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A Fresh Slate: Why Exam Integrity Needs Institutions, Not Resignations

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If a minister resigns over a paper leak he did not personally cause, has accountability been served or merely performed?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A resignation is an answer to public anger, not to a systems failure. On 25 July 2026 Dharmendra Pradhan left the Ministry of Education and the Union government committed to withdrawing cases against student protestors; the streets emptied, but the question paper is still set, printed, transported, stored and evaluated by the same thin institutional machinery that failed in May. India's examination crisis is a capacity crisis wearing the costume of a political crisis. Trust in an examination is not restored by who occupies Shastri Bhawan; it is restored when the leak becomes technically difficult, the vendor becomes legally accountable and the result becomes independently auditable.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

GS Paper 2 gets three distinct hooks. First, *government policies and interventions for development in the education sector*, since the National Testing Agency is the single largest instrument through which the Union government touches the life chances of school leavers. Second, *statutory, regulatory and quasi-judicial bodies*, and the consequences of designing a national testing body as a registered society rather than a statutory authority: no guaranteed budget line, no cadre, no enforcement powers. Third, ministerial responsibility, since Article 75(3) of the Constitution makes the Council of Ministers collectively responsible to the Lok Sabha, while individual resignation on a departmental failure is a convention borrowed from Westminster and not a constitutional command. Education sits in Entry 25 of the [Concurrent List](#) of the Seventh Schedule, so Centre and States share both the blame and the remedy.

GS Paper 4 gets the harder question: *accountability and ethical governance, probity in public life*, and the difference between symbolic accountability, which is a resignation, and [substantive](#) accountability, which is a redesigned system with named owners for each failure point. The episode is also a live case study in

institutional trust as a public good: trust is slow to build, fast to destroy, and impossible to legislate.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The National Testing Agency (NTA) was set up in 2017 as a society registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860, and began conducting examinations from 2018-19. It was intended to relieve the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and individual universities of the burden of running high-stakes entrance tests. Today it conducts the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test Undergraduate (NEET-UG), the Joint Entrance Examination Main (JEE Main), the University Grants Commission National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) and the Common University Entrance Test (CUET), touching well over one crore candidates a year on a permanent staff strength that is a rounding error against that number.

PARAMETER	POSITION
Legal form of NTA	Society under the Societies Registration Act, 1860; not a statutory body
Established	2017; examinations conducted from 2018-19
Flagship examinations	NEET-UG, JEE Main, UGC-NET, CUET (UG and PG)
Governing penal law	Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024
Assent and commencement	Assented 12 February 2024; brought into force 21 June 2024
Previous reform panel	Seven-member High-Level Committee under Dr K. Radhakrishnan, constituted 22 June 2024, 101 recommendations
New panel	Six-member task force chaired by Nandan Nilekani, announced 26 July 2026
Ministerial position	Pralhad Joshi given additional charge of Education, took charge 26 July 2026

The 2026 sequence is the immediate trigger, and the dates matter because they show how long the system took to admit what candidates had already worked out.

DATE	EVENT
3 May 2026	NEET-UG conducted for roughly 22.7 lakh candidates
12 May 2026	NTA cancels the examination; the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) takes over the probe
15 May 2026	Retest announced for 21 June 2026
21 June 2026	Retest held under enhanced security; over 2.7 lakh candidates skip it
16 July 2026	Results declared; about 1.1 lakh candidates qualify
20 July 2026	Protest march to Parliament met with tear gas and lathi charge
25 July 2026	Dharmendra Pradhan resigns; the agitation is called off
26 July 2026	Pralhad Joshi takes charge of Education, retaining his existing portfolios; Nilekani task force announced

The single most damning number in that table is not the cancellation. It is the attendance figure: participation in the retest fell to **87.72 per cent from 96.72 per cent** at the original sitting, the second-lowest since 2020. Over 2.7 lakh candidates who had sat the May paper did not return in June. Some had moved on; many simply did not believe the second attempt would be any cleaner than the first. That is what a loss of institutional trust looks like once it is converted into a statistic.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

An agency built for scale, not for security

The NTA's design flaw is that it is an examination **conductor** without being an examination **regulator**. As a society it has no independent statutory **mandate**, no guaranteed budget line, no cadre and no enforcement arm. It therefore outsources the parts of the chain that carry the highest risk: printing, secure transport, custody at centres, biometric verification and, at private centres, invigilation itself. Every outsourced link is a commercial contract, and a commercial contract creates an incentive to minimise cost, not to maximise integrity. The May 2026 leak reportedly involved a circulating "guess paper" whose overlap with the actual paper ran into scores of questions out of 180, distributed through coaching networks and, on the investigating agency's account, monetised through paid coaching sessions where the leaked questions were discussed. That is not an individual act of cheating; it is a supply chain being sold.

The law is stringent, the detection chain is not

The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024 is not a weak statute. It was assented to on 12 February 2024 and brought into force on 21 June 2024.

CATEGORY OF OFFENDER	IMPRISONMENT	FINE
Individual using unfair means	3 to 5 years	Up to Rs 10 lakh
Directors or senior management of a service provider	3 to 10 years	Rs 1 crore
Organised crime by persons or groups	5 to 10 years	Minimum Rs 1 crore

All offences are cognizable, non-bailable and non-compoundable. An institution convicted of organised crime can have its property attached and forfeited, and a proportionate share of examination costs recovered from it. Yet **deterrence** is the probability of detection multiplied by the severity of punishment, and in paper-leak cases the first term is small. Leaks are detected after the fact by candidates, teachers and coaching-market chatter rather than by the system's own controls; in May 2026 it was a teacher who flagged the overlap between the circulating paper and the real one, not the agency. Prosecution then runs through overworked police and courts. An amending Bill proposing harsher sentences was introduced on 27 July 2026 and is listed for debate. It moves the term that is already large and leaves the term that is small untouched.

Note also that the Act contains no statutory saving clause protecting candidates caught in a leak they did not cause. The Government's assurance on withdrawing cases is policy, not a legal defence, and the over-criminalisation of leak-affected students remains unresolved.

The Radhakrishnan Committee already wrote the answer

The seven-member High-Level Committee chaired by Dr K. Radhakrishnan, former Chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and Chairman of the Board of Governors of IIT Kanpur, was constituted on 22 June 2024 and returned **101 recommendations**. Among them: a decisive shift toward computer-based testing to limit the physical handling of question papers; the use of roughly **500 Kendriya Vidyalayas and Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas** as government-run test centres within a year, scaling toward a target of about 1,000 secure centres; expanded biometric authentication and secure-centre infrastructure; a substantial increase in permanent staffing at the NTA, which the committee flagged as relying too heavily on contractual personnel for consistent operational standards; and a reduction in dependence on third-party private service providers and private centres.

Two years later, on 26 July 2026, a fresh six-member task force chaired by Nandan Nilekani, with former ISRO Chairman S. Somanath, former Intelligence Bureau Director Tapan Deka, IIT Madras Director V. Kamakoti, former Education Secretary Anita Karwal and Amrit Lal Meena, was asked to evaluate the entire public examination lifecycle and recommend structural, administrative and technology-driven reform for the NTA, including artificial-intelligence and blockchain-based verification. The strongest indictment of Indian examination governance is that the second committee's terms of reference so closely resemble the first committee's report. A reform recommended twice and implemented once is not a knowledge problem; it is an implementation problem.

The counter-argument, taken honestly

There is a serious case for the resignation, and it deserves to be stated at full strength rather than dismissed. Ministerial responsibility is a genuine constitutional convention, not theatre. A minister who does not resign after a national examination is cancelled signals that no one is answerable, and that signal corrodes institutional trust more than the leak itself does; the 2.7 lakh candidates who did not return for the retest were responding to precisely that perception of **impunity**. Political accountability is also, in practice, often the only force strong enough to unlock money, statutory amendments and sanctioned posts that years of bureaucratic reform notes cannot. On this reading the resignation is not a substitute for reform but its precondition, and the Nilekani task force announced the very next day is the evidence.

That case is fair. It fails only if the resignation is treated as the settlement rather than the down payment. Accountability that ends at the minister's letter and does not reach the vendor contract, the centre superintendent, the private centre owner with coaching-sector interests and the NTA's own staffing table is accountability that has been performed rather than served. The test of 25 July 2026 is not what happened that day; it is whether the 2026 report is implemented where the 2024 report was not.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Carry the **Four Locks of Examination Integrity** into the exam hall. Any question on paper leaks, the NTA or examination reform can be answered by asking which lock broke.

- ❶ **Content lock.** How the paper is created and secured: large randomised and **calibrated** question banks, multi-shift adaptive delivery, encryption at rest and in transit, and the smallest possible number of humans who ever see a whole paper. The May 2026 leak was a content-lock failure at the paper-setting and translation stage.
- ❷ **Logistics lock.** Chain of custody from press to examination hall: government-owned centres, GPS-tracked and time-locked transport, biometric candidate authentication, signal jammers, and vendor contracts that carry integrity penalties rather than only delivery penalties.
- ❸ **Evaluation lock.** What happens after the bell: published answer keys, a transparent and pre-announced normalisation formula, complete audit trails, grievance **redress** with fixed statutory timelines, and independent statistical anomaly detection run on response patterns and score distributions.
- ❹ **Capacity lock.** Who owns the system: statutory status, permanent professional staff, an assured budget, an independent examination ombudsman, and structural separation of the body that conducts the examination from the body that audits it.

The Indian debate obsesses over Lock 1 and Lock 2, which are the visible, dramatic failures, and neglects Lock 3 and Lock 4, which are the boring structural ones. That is precisely why the same crisis recurs.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture a long pipeline running left to right across the page. At the far left sits a small sealed room labelled *paper setting*, with only a handful of people inside. The pipe then widens through *printing, transport, district storage, centre custody* and *examination hall*, before narrowing again into *evaluation, normalisation* and *result*. Now draw the pipe thick where the NTA controls it directly and thin, almost dotted, where a private vendor or a private centre owns the segment. Mark a red cross on every dotted stretch: printing, transport, storage and private-centre invigilation. Below the pipeline, draw a thin horizontal bar labelled *NTA permanent staff*, and note that this bar is almost invisible under a pipeline carrying more than a crore candidates a year. Finally, draw a dotted feedback arrow from *result* back to *paper setting* and label it *audit*, then observe that in the present design this arrow does not exist. The picture makes the argument by itself: the leak does not happen where the state is strong, it happens where the state has contracted itself out, and nothing loops back to catch it.

WAY FORWARD

- **Give the NTA statutory backing.** Convert the society into a statutory authority with a defined mandate, an assured budget, a permanent professional cadre in place of contractual staff, and a governing board whose members are appointed for fixed terms, so that continuity of reform survives ministerial change.
- **Nationalise the high-risk links.** Move examinations decisively into government-owned centres, beginning with the Kendriya Vidyalaya and Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya network as the Radhakrishnan Committee recommended, scale toward the 1,000 secure-centre target, and end the practice of hiring private centres whose owners hold coaching-sector interests.
- **Make computer-based testing genuinely secure.** A computer-based NEET from 2027 helps only if it is paired with large calibrated randomised item banks, item-response-theory-based scoring and an audited digital chain of custody. A badly implemented online examination simply relocates the **vulnerability** from the printing press to the server.
- **Fix detection, not just punishment.** Mandate real-time anomaly analytics on response patterns and score distributions, a protected whistle-blower channel with time-bound action, and a legal duty on the NTA to publicly report every suspected breach within a fixed window, so that the probability of detection rises rather than only the length of the sentence.
- **Protect the candidate caught in the middle.** Amend the 2024 Act to insert an express saving clause distinguishing candidates affected by a leak from those who engineered it, so that relief does not depend on an executive assurance that carries no legal force.
- **Create an independent Examination Ombudsman and close the loop on the task force.** Separate conduct from audit through an external body empowered to inspect centres unannounced, blacklist vendors and order a retest, so that the agency that failed is not the sole judge of whether it

failed. Require the Nilekani task force to report within a stated deadline and the Ministry to table an action-taken statement in Parliament, so that the 2026 report does not repeat the fate of the 2024 report.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly circled this theme without naming it. **GS Paper 2, 2020** asked whether the National Education Policy 2020 conforms to [Sustainable Development Goal 4](#) and how it intends to restructure and reorient the Indian education system. **GS Paper 2, 2015** asked whether the entry of foreign educational institutions would help improve the quality of higher and technical education in India, a question about standards and credibility in exactly this space. **GS Paper 4, 2019** asked what probity in public life means, what the difficulties in practising it are, and how those difficulties can be overcome, which is the ethics half of this editorial. GS Paper 2 has separately probed the accountability of regulatory bodies and the distinction between political and administrative responsibility. The examiner's underlying interest is constant: does the candidate understand that educational outcomes depend on institutional design rather than on policy announcements?

Practice question: “The credibility of a national examination rests on institutional capacity, not on ministerial accountability alone. In the light of the 2026 examination crisis, examine the structural weaknesses of the National Testing Agency and suggest a reform architecture.” (250 words)

Interview angle: If a minister resigns over a paper leak he did not personally cause, has accountability been served or merely performed?

Sources: Business Standard, PIB, PRS Legislative Research

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