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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Restoring Trust: Exam Integrity and the Reform of India's Testing System

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POLITY

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THE LIFT LINE

For a student who has studied for years, a leaked question paper is not a headline but a robbery. Each fresh scandal around **NEET** and other national tests corrodes something a democracy cannot easily rebuild, the belief that merit is fairly measured. The fix is not one more investigation but the reform of the machinery that runs the exams.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Institutional integrity is a core governance theme, and examinations are where the abstract idea of merit meets the concrete reality of process design. A candidate who understands why leaks recur understands how institutions fail.

The topic is also personal to every aspirant and therefore ideal for the ethics and governance overlap, connecting **probity** in public administration with the citizen's right to a fair, transparent selection process.

GS Paper 2: **Statutory**, regulatory and quasi-judicial bodies, and issues relating to the development and management of the education sector.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the **National Testing Agency (NTA)** conducts **NEET-UG**, **JEE (Main)**, **CUET** and other national tests; the **Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024** criminalises paper leaks and organised cheating with stiff penalties and treats such offences as cognisable and non-bailable; and the **high-level committee headed by K. Radhakrishnan (2024)** recommended secure question-paper transmission, district-level control, greater use of technology and a restructuring of the NTA.

For **Mains**, the demand is to distinguish individual malpractice from organised, systemic leakage and to argue for institutional rather than merely **punitive** fixes.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The NTA was created to bring professionalism and uniformity to high-stakes testing, replacing a patchwork of separate bodies. It now administers examinations that decide the futures of lakhs, from medical aspirants sitting NEET to university applicants taking CUET. That concentration of responsibility is efficient, but it also means a single failure ripples across the country.

Successive controversies have exposed vulnerabilities in the chain from printing to transmission to the examination hall. The distinction that matters is between **individual malpractice**, a candidate cheating in one centre, and **organised leaks**, where criminal networks compromise papers before the exam and sell them at scale. The second is a governance failure, not merely a policing one.

Parliament responded with the **Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024**, which criminalises leaks and organised cheating with heavy penalties. The government also constituted the **Radhakrishnan Committee**, whose recommendations aimed at hardening every stage of the process. The open question is implementation.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Punishment alone cannot fix a broken process

The 2024 Act is necessary but reactive. It punishes after harm is done. If question papers still travel through insecure channels and centres remain weakly supervised, **deterrence** will always lag behind determined criminal networks. Prevention must be engineered into the system.

Secure the whole chain

A paper is only as safe as its weakest handling point. Encrypted, on-demand transmission, tighter district-level custody, biometric verification and randomised centre allocation reduce the surface that leaks can exploit.

Reform the institution, not just the exam

An overstretched NTA running many high-stakes tests with limited permanent capacity is structurally fragile. The Radhakrishnan Committee's call to restructure and professionalise the agency goes to the root.

LAYER OF REFORM	INSTRUMENT	PURPOSE
Deterrence	Public Examinations Act, 2024	Criminalise leaks and organised cheating
Process security	Encrypted transmission, district control	Prevent leaks before the exam
Institutional strength	NTA restructuring per Radhakrishnan Committee	Build permanent capacity and accountability
Transparency	Grievance redress and disclosure	Rebuild aspirant trust

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read exam integrity as a problem of **institutional trust** and **process design**, not individual villainy. The relevant question is not who cheated but why the system allowed it. Apply the idea of **defence in depth**: no single safeguard is enough, so security must be layered from printing to result. A second lens is **accountability**, the principle that when a public body fails, responsibility must be traceable and consequences must follow, which is why transparency and independent oversight matter as much as tighter locks. Finally, weigh **efficiency against resilience**: centralising exams under one agency is efficient, but resilience demands redundancy, decentralised custody and permanent institutional capacity so that one breach does not compromise a nationwide test.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Insecure process plus weak NTA capacity -> organised paper leaks -> loss of merit and public trust -> layered reform (2024 Act plus secure processes plus NTA restructuring) -> credible, fair examinations

WAY FORWARD

- 1 Restructure the NTA.** Implement the Radhakrishnan Committee's recommendations to professionalise the agency, build permanent capacity and fix clear lines of accountability.
- 2 Harden the process.** Adopt encrypted, on-demand question-paper transmission, district-level custody, biometric verification and randomised centre allocation to prevent leaks at source.
- 3 Enforce the 2024 Act.** Ensure swift, visible prosecution of organised cheating networks so that deterrence becomes real rather than notional.
- 4 Guarantee transparency.** Provide robust grievance redress, timely disclosure and independent audit so that aspirants can trust the fairness of every result.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

The UPSC has repeatedly examined regulatory and statutory bodies and questions of transparency and accountability in governance, for example the 2023 theme on the role of institutions in ensuring probity. Exam integrity is a vivid, current application of these ideas.

Practice question: “Recurring paper leaks reflect a failure of institutional design more than of individual honesty.” Examine the reforms needed to secure the integrity of national examinations in India. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: Indian Express, NEET and exam integrity, PIB, Public Examinations Act 2024

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