Spill the Tea

On NET-JRF

In conversation with
Nihar Vyas & Ananya Acharya

Nihar Vyas

Ananya Acharya

I first met Ananya and Nihar together in January 2023, attending a session in the Front Lawn during JLF. The morning sun was soothing, dispelling the chilled and dry air of the late winters in Jaipur, and we were sitting together in the last row of the venue. Although we didn't talk much, I sensed we were kindred spirits, breathing the very air teeming with life and literature.

Later that year, during the final year of their master's program, I noticed them again - in my lectures on Amitav Gosh's The Shadow Lines. I taught post-colonial literature, a course that they had not opted for but still attended. I witnessed their love for engaging in discussions on identity and gender, and how they could draw new insights from their own learning and experience.

It is no surprise that they both went on to crack UGC NET-JRF, an exam passed by only the top one percent each year, qualifying them for assistant professorship nationwide, and a government research fellowship. Their curiosity and love for the subject played a big role. It is with great admiration that I introduce Ananya and Nihar to the readers of Literati!

Rohan Thomas Cherian

Interviewer: How did you approach preparing for the UGC NET-JRF exam, particularly for Paper I (Teaching and Research Aptitude) and Paper II (English Literature)?

Nihar: To be very honest, all the 'preparation' I did that helped me in NET was not really for NET. I love literature and books and art and everything creative, so reading about all that, from the history of literature to the movements and theories was all really fun for me, and I was doing it mostly to know about it, instead of having any exam in mind - although, of course, practical considerations of it all being useful later were there at the back of my mind. Again, the priority was not preparing for any exam, but just curiosity and a desire to know more about all this fun stuff. Regarding the first paper, I only prepared for it during the last few days before NET, so whatever I crammed would stay with me in the exam. I'm useless at maths and what they call 'general' knowledge (which isn't really general, but very specific, and the useless kind of specific), so didn't really give them much attention. My strategy, if it can be called that, was to get at least 60% marks in both the papers. So I aimed at that.

Even if I got 50% answers correct with absolute surety, then that was good enough, because the no-negative-marking thing (praise be to God for that) would hopefully lift the overall score higher. Now, I'm not very sure how good this really is, and if it's really effective, but that's what my brain said. And I just needed it to work once. Heheh!

Ananya: Alright so as someone who didn't have a Bachelor's in this subject, the first crucial step for me was to get familiar with the history of English literature. Secondly, the NPTEL courses I had completed throughout my Master's introduced me to a variety of interesting topics such as Cultural Studies and World Literature. At that point in time I didn't know they were a part of the NET syllabus. The lectures were fascinating, and I hadn't yet realised the importance of the notes I was jotting down, they helped me a lot. Thirdly, reading some books on Literary Theory and Criticism was a lovely experience, they genuinely left me awe-struck at times. Reading about them also helped me figure out the research areas that interest me (You should have seen me read the 'Feminism' section). Also, I prioritised Paper-II rather than Paper-I, but that doesn't mean you should do it too. The first paper involves some mathematics, and I am not friends with mathematics (I hate it).

(contd.) It is good to know where your strengths lie, for me, it has always been English literature. Preparing for the general paper happened mostly through watching YouTube lectures offered by capable educators (and praying that I make it through, somehow). I preferred studying properly only a month before the exam to remember better, as I am terrible at remembering facts.

Interviewer: What resources (books, online platforms, or coaching) did you find most helpful for mastering the vast syllabus of English Literature?

Nihar: The most helpful resources that I'm super grateful for are the NPTEL courses. The best one, that was quite foundational and introduced me to important concepts, was Introduction to Literary Theory. Apart from this, Introduction to Cultural Studies, History of English Literature, etc. were also useful; all these are freely available on YouTube. But I did these all throughout my Bachelor's and Master's, and then read the notes I made just before NET. I didn't particularly read any specific book. Back when I was preparing for CUET (which I failed btw, so there's that), I had read Edward Albert's History of English Literature, so that gave me a good idea about the history and the

whole flow of it down to modernism, where everything gets convoluted. I also downloaded a pdf containing all the previous years' papers in the week before the exam. You can find it on libgen.is. I'd suggest starting from the most recent years and then making your way back. I started from the 2004 paper and went all the way down to 2018, and then realized that the exam pattern was changed in 2018, so the papers before that were kinda useless. Apart from these, I didn't really do anything else for English. Going down random Wikipedia rabbit holes is highly recommended though, they're fun and interesting and you get to know weird stuff such as Hans Christian Andersen being a major fan of Charles Dickens, and staying as a guest at his home for too long, and then being told to leave when it got too much. And also all the nice stuff about Oscar Wilde (*whispers* go on, open wikipedia, read it!) – and anyone saying Wikipedia isn't reliable, just go through their review process once; also, they have long lists of references for whatever is written there, for almost every line, which you can check and read. So hush, and go read Wikipedia (yeah, I'm salty about people undermining Wikipedia, my beloved). For the first paper, I only opened one book, and that was KVS Madaan (unpaid promotion). The book was good enough, and I never touched anything else for that paper.

Speaking at a conference.

Ananya: When it comes to books, I read Edward Albert's *History of English Literature*, Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory,* and Pramod K. Nayar's *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory.* A majority of my notes were prepared while attending video-lectures for a few NPTEL courses. I went for Introduction to Cultural Studies, Introduction to Postmodernism, History of English Language and Literature. An additional NPTEL course I studied for free through YouTube was Introduction to Literary Theory (taught by prof. Sayan Chattopadhyay), it is truly brilliant. Apart from these resources, I liked exploring random authors and texts online. I never wanted to spend a fortune on any coaching and the likes.

Contrary to popular belief, they are not essential to qualify for JRF. If you have the time, self-studying your way through UGC-NET perfectly works. It doesn't matter how much you study, you always feel under-prepared days before the exam, at least I did. I guess now I understand that was just a feeling, and whatever knowledge you're engaging with, will come back to you when needed (During the exam, I was sure about only a handful of questions, rest were attempted on pure instinct). Almost forgot to mention the PYQs! This was the one thing I was completely unaware of during my first attempt (lost out on NET by ONE SINGLE question).

(contd.) I liked simply reading them, you know, not solving and stressing about projected scores? Started from the beginning (2004) and ended at the recently conducted cycle (2023 for me). I found the older papers easier, with the difficulty level gradually increasing, so this approach worked for me. For the first paper, YouTube was my saviour, and I'll give some credit to my own mind for attempting to understand maths, and successfully solving a percentage question! I also learnt how to convert numbers to binary codes on my fingertips, that was pretty cool.

Interviewer: The NET-JRF is highly competitive, with only the top 1% of candidates qualifying for JRF. What challenges did you face, and how did you overcome them?

Nihar: Is it only the top 1%? Oof. Sincerely no shade to people struggling to clear JRF, but I honestly still can't understand how I got it, and what the big deal was. Since childhood, my parents and everyone else had said that NET is very difficult and people keep attempting and failing. So, I had thought it must be something big. But then I gave the exam for the first time (in June 2023), and it was fine.

I didn't clear it, hadn't really prepared (it took place 20 days after our MA Previous university exams), but got pretty close, and knew what smol prep I needed. And then the December one came, and I gave it (without really aiming for JRF if I'm honest), and felt awful because I thought it went more or less the same as the June one. But then I cleared it, and what's more, JRF happened! So now you know that I have no idea about how anything works and what I'm doing at any given moment. Anyway, the only major challenge I faced was switching from science to literature after school. 2018-19 were dark, dark years full of depression, Allen coaching classes, anxiety, and some more sprinkling of depression. Towards the end of that period, I told myself that if I made it out, I'll just do what I like, what I find fun. And surprisingly, I did make it out alive, and since then, I've honestly been just having fun with whatever I do. So, that's my advice to whoever cares: just have fun with whatever you're doing, and if you don't find it fun at all, then leave it and find what's fun for you. It's totally fine to change and switch stuff, we're not static creatures, we're meant to explore and leave things and take up new things. Just have fun.

Ananya: I have been at the position where I lost out on NET and JRF by the tiniest of margins. It felt terrible, sometimes it also felt comical, but that stage came days later. I mostly felt like Rajiv from Welcome you know? *"I'm sick and tired of this, I don't know what to do."* Yeah, that eventually passed. I realised it wasn't the end of the world. But by far the biggest challenge I faced was the UGC-NET exam getting cancelled the day after it was conducted, in the summer of 2024. It wasn't easy to accept the incident when it had happened, I was almost adamant on never attempting the examination then. You need kindness during such absurd spells, I am grateful to have had that. A friend who herself was a fellow cancellation-sufferer laughed about it that very night, it made me feel okay. My family and friends gave me the much-needed space and support, and the faculty here kindly reassured me of my capabilities. A professor told me *"If anyone can do this, it's you"*, that was something! Attempting a competitive exam does not mean you need to isolate yourself, or compete with your fellow aspirant-friends. It is much more fun to whine with someone else about such ordeals, you know? Everybody congratulates you when you reach your destination, but I feel sincerely grateful for the ones who

spoke kind words to the Ananya who felt a little lost and uncertain during her journey. To my surprise, watching cricket kinda helped me get back up again... the matches where teams gave it their all and still lost. It was like sometimes we just lose out on some things, and it is okay. It happens. In August, I did attempt the exam when it was re-held, I did clear NET along with the friend who laughed about the cancellation that night, but I lost out on JRF by approximately 0.1% or something. I was honestly content with just NET too, but I was thisss close to JRF. So, I had December ahead of me, and with absolutely nothing to do, I thought of going at it one last time. Got a beautiful score with a tiny-little "Qualified for JRF". Weirdly, once I got it, I didn't feel like I'd won the World Cup or something. It was okay, it just happened. In all honesty, the journey has always mattered more to me.

Interviewer: What habits or qualities do you think were most critical to your success as a NET-JRF qualifier?

Nihar: The habit that was most critical to my success as a NET-JRF qualifier is a deep, deep love of Oreo Shakes. No, just kidding, that habit will be critical to my developing diabetes later in life, but

Felicitated at the College Farewell for their achievements.

(contd.) until then, it's Oreo Shakess babbeyyy! More seriously, I think the qualities that came really handy in clearing NET-JRF are my love for books and my curiosity about everything. I just love reading and knowing about stuff. Apart from that, I didn't really do anything different in my routine (just ask my mum, she'll tell you how much I ~~studied~~ slept, and how much I ~~read~~ watched movies; hint: it was A LOT, even in days just before the exam…I'm shameless). Daily escaped into books and movies and shows (psst, go watch Arcane, it's incredible). I knew clearing NET was a thing I needed to do, and I had the appropriate anxiety and worry for that, but I didn't let it affect my mental peace too much. Just kept reading, and kept trying to satisfy this insatiable curiosity. Everything else happened on its own.

Ananya: I am not sure if I did anything differently or extraordinarily, my day used to look pretty normal. I prioritised my well-being as much as I prioritised my academics. Nothing is worth deteriorating your mental, emotional, and physical health for— but this doesn't mean one can't be disciplined. A month before the exam, I would switch off my social media for the much needed peace (life is lived outside of those platforms). I read and revised my notes, then went through all the previous year papers, and lastly practiced for Paper-I. I had this quote from BoJack Horseman taped on the wall, "It gets easier. Everyday it gets a little easier. But you gotta do it every day, that's the hard part." Showing up everyday is the one thing that can do wonders, and not just for this particular exam.

(contd.) Rest, I slept well (7-8 hours), ate well (I suppose), listened to loads of good music, studied accordingly, and held patience and love for myself throughout the journey. Loving yourself would mean not basing your worth on an exam, or on anything or anyone really. If you get it, great! If not, then that doesn't make you any less capable. The night before I sat for the exam, I'd write a tiny note for myself to be read the next morning, with much love and kindness.

Interviewer: What advice would you give to students trying to qualify for the NET-JRF?

Nihar: The same thing I've said before: just have fun. If you like English (or whatever your subject is), and like knowing more about it, then keep going, keep reading new stuff, keep diving down Wikipedia rabbit-holes. The exam doesn't matter, your personal happiness does. Things will work out the way they're supposed to, don't worry too much about that, it's not in your control anyway. I don't really have any practical advice, as I'm not personally very practical. Most of what I did, I've told before in this interview. I'd just like to say, don't think you're losing time, that you're falling behind. You're not.

You have plenty of time. It's totally fine to stop, to pause, to gather yourself. It really is just a small exam. On the international level, the exam is so insignificant that you can't even mention it on your resume, because nobody outside India knows what this weird little thing is. And the ingenuity of humans is that we always have so many things going on, that you'll never run out of things to do. If not NET, then something else - maybe some other exam, maybe some other course, maybe some internship, maybe some temporary job, maybe some PhD. There are so many things. You're not running out of time. If you really really want to clear it, then just keep reading and develop curiosity about stuff, try to find the parts of this vast syllabus that fascinate you, and read about things related to those. Don't stress too much, don't worry. It's not important enough to lose your health or mental peace over. Have fun. That's all that matters.

Ananya: I'd say breathe; treat UGC-NET like any other exam, because it really is just an exam. Get familiar with the format and pattern of the examination, *read* all the previous year papers, and identify the areas you're good at. Read original texts and feel free to explore the subject in whatever ways you like.
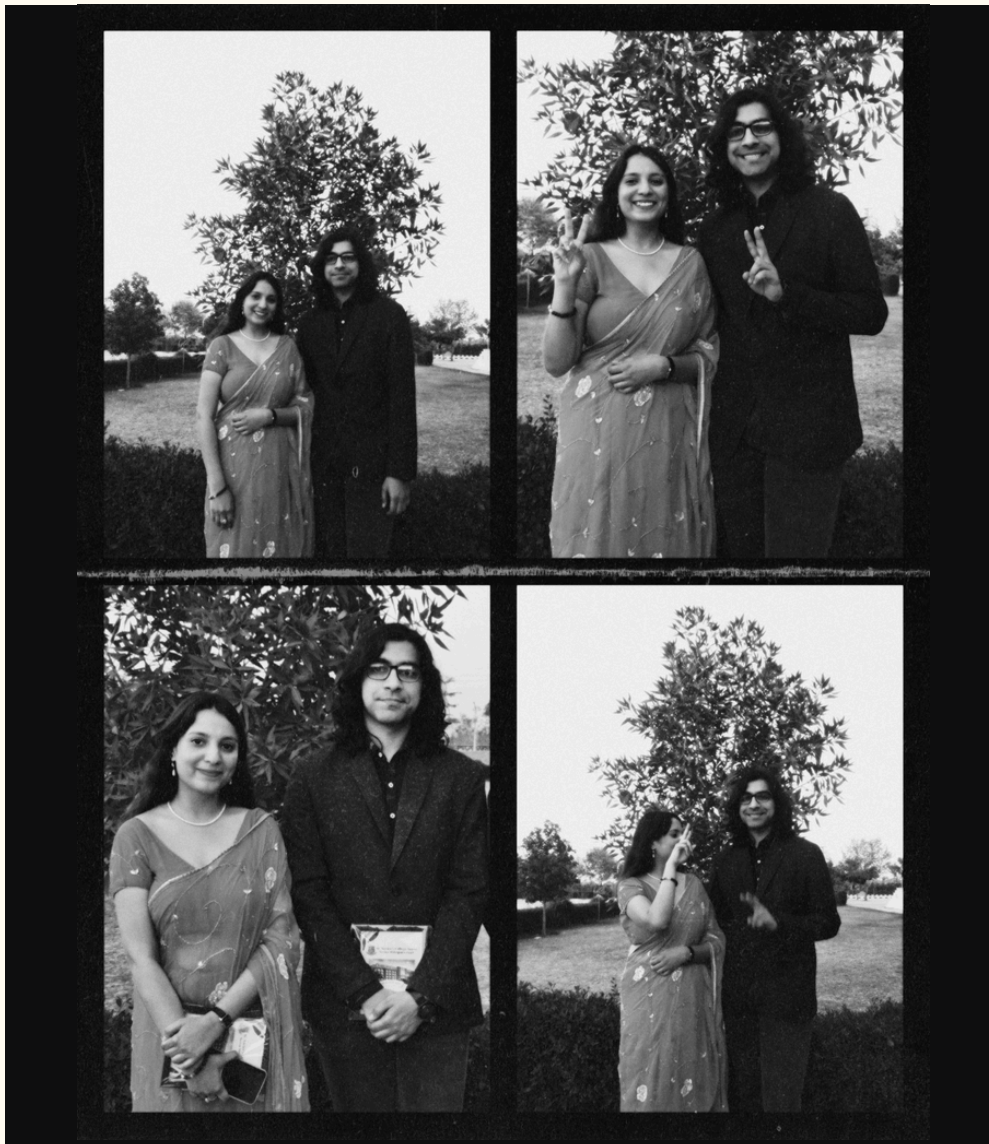
Farewell Day.

(contd.) It is better to prepare short notes and listicles for this exam rather than tremendously lengthy ones. Writing your own notes is half the work done. Enjoy the journey, romanticise studying! I definitely did that with coffee, candles, and dimmed lights. I understand it can get lonely sometimes, studying in your room. Sometimes it's just not fun or romantic. Feel free to take a break, look at the birds, and pet the cats. Please know that it is okay if you don't make it through on your first attempt, there's no shame attached around it, don't hide yourself away. If you score anywhere close to the cut-off, that usually indicates you definitely have what it takes to qualify, it'll take another try. I would also not recommend spending crucial years of your life in the pursuit of a certificate, and sometimes, it is also okay to let it go. At the end of the day, plans don't work out but people do.

Interviewer: Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently in your academic or NET-JRF preparation journey?

Nihar: Honestly? Not really. Everything I did up to that point led me to attempting the paper the way I did, and it turned out great. Why would I change anything? Even if I did something more, studied more, what would've happened? I would've gotten more marks? Doesn't matter. Here I am, pursuing a PhD, getting paid by the government to read comics and have fun. The nature of life and causality is such that you never really know what changing small things can do to bigger things. And I kind of like who I am right now; yeah, there's a lot of growing to do, a lot of things to learn, a lot of flaws to overcome and habits to resolve, but still, I like myself, and this liking came after a long and tedious journey. So, nope, wouldn't have done anything differently. Although, thinking about it, if I'm given another chance, having lived this life once, if I somehow go back in time mentally, I might just do things differently for fun, at random – talk to that person I didn't before; tell someone something I didn't before; do things I didn't in that earlier life; spend time with people I didn't before, and...eh, so many what-ifs, could-have-beens (beens, hehe) –

you can spend days thinking about all this and get nowhere, except to undiscovered depths of anxiety... or write an interesting speculative story about it, which is more fun.

Ananya: Hasn't a wonderful book by the name of *The Great Gatsby* taught us the past is best left untouched? I haven't really thought about this, if I would've done anything differently. Everything happened the way it was supposed to happen, even the roadblocks. Due to those experiences, I have become better at navigating pauses, and dealing with failures. Still, I wish I worried a little (A LOT) less. I don't know if attempting the exam in an earlier cycle would have made any difference, at this point in time it is not something I bother myself with. I did wish I'd attended more of my lectures offline, I dearly miss those classes and our campus sometimes. There's a tree I love there, and a bird house, and honestly, I wish I'd read a good book sitting under it, sipping some coffee from that one Milton flask I used to carry. I wish I took more photographs! These aren't strictly academic things, but they count.

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