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Dharmendra Pradhan Resigns Over Exam Leaks: Ministerial Accountability and the NTA Crisis

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Dharmendra Pradhan Resigns Over Exam Leaks: Ministerial Accountability and the NTA Crisis

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Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigned on July 25, 2026, after weeks of sustained, youth-led protests centred on Jantar Mantar in Delhi over examination paper leaks and repeated irregularities at the National Testing Agency (NTA). The resignation is the government's most significant concession to the nationwide exam-integrity movement and has reopened debate on individual ministerial responsibility in India's parliamentary democracy.

ACCOUNTABILITY AT THE HEART OF PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

The resignation is not merely an administrative reshuffle. It is a textbook illustration of how executive accountability is meant to operate under the Indian Constitution. Article 75(3) states that the Council of Ministers is collectively responsible to the Lok Sabha. Alongside this doctrine of collective responsibility runs the older constitutional convention of individual ministerial responsibility, under which a minister answers for the acts and failures of the department he heads.

When a portfolio suffers a systemic failure, be it a corruption scandal, an administrative collapse or a breach of public trust, the convention expects the minister in charge either to remedy the failing or to demit office. Pradhan's exit reflects the second path, taken under intense public and parliamentary pressure.

Individual vs Collective Responsibility

PRINCIPLE	CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS	WHAT IT MEANS
Collective responsibility	Article 75(3)	The entire Council of Ministers stands or falls together before the Lok Sabha
Individual responsibility	Constitutional convention	A minister is personally answerable for the working of his ministry
Appointment and removal	Article 75(1) and 75(2)	Ministers are appointed by the President on the PM's advice and hold office during the PM's pleasure

The distinction matters for UPSC. Collective responsibility is codified; individual responsibility is a convention borrowed from the Westminster system and is not judicially enforceable. A minister's resignation therefore signals the health of democratic conventions rather than the operation of a legal rule.

THE NTA GOVERNANCE CRISIS

The National Testing Agency was established in 2017 as an autonomous, self-sustaining premier testing organisation under the Ministry of Education. It was created to conduct high-stakes entrance examinations such as NEET-UG, the Joint CSIR-UGC-NET and other national tests, taking this burden off bodies like the CBSE.

The agency's credibility has been eroded by successive controversies over question-paper leaks, grace-mark disputes, centre-allocation failures and postponed or cancelled examinations. Because these tests determine the futures of millions of aspirants, each breach has provoked outsized public anger. The July 2026 protests channelled that anger into a demand for ministerial accountability.

The K. Radhakrishnan Committee

In response to the earlier NEET-UG turmoil, the Ministry of Education constituted a seven-member high-level expert committee chaired by Dr K. Radhakrishnan, former Chairman of ISRO. The committee held nearly 30 meetings and submitted around 101 recommendations aimed at making the NTA more specialised, secure, technology-driven and accountable.

Its key reform directions included:

- Building government-owned digital testing infrastructure by using Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas as secure centres, reducing dependence on private venues.
- Strengthening data-security protocols across the examination cycle.
- Overhauling grievance-redressal and question-setting processes.
- Restructuring the NTA to focus on a smaller set of high-stakes examinations conducted with greater rigour.

The committee's work forms the reform template that the protests have now pushed to the top of the political agenda.

THE LEGAL SHIELD: ANTI-PAPER-LEAK LAW

The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, which came into force in June 2024, is India's first dedicated central law against organised cheating and leaks in public examinations.

OFFENCE	PUNISHMENT UNDER THE 2024 ACT
Individual using unfair means	3 to 5 years imprisonment, fine up to Rs 10 lakh
Organised crime by a group or institution	5 to 10 years imprisonment, fine of at least Rs 1 crore

The Act treats organised leaks as a serious cognisable, non-bailable offence, though it protects genuine candidates from being penalised for the failures of the system.

Against the backdrop of the 2026 protests, the Union Cabinet cleared a draft amendment further hardening the law. The proposed changes raise the maximum punishment for organised leaks to up to 10 years in jail and fines of up to Rs 10 crore, and **mandate** time-bound processes: investigation within two months, trial within three months, and conclusion of cases within about five months through statutory fast-track courts.

THE RIGHT TO PROTEST

The student mobilisation itself rests on constitutional foundations. Article 19(1)(a) guarantees freedom of speech and expression, and Article 19(1)(b) guarantees the right to assemble peaceably and without arms. The Supreme Court has repeatedly affirmed that peaceful protest is integral to a functioning democracy, subject to reasonable restrictions under Articles 19(2) and 19(3) in the interest of public order.

The Jantar Mantar demonstrations, a designated protest site in the capital, show how peaceful assembly can translate public grievance into concrete institutional change, in this case a ministerial resignation and accelerated legal reform.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2: Governance, accountability, and the functioning of the executive.

Prelims pointers:

- Article 75(3): collective responsibility of the Council of Ministers to the Lok Sabha.
- NTA established in 2017 under the Ministry of Education.
- Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024: in force since June 2024.
- K. Radhakrishnan (former ISRO Chairman) chaired the NTA reform committee.

★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

The doctrine of collective responsibility in India is drawn from the British Westminster model and is expressly incorporated in Article 75(3).

The NTA is an autonomous body registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860, functioning under the Ministry of Education.

The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, makes offences cognisable, non-bailable and non-compoundable.

Jantar Mantar in Delhi is a state-designated site for peaceful demonstrations after protests were shifted from the Boat Club and India Gate areas.

The National Recruitment Agency (NRA) framework is tasked with preparing guidelines for the conduct of exams under the anti-paper-leak regime.

Source: Dharmendra Pradhan Resigns Over Exam Leaks: Ministerial Accountability and the NTA Crisis —
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