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MAGAZINE NOTES

Examination Scams and the Test of State Capacity

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POLITY

SOCIAL ISSUES

GS2

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Examination Scams and the Test of State Capacity

 **Economic & Political Weekly** Chapter 1 · 4 min read ·

Analytical digest for EPW July 2026, built from verified data and public debate.

The summer of 2026 turned a recurring administrative embarrassment, the leaked or compromised competitive examination, into a full political crisis. EPW's July commentary framed the issue in a way that goes to the heart of GS Paper 2: the state's ability to conduct entrance and recruitment examinations with integrity is itself a test of its capacity to govern. When that test is failed repeatedly, the failure is not merely procedural. It corrodes the legitimacy of the state as an impartial allocator of opportunity.

WHY EXAMINATIONS CARRY SUCH WEIGHT

In a society with limited private wealth and pervasive social stratification, competitive examinations are one of the few institutionalised ladders of **intergenerational mobility**. A first-generation aspirant from a small town who clears NEET, a State PSC preliminary, or a staff-selection test converts effort into a credential the market and the state must recognise. This is why exam integrity is not a niche education-policy matter but a question of the social contract. When a paper leaks, the aspirant does not simply lose a chance; the promise that merit is rewarded is broken for an entire cohort.

THE TRIGGER: NEET 2026

The **National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET)**, which governs admission to India's medical colleges, was **cancelled on May 12, 2026** amid allegations of irregularities, with a **retest held on June 21, 2026**. EPW's editorial cited **at least 13 student suicides linked to the cancellations** between May and June 2026, a toll that transformed grievance into grief and grief into mobilisation. A youth-led protest movement, centred on **Jantar Mantar in Delhi and beginning on June 6, 2026**, demanded accountability, including the resignation of the responsible minister and structural reform of the examining bodies.

THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE AND ITS CRITICS

The executive eventually promised **fast-track courts** for exam-fraud cases and signalled that compensation for victims' families was under consideration. Protesters and analysts argued that punitive courts address the symptom rather than the disease: the institutional weakness of examining agencies, the opacity of question-

paper logistics, and the absence of a standing accountability mechanism. EPW's core argument was that the state cannot abdicate responsibility by outsourcing it to the judiciary after the fact; it must engage with the protesters, acknowledge error, and rebuild the integrity of the examination system itself.

STATE CAPACITY: A FRAMEWORK

DIMENSION OF STATE CAPACITY	WHAT EXAM FAILURES REVEAL
Administrative	Weak question-paper security, poor vendor oversight, and thin standard operating procedures at examining bodies
Coercive	Reliance on tear gas and baton charges against protesting students rather than negotiated engagement
Fiscal	Under-investment in secure printing, digital delivery and independent audit of examination logistics
Legitimacy	Erosion of the belief that the state is an impartial allocator of merit-based opportunity

The table restates a familiar political-science point: capacity is not just the ability to enforce, but the ability to be trusted. A state that can deploy police but cannot guarantee a leak-free paper has misallocated its capacities.

THE RIGHT TO PROTEST AND DEMOCRATIC VOICE

The episode also raised GS2 questions on the **right to peaceful assembly** under Article 19(1)(b) and the state's duty to facilitate rather than suppress dissent. A hunger strike and sustained demonstrations by students are precisely the kind of accountability-seeking civic action that a mature democracy is expected to absorb. The use of force against unarmed aspirants sat uneasily with constitutional guarantees and, in EPW's reading, deepened the legitimacy deficit rather than resolving it.

REFORM DIRECTIONS

- **A statutory, independent examination-integrity authority** with audit powers over all high-stakes national tests, insulated from the ministries whose performance it evaluates.
- **End-to-end digital and secure logistics**, with tamper-evident question-paper delivery and real-time monitoring, backed by the **Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024** framework.
- **A published accountability protocol**: fixed timelines for investigation, disclosure of findings, and named responsibility, so that failure has an address.

- **Institutionalised engagement with aspirants**, treating student representatives as legitimate stakeholders rather than a public-order problem.

UPSC ANGLE

- **GS2 (Governance)**: state capacity, accountability, and the design of autonomous regulatory institutions.
- **GS2 (Polity)**: the right to protest under Article 19; executive versus judicial remedies.
- **GS4 (Ethics)**: the moral duty of the state toward citizens who invest years in a merit ladder; institutional trust as a public good.

Likely Mains question: “The integrity of public examinations is a measure of state capacity, not merely of education administration. Critically examine in the light of recent examination scams.” (GS2, 15 marks)

FACTS CORNER

NEET 2026: cancelled May 12, 2026; retest June 21, 2026; EPW cited at least 13 linked student suicides (May to June 2026).

2026 Delhi Jantar Mantar protests: youth-led accountability movement, began June 6, 2026.

Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024: central law penalising paper leaks and organised cheating; up to 10 years imprisonment and fines up to Rs 1 crore for the most serious offences.

Article 19(1)(b): guarantees the right to assemble peaceably and without arms, subject to reasonable restrictions.

National Testing Agency (NTA): the autonomous body conducting NEET and other national entrance tests; its governance has been under review following repeated integrity failures.



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