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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Mistakes Were Made: How the Passive Voice Erodes Democratic Accountability

 INDIAN EXPRESS

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Mistakes Were Made: How the Passive Voice Erodes Democratic Accountability

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GS2
GS4
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THE LIFT LINE

“Mistakes were made.” “It happens.” “Lapses have been noted.” These are the sentences a democracy reaches for when it wants the comfort of remorse without the cost of responsibility. The passive voice is not a grammatical habit; it is a governance strategy, and every time a failure is narrated with no subject, an official who could have been named walks free and a citizen who was harmed goes unanswered.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This is an ethics and governance editorial, and it sits at the exact seam where GS2 and GS4 meet. The GS2 paper tests whether you understand accountability as an institutional mechanism, while the GS4 paper tests whether you can reason about it as a moral duty of the public servant. A candidate who can move fluently between “which body holds the official to account” and “why the official owes an answer at all” is demonstrating precisely the integrated thinking the examiner is hunting for.

GS Paper 2: Accountability and transparency in governance, and the mechanisms that enforce them, are core themes. **GS Paper 4:** **Probity** in governance, moral responsibility, and the ethics of public office are directly engaged. For **Prelims** and framework recall, hold the specifics: accountability has three commonly cited forms, **political, administrative and social**; the **Right to Information Act, 2005** is the citizen’s primary accountability tool; the **Citizens’ Charter** and the **Sevottam** framework set service standards and answerability; and the **Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2nd ARC)**, especially its reports on ethics and on citizen-centric administration, is the standard reference on accountability reform. For **Mains**, carry a clean distinction: **responsibility** is the duty to act, while **accountability** is the obligation to answer and to bear consequences, and a system that blurs the two produces exactly the passive-voice culture this editorial names.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Consider how India narrates its recurring failures. A stampede at a crowded venue becomes “the crowd surged.” A question-paper leak becomes “a lapse in the examination process.” Toxic winter air becomes “pollution levels rose.” A bridge that gives way becomes “a structural failure occurred.” In each sentence the

event has no author. The grammar quietly deletes the official who signed the safety clearance, the officer who ignored the warning, the vendor who cut the corner and the supervisor who looked away.

This is not a trivial complaint about style. Language shapes what a system is willing to investigate. When failure is described as something that happened rather than something someone did, the natural next step, of asking who decided and why, never arrives. The inquiry becomes a search for a “systemic gap” rather than a chain of decisions, and reform becomes an abstraction rather than a correction.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The passive voice diffuses responsibility until no one holds it

Ethics has a name for this: the **diffusion of responsibility**. When a duty is spread across many hands, each hand assumes another will act, and none does. The passive voice is the linguistic engine of this diffusion. “It was decided” hides who decided, and a decision without a decider cannot be examined, praised or punished.

Answerability is the missing half of accountability

Genuine accountability has two halves: the duty to act and the duty to answer for the action. India’s system is comparatively strong on the first and weak on the second. Officers are given responsibilities, but the obligation to publicly explain a failure, and to face consequences for it, is easily deflected into transfers, committees and reports that name no one.

Naming is not vindictiveness; it is the precondition of reform

CONCEPT	WHAT IT ASKS	WHAT ITS ABSENCE PRODUCES
Responsibility	Whose duty was it to act?	Overlapping mandates, buck-passing
Accountability	Who must answer and bear consequences?	Failures with no author
Answerability	Was a public explanation given?	Committees that name no one
Probity	Was the office held with integrity?	Erosion of public trust

The table clarifies that fixing responsibility is not about finding a scapegoat. It is about restoring the link between a decision and a decision-maker, which is the only link along which learning, **deterrence** and justice can travel.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read the issue through the **answerability chain**: a citizen is harmed, a decision caused it, a decision-maker made it, and an institution must compel that person to answer. The passive voice snaps this chain at its second link, and once the decision has no author, every link beyond it goes slack. A complementary frame is the ethics

of **moral responsibility**: a public servant does not merely operate a system, he makes choices within it, and choices carry ownership. Hold both frames and the argument sharpens. Accountability is not primarily a matter of punishment; it is a matter of authorship, the insistence that every consequential act in public life can be traced back to a person willing to say, in the first person, “I decided.”

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Governance failure -> passive-voice narration -> no decision-maker named -> diffusion of responsibility -> no answerability -> no reform or justice -> repeat failure

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Write accountability in the active voice.** Require inquiry reports and official communications to name the decisions and the decision-makers, replacing “lapses occurred” with “who decided what, and when.”
- ❷ **Strengthen answerability mechanisms.** Use the **RTI Act**, **Citizens’ Charters** and the **Sevottam** framework to make public explanation a routine obligation, not a favour, with time-bound responses.
- ❸ **Institutionalise the 2nd ARC’s ethics agenda.** Adopt clear codes of ethics, protection for those who flag risks, and consequence management so that responsibility attaches to named offices.
- ❹ **Separate systemic reform from personal accountability.** Fix the process and name the person, since treating every failure as a faceless “systemic gap” is itself a way of protecting the individuals inside the system.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly probed accountability and probity, including GS4 questions on the difference between responsibility and accountability, and GS2 questions on transparency mechanisms such as RTI and Citizens’ Charters. This editorial gives you a vivid, quotable frame, the passive voice, to structure such answers.

Practice question: “The passive voice is the grammar of **impunity**.” Discuss how the failure to fix personal responsibility undermines accountability in governance, and suggest ethical and institutional remedies. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: The Indian Express, Second Administrative Reforms Commission Reports, Right to Information Act, 2005

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