bonafide mistake, a capable boss is able to handle it. Administration is about people management: knowing what/how much to delegate and to whom, how and when.

Fort Kochi and Kasaragod Postings: Early Learning Grounds

Mrunmai had her initial independent assignment as an SDM in charge at Fort Kochi when she was an Assistant Collector Under Training (ACUT) in Cochin. This period was described as immensely learning but very difficult, with sleepless nights over signing files independently, finding confidence, relying on incomplete information and trusting local staff. It was a "very challenging" experience, but it prepared Mrunmai well for subsequent postings.

She recollects her first day of independent charge as SDM, while she was barely a few months into ACUTship. She hadn't learnt the Malayalam fully and in her office, only one staff member knew English. In her first few days there, she had to handle a law and order situation. She spent the previous night day reading the relevant rules and provisions, interacting with her staff and seniors to understand the entire issue and was then able to tide over the situation. Grace of God she says that the issue didn't escalate. She learnt a lesson there that hard work has no substitute. Irrespective of how seasoned your staff and colleagues are, you have to read provisions first hand, understand the difference between theory and practice and only then work.

Her first independent posting was at Kasaragod, as a sub divisional magistrate. Kasaragod was relatively a backward rural district. However, having already handled significant

sub-divisional work and independent charges in Fort Kochi, Kasaragod felt very easy. Despite the language barrier (Malayalam was not yet fully mastered, being "very difficult" to learn), the local staff were appreciative of attempts to speak the language. The Collector in Kasaragod gave significant autonomy, referring to Mrunmai as "Collector of Kanhangad" (a subdivision) and emphasizing that "we as officers are paid to take decisions'.

This experience ingrained a crucial lesson: making a well thought out decision with "a decent amount of information" and "without malafide intention" is "more important than not taking a decision". This principle contributed to Mrunmai's image as "decisive" and someone who "takes a stand". The first posting is critical for image building, as officers are under constant public scrutiny, more so in Kerala, with every action, contributing to one's reputation.

Kozhikode Municipal Commissioner: The Most Challenging Role

The transfer to Kozhikode (Calicut) as Municipal Commissioner was sudden and unexpected. In Kerala, tenures are typically stable, with two years in sub-division, followed by two to three years in the secretariat, then Collector. This transfer was an "out of the blue" decision by a legendary Chief Secretary who was a key figure behind Kerala's decentralization, who believed IAS officers should be placed in important corporations like Kozhikode, Kochi, and Thiruvananthapuram. Mrunmai was one of three officers chosen for such postings.

The transfer came at a time for Mrunmai when the sub-divisional work had become monotonous and unchallenging. The role of a Corporation Commissioner in Kerala is inherently difficult owing to decentralization. The Commissioner holds all the responsibility, while all the power is vested with the Mayor and the Council.

Initially, understanding the complexities of work, clearing bills, and tenders was challenging. Many colleagues sought transfers out, but Mrunmai chose to "pull on," believing that "whatever comes, we have to do it". This perspective was rooted in a belief system, that one must not escape a difficult situation, but fight through.

The period in Kozhikode, lasting one and a half years, was the most challenging assignment of the career, with every day as a new day, difficult and demanding. Yet, it was a period of significant learning. Mrunmai kept in mind a crucial piece of advice given by her former

collector which is that even in the most notorious offices or worst places, there are always a few good people who keep sanity in the system. Identifying and collaborating with such persons is the hallmark of a good civil servant. Eventually, her transfer out of Kozhikode, was marked by an emotional farewell with half the office staff, coming to the railway station to see her off for the next assignment. Corporation experience "shaped me a lot as an officer".

Navigating Kerala

Kerala is a very different State and cadre. One cannot come to Kerala with traditional expectations about “perks and privileges” available to civil servants in other cadres. It is a literate, well aware society. As an officer, you are being judged constantly and are expected to meet the demands of people. People are argumentative and demanding. But isn't that how citizens in democracy should be? You are a public servant here. Avoiding an entitled attitude, and treating everyone with respect is essential. Dialogue and negotiation rather than an adversarial approach (e.g., "who are you to tell me what to do?") is needed here.

Tourism Department and Higher Studies

The transfer to the Tourism Department was sudden, and happened when her plans for higher studies at Oxford were finalized. The Tourism Department after Corporation was a pleasure to work in. It was professionally run, reflecting Kerala's long-standing expertise in tourism.

Mrunmai secured the Chevening scholarship for pursuing the Masters in Public Policy course. With its diverse cohort of civil servants, politicians, activists from numerous countries, the course was designed in such a way that everyone could relate to the curriculum. It provided a valuable "refresher" on political science and public policy, re-sensitizing Mrunmai to aspects of human rights, liberty, and public service. The academic rigor and diverse perspectives made the experience one of the most enriching years of her life.



Mrunmai at University of Oxford as a Chevening Scholar.

Jalanidhi Project and Specialised vs. General Administration

Upon returning from the UK, Mrunmai took on multiple charges, including the Jalanidhi World Bank Project, groundwater department, and Deputy Secretary in the Secretariat. The theoretical knowledge from Oxford provided a new perspective for applying concepts in the secretariat.

A key learning from this phase was the difference between general administration (like a Collector's role) and specialized departmental work. In general administration, one is not expected to know everything but to act decisively with available information. However, in a department, one is expected to know everything, and be hands-on from budgeting to technical aspects of the specific field.

The Jalanidhi Project was a very successful World Bank project focusing on providing rural water supply connections through public participation. Its unique selling proposition (USP) was its reliance on local self-help and community groups, making it a "demand-driven" and "sustainable project". The community not only demanded the connections but also managed and maintained the assets, embodying a model of community owned assets, community owned management maintenance. This provided her with valuable experience from field work .



Mrunmai with other officials reviewing Jalanidhi project.

Chief Secretary's Office and COVID-19 Management

Towards early 2020, COVID-19 struck, and Mrunmai became part of the Kerala State War Room. This was an immensely challenging and interesting time, involving facilitating the return of Keralites from abroad, managing supply chains for food and other essentials, and ensuring the well-being of migrant workers. Kerala was unique in avoiding a migrant worker crisis, as they were well taken care of here.

In her next assignment, as Staff Officer to Chief Secretary, her role involved assisting the Chief Secretary in all matters, including managing files, preparing minutes of meetings, briefing on talking points and action points, and drafting cabinet notes and briefs. This provided a birds-eye perspective, offering insights into the workings of various departments, interactions between secretaries and ministers, and the dynamics of Kerala. While it offered a bird's-eye view, the "flip side" was the lack of "hands-on" direct action, as decisions were made by the Chief Secretary.

Palakkad Collectorship: The High Point

The Collectorship, generally seen as the high point of your career as an IAS officer. Palakkad was the next significant posting, a border district in Kerala. This role came with tremendous expectations from the general public. For Mrunmai, Collectorship proved easier than the corporation role because it provided a defined authority, and people respected the institution of Collector.

The tenure began in 2021, leading directly into the state elections, posing the challenge of running elections across 12 constituencies while adhering to COVID-19 protocols. Key challenges included identifying and managing election staff, navigating local culture, and dealing with observers. Kerala's context required a nuanced approach to rules like those of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), as local peculiarities differed from other states. The primary focus was to be and importantly be perceived as neutral .



Mrunmai monitoring the smooth and haslefree functioning of election during Pallakkad collectorship.

The most challenging assignment was managing the Oxygen Crisis during the second wave of COVID-19. Palakkad district had an important oxygen plant which supplied oxygen to whole of South India. As Collector, her responsibility primarily was to ensure that there is no oxygen shortage in the State. The Chief Minister's instruction was clear: "no person in the state should die out of oxygen shortage." giving Collectors the complete authority to ensure it. This daunting task involved procuring oxygen cylinders from all possible sources including welding shops (collecting thousands and diligently returning them post-crisis), establishing three overnight hospitals (CFLTCs), and setting up oxygen supply chains in all hospitals.

The constant ringing of phones from distressed citizens for ambulances underscored the urgency. In Kerala, every life is valued and hence any death due to negligence or improper management is unthinkable. A harrowing incident involved a private hospital calling at the last minute, saying they had only 30 minutes of oxygen left, despite numerous instructions to inform in advance. This moment, with media covering the issue minute to minute and the

Collector frantically coordinating oxygen supply, was a near brink experience. Thankfully, all ended well.

Another significant initiative was vaccination, especially in tribal areas like Attapady, a prominent tribal area in Palakkad. The Collectorate experience, with its elections and second wave of COVID, was akin to 10 years of your whole career.



Mrunmai at one of the official inauguration events.

A dramatic incident involved the rescue of a person stuck in a crevice on a mountain. What started as a routine missing person report escalated into national news in no time. The rescue effort involved co-ordinating with multiple departments and politicians. The successful rescue, against all odds, reinforced the lesson that everything has to be dealt with sensitivity.

Personal Growth and Learnings over a Decade

Mrunmai believes that the last decade for her was of tremendous transformation. She began her career with less confidence particularly due to language barrier but by 2023, her confidence grew.

Health System in Kerala and State National Health Mission Director Role

Kerala's health department is very active. The State prioritizes education and health. Unlike other states, in Kerala, it is rare that doctors are absent from duty. Basic public infrastructure is robust, and people have a health-seeking behavior. Community Health Centers (CHCs) in Kerala have Liquid Medical Oxygen (LMO) tanks, a feature often absent even in district hospitals in other states.

As State Mission Director for Health (a brief three-month tenure before central deputation), Mrunmai focused on Kerala's challenges, mainly second-level challenges like obesity, diabetes, and geriatric care, etc.

Personal Initiatives and Administrative Philosophy

Mrunmai's administrative approach leans towards implementing existing, well-designed government schemes effectively rather than reinventing the wheel.

She undertook some hyper local initiatives to ensure proper implementation of the existing schemes, particularly in tribal areas like Attapady. One significant initiative focused on reducing Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) and Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) in the region (which, while not very high by national standards, were higher than Kerala's average). This involved inter-departmental coordination meetings to ensure every child's life was protected, involving Health, Kudumbashree (local self-help group network), teachers, and Anganwadi workers. This collaborative approach, though simple, yielded very good results and the system continues even after Mrunmai left.

Another notable initiative was the "ABCD program" whereby Aadhaar and other basic certificates, documents were secured for all tribal and Scheduled Caste colonies in the district through a campaign mode.

Central Deputation and Current Role

Currently on central deputation, Mrunmai has served as Deputy Secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat, New Delhi, where her primary role involved assisting the Office of the Cabinet Secretary on Cabinet and other related matters. Given the confidential nature of the work, it requires a high degree of attention to detail and discretion, making it significantly different from her earlier field assignments.

In June 2026, Mrunmai took up a new responsibility in the Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance.

Hobbies and Work-Life Balance

Mrunmai loves reading and travelling.

She says she is blessed with the ability of being able to switch off from work after office hours. Hence, usually, stress is not carried home, and personal time is dedicated to reading or meeting close friends. Files work and meetings are kept strictly to the office.

Vision for the Future

Mrunmai likes the social sector. She wants to focus on welfare of tribal, women, labor (especially migrant labor), and the homeless. The aspiration is to build career in these fields. This also aligns with her initial motivation for joining the service: "human development" and "reaching the bottom rung".

Reflections on Bureaucracy

Mrunmai offers candid insights into both the negative and positive aspects of bureaucracy.

Challenges -

A sense of entitlement and feudal mindset in some officers across hierarchy that treats people as beneficiaries and not as partners in development.

Lack of a people-friendly, people-centric approach, insufficient focus on Human Development sectors. Bureaucracy in many parts of the country prioritizes infrastructure and industry as important work. However, Mrunmai believes that sectors like "health" and "education" can create "intergenerational differences" and deserve more focus.

Strengths -

Systems are transforming and are becoming more people responsive, reflecting a positive change over time. Increased public awareness is a positive factor. Public trust in bureaucracy remains high, with AIS officers being perceived as neutral.

Advice for JPCEC's Future

1. **Maintain Core Culture:** Prabodhini should continue its commitment to timely classes, adherence to timetables, and prompt evaluation of papers, practices often neglected by other institutions. This non-commercial approach, prioritizing promised services is important and should continue.
2. **Broader Life Perspective:** The institution should emphasize that UPSC or IAS is not life. Many aspiring candidates dedicate their prime years, only to feel less if they don't succeed. The reality that there are many factors like luck contributing to success beyond hard work should be stressed, along with the importance of a "Plan B".
3. **Preparation for Bureaucratic Life:** Crucially, Prabodhini should prepare students for how your life will be as a civil servant beyond the glamorized idea of being a Collector. This includes practical aspects like:
 - Life in different states and learning new languages.
 - Choosing an appropriate life partner and managing work life balance.
 - Coping with a possibly lonely life away from family in some postings,
 - Navigating personal space and compromises in service.
 - Understanding cadre-to-cadre and service-to-service differences. This comprehensive preparation is vital, as aspirants often make major life decisions (like marriage and family) at the same age they prepare for competitive exams.

Photo Gallery



Mrunmai along with husband Rohan (also JPCEC Alumnus) along with Dr. Vivek & Dr. Savita Kulkarni



Mrunmai being honoured with Best DEO award for outstanding work in the 2021 elections.



Mrunmai (second row) along with Vivek Sir, Savita tai and other Officers, professionals of JP network at Maharashtra Sadan, Delhi.



Mrunmai during an on-field inspection with officials.



Mrunmai at the inauguration of the poverty alleviation project at Palakkad.