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NEET-UG 2026 Paper Leak — CBI Arrests, NTA Crisis, and CBT Shift from 2027

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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NEET-UG 2026 Paper Leak — CBI Arrests, NTA Crisis, and CBT Shift from 2027

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WHY IN NEWS

The **Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)** arrested **Shivraj Motegaonkar**, owner of Renukai Career Centre in Latur, Maharashtra, on **May 18, 2026**, after the question bank at his coaching centre was found to match the **NEET-UG 2026** examination paper. With around 10 arrests across six cities by May 20, Union Education Minister **Dharmendra Pradhan** announced that NEET-UG will shift to fully **Computer-Based Testing (CBT)** from **2027**.

THE 2026 PAPER LEAK — WHAT HAPPENED

Timeline of Events

DATE	EVENT
May 2026 (exam date)	NEET-UG 2026 held; ~23 lakh candidates appeared
May 12, 2026	CBI formally registers case of alleged paper leak
May 18, 2026	CBI arrests Shivraj Motegaonkar, Renukai Career Centre, Latur (Maharashtra) — Chemistry question bank matched exam paper
By May 20, 2026	~10 arrests made across six cities in multiple states
May 20, 2026	Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan announces CBT shift from 2027

How the Leak Allegedly Occurred

The CBI's working theory centres on **pre-examination circulation of question papers** through coaching networks. The Chemistry paper recovered from Renukai Career Centre bore a forensic match to the live NEET-UG 2026 question set — the same modus operandi documented in the 2024 paper leak, where question papers were allegedly photographed and circulated via encrypted messaging apps hours before the exam.

NTA — BACKGROUND AND ROLE

The **National Testing Agency (NTA)** was established in **2017** under the **Ministry of Education** to take over large-scale entrance examinations from university bodies and the CBSE. Its stated **mandate**: bring standardisation, technology, and scale to high-stakes testing.

Examinations Conducted by NTA

EXAMINATION	PURPOSE	APPROX. CANDIDATES (ANNUAL)
NEET-UG	MBBS, BDS, AYUSH admissions	~23–24 lakh
JEE-Main	Engineering (NITs, IITs, CFTIs)	~12–13 lakh
CUET-UG	Central university admissions	~15 lakh
UGC-NET	Assistant professor / JRF eligibility	~11 lakh
CMAT	Management admissions	~1.5 lakh
Total (approx.)		~65 lakh candidates/year

NTA’s structural design replicated features of the **Educational Testing Service (ETS)** in the United States — a centralised agency at arm’s length from the government. However, critics have long argued that NTA lacks equivalent institutional independence, accountability mechanisms, and technology investment.

HISTORY OF NEET CONTROVERSIES (2021 ONWARDS)

NEET has been contested since its inception, but organised malpractice escalated sharply after 2021.

YEAR	CONTROVERSY
2021	Irregularities reported in Bihar; multiple FIRs
2022	Rajasthan paper leak — Jaipur police arrests coaching staff
2023	Alleged centre-level impersonation in Jharkhand and UP
2024	National-scale paper leak; 48 persons arrested by CBI; grace marks scandal; Supreme Court hearing
2026	Fresh paper leak; Latur network; CBI case; ~10 arrests; CBT announced

The 2024 Paper Leak — Key Facts

- CBI arrested **48 persons** in the 2024 NEET paper leak case, including coaching centre operators, middlemen, and examination centre staff.
- A parallel **grace marks controversy** erupted: NTA awarded grace marks to over 1,500 students from six centres, pushing many to a perfect 720 — statistically anomalous clusters that triggered court challenges.
- The **Supreme Court (July 2024)** refused to cancel the examination outright, holding that CBI investigation must continue but mass cancellation would harm the majority of honest candidates.
- The Court explicitly held **NTA institutionally responsible** for systemic failure and directed a comprehensive overhaul.

K. RADHAKRISHNAN COMMITTEE — RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the 2024 crisis, the government constituted a **High-Level Committee** under **K. Radhakrishnan**, former Chairman of **ISRO**, to recommend structural reforms to NTA and the examination ecosystem.

Key Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION	DETAIL
Shift to CBT	Replace pen-and-paper NEET with Computer-Based Testing; phased rollout
Multi-city exam centres	Expand authorised test centres to reduce concentration in a few nodes
Biometric verification	Fingerprint and facial recognition at entry for all candidates
Real-time CCTV surveillance	Live feed to a centralised monitoring command centre
AI-based proctoring	Algorithmic flagging of suspicious candidate behaviour during the exam
Encrypted question delivery	Questions transmitted to test centres digitally and decrypted only at exam start — eliminating physical paper
Institutional audit of NTA	Independent third-party audit of NTA's governance, IT systems, and vendor contracts
Grievance redressal mechanism	Transparent, time-bound process for candidate complaints

The committee's emphasis on **encrypted digital delivery** directly addresses the root vulnerability: physical question papers printed weeks in advance and stored in transit create multiple interception points.

CBT TRANSITION — PROS AND CHALLENGES

Advantages of Computer-Based Testing

ADVANTAGE	EXPLANATION
No physical paper	Eliminates pre-exam printing, storage, and physical delivery — the primary leak vector
Question randomisation	Each candidate receives a different set of questions from a validated question bank, making mass leaks operationally futile
Instant evaluation	Results within hours; eliminates answer-sheet scanning errors
Tamper-proof audit trail	Every candidate response time-stamped; anomaly detection possible
Scalability	Large question banks can be dynamically assembled per session

Challenges and Concerns

CHALLENGE	DETAIL
Digital infrastructure gaps	Rural and semi-urban areas lack reliable power supply and high-speed internet for sustained CBT sessions
Urban–rural digital divide	Candidates from government schools in smaller towns have limited prior exposure to computer-based interfaces
Cyber security risks	Server breaches, man-in-the-middle attacks, and remote-access fraud are CBT-specific threat vectors
Centre accreditation quality	Private computer centres empanelled by NTA may have inadequate hardware or supervision
Disability accommodation	Candidates with visual impairment or motor disabilities require specialised CBT hardware and software (screen readers, assistive devices)
Trust deficit	After repeated leaks, candidates and parents are sceptical of any NTA-run system regardless of the mode

The JEE-Main, conducted in CBT mode since 2018, provides a reference case: JEE-Main has had no large-scale paper leak since switching to CBT, though isolated centre-level irregularities have occurred.

NEET-UG — STRUCTURE AND STAKES

Understanding the examination’s architecture is essential for evaluating reform options.

PARAMETER	DETAIL
Full name	National Eligibility cum Entrance Test — Undergraduate
Purpose	Single national entrance for MBBS, BDS, BAMS, BSMS, BUMS, BHMS, BVSc seats
Conducting body	NTA (since 2019; previously CBSE)
Mode	Pen-and-paper (OMR); CBT proposed from 2027
Duration	3 hours 20 minutes
Total marks	720
Structure	Physics: 180 marks · Chemistry: 180 marks · Biology (Botany + Zoology): 360 marks
Negative marking	-1 per wrong answer; +4 per correct
Registered candidates 2026	~23 lakh
Available MBBS seats (approx.)	~1.1 lakh (govt + private)
Competition ratio	~21 candidates per MBBS seat

The extreme competition ratio — roughly 21 aspirants for every available MBBS seat — is what makes NEET the highest-stakes single examination in India’s higher education system, and why a leaked paper is not merely an administrative failure but a civilisational injustice.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND GOVERNANCE DIMENSIONS

Fundamental Rights at Stake

Paper leaks strike at multiple constitutional guarantees:

- **Article 14 (Equality before law):** Every candidate must compete on identical terms. A leaked paper creates a two-tier system — those who paid for stolen questions and those who did not — violating the very basis of equal treatment.

- **Article 15 (Non-discrimination):** Leak networks disproportionately serve affluent candidates who can pay coaching centres for “guaranteed” question sets, widening socio-economic inequity.
- **Article 16 (Equality of opportunity):** Merit-based admission is the constitutional instrument through which citizens access public goods (government medical colleges). Leaked papers hollow out this instrument.
- **Article 21 (Right to life):** The Supreme Court has held that the right to life includes the right to livelihood and to pursue one’s chosen profession. A corrupted examination process arbitrarily forecloses that right for honest candidates.
- **Article 21A (Right to education):** The broader right to quality, fair education creates a positive obligation on the State to ensure examination integrity.

Governance Failure Analysis

The repeated NEET leaks reveal a **systemic governance deficit** rather than isolated criminal acts:

- ❶ **Weak institutional design:** NTA lacks a statutory charter; it operates as a registered society under the Societies Registration Act, giving it insufficient independence and accountability.
- ❷ **Vendor dependence:** Examination printing, logistics, and centre management are outsourced to private vendors with inadequate oversight.
- ❸ **Opacity:** NTA does not publish annual reports, examination security audit findings, or vendor contracts — unlike ETS (USA) or UCAS (UK).
- ❹ **Inadequate deterrence:** Prior to 2024, prosecution rates in examination fraud cases were low; the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024 was enacted specifically to address this gap.

Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024

Enacted in the aftermath of the 2024 NEET crisis, this legislation:

- Defines “public examination” to include NEET, JEE, CUET, and UGC-NET.
- Prescribes imprisonment of **3–5 years** and fines up to ₹10 lakh for impersonation.
- Prescribes imprisonment of **5–10 years** and fines up to ₹1 crore for organised paper leak networks.
- Designates CBI as the primary investigating agency for offences under the Act.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2 — Governance, Education, Social Justice

- **Institutional accountability:** NTA's governance deficit as a case study in regulatory capture and weak oversight.
- **Education policy reform:** CBT transition, K. Radhakrishnan Committee, and the role of technology in examination integrity.
- **Judicial activism:** Supreme Court's role in directing administrative reform (2024 NEET judgment).
- **Legislation:** Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024 — provisions, intent, and adequacy.

GS Paper 1 — Society

- **Inequality and access:** How examination fraud deepens socio-economic stratification in merit-based admissions.
- **Education and social mobility:** NEET as a gateway for first-generation professional aspirants from non-privileged backgrounds.

Probable Mains Questions

- 1 “Repeated paper leaks in NEET-UG expose not just criminal networks but a structural failure in India's examination governance architecture.” Critically analyse with reference to the K. Radhakrishnan Committee recommendations. *(GS2, 250 words)*
- 2 Examine the constitutional dimensions of examination fraud. How do paper leaks violate the fundamental rights guaranteed under Articles 14, 15, 16, and 21 of the Constitution? *(GS2, 150 words)*
- 3 Evaluate the transition from pen-and-paper to Computer-Based Testing for NEET-UG. What are the key opportunities and challenges, especially for candidates in rural India? *(GS2, 250 words)*

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

NTA (NATIONAL TESTING AGENCY):

Established: 2017; under Ministry of Education

Legal status: Registered society (not a statutory body)

Exams: NEET-UG, JEE-Main, CUET, UGC-NET, CMAT

Total candidates annually: ~65 lakh

NEET-UG 2026:

Candidates registered: ~23 lakh

Mode: Pen-and-paper (OMR)

Marks: 720 (Physics 180 + Chemistry 180 + Biology 360)

Duration: 3 hours 20 minutes; Negative marking: -1/wrong, +4/correct

CBI case registered: May 12, 2026

Key arrest: Shivraj Motegaonkar, Renukai Career Centre, Latur (Maharashtra) — May 18, 2026

Total arrests by May 20, 2026: ~10 across six cities

NEET-UG 2024 PAPER LEAK:

CBI arrests: 48 persons

Grace marks controversy: 1,500+ students from 6 centres

Supreme Court verdict (July 2024): Refused to cancel exam; directed NTA overhaul

K. RADHAKRISHNAN COMMITTEE (2024):

Chair: K. Radhakrishnan (former ISRO Chairman)

Key recommendations: CBT, biometric verification, AI proctoring, encrypted question delivery, real-time CCTV

CBT TRANSITION:

Announced by: Dharmendra Pradhan (Union Education Minister)

Effective from: 2027

JEE-Main reference: CBT since 2018; no large-scale paper leak since

PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS (PREVENTION OF UNFAIR MEANS) ACT, 2024:

Organised paper leak: 5–10 years imprisonment + fine up to ₹1 crore

Impersonation: 3–5 years + fine up to ₹10 lakh

Primary investigator: CBI

CONSTITUTIONAL ARTICLES:

Article 14: Equality before law

Article 15: Non-discrimination

Article 16: Equality of opportunity in public employment/education

Article 21: Right to life (includes right to pursue chosen profession)

Article 21A: Right to education (6–14 years; broader interpretation includes fair examination access)

AVAILABLE MBBS SEATS (APPROX.): ~1.1 LAKH · COMPETITION RATIO: ~21 CANDIDATES PER SEAT

Sources: [PIB](#), [The Hindu](#), [Ministry of Education](#)

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Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

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