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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Move from Testing Memory to Testing Understanding

 HINDUSTAN TIMES

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SOCIAL ISSUES

POLITY

GS2

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If a leaked answer key is worthless against a question that requires applying a concept to a scenario the candidate has never seen, why does India keep designing exams where the answer key is the only thing worth leaking?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A leaked answer key is only as valuable as the exam that made recall the whole game.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Most answers on paper leaks stop at enforcement, tighter security, biometric checks, CBI probes, treating the leak as purely a policing failure. This editorial supplies the harder analytical point examiners reward: assessment design sets the ceiling on what a leak is worth in the first place, and an exam built around recall will always be more leak-prone than one built around application, regardless of how tight the security around it becomes.

GS Paper 2: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Education, Human Resources; Government policies and interventions for development in the education sector, and issues arising out of their design and implementation.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
NEP 2020 competency-based assessment	The National Education Policy 2020's commitment to evaluating understanding and application over rote memorisation	The policy anchor for every assessment-reform question
PARAKH	Performance Assessment, Review and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development; an independent constituent unit of NCERT, established 8 February 2023	Named national body, high Prelims yield
Bloom's Taxonomy (revised, 2001)	Six cognitive levels: Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate, Create, from Anderson and Krathwohl's revision of Bloom's original framework	The standard reference for "lower-order" versus "higher-order" thinking skills
Holistic Progress Card	A NEP 2020 assessment tool covering cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains, developed under PARAKH's framework	Distinguishes NEP-era assessment from a single numerical score
Computer-Based Test (CBT)	An exam format administered on computers rather than paper, reducing physical-paper leak risk	The security-side reform being paired with NEET from the next cycle

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The trigger for renewed attention to assessment design is the **NEET-UG 2026 controversy**. The exam, held on **3 May 2026** for over **2.27 million candidates** seeking undergraduate medical and dental seats, was **cancelled on 12 May 2026** after a CBI-ordered investigation found a pre-circulated guess paper matching a substantial share of the actual question paper. A **re-examination followed on 21 June 2026, results were declared on 16 July 2026**, and Union Education Minister **Dharmendra Pradhan resigned on 25 July 2026** amid the political fallout, with the National Testing Agency announcing NEET's move to a **Computer-Based Test format** from the following cycle to reduce future leak risk.

The columnist, **Sridhar Rajagopalan**, is **co-founder of Educational Initiatives (EI)**, an education-assessment organisation established in 2001 with the explicit aim of moving Indian classroom testing from measuring how much a child has memorised toward measuring how well a child has understood; EI's diagnostic assessment, **ASSET**, was built on that premise.

NEP 2020 commits India's school and higher-education systems to a shift toward **competency-based assessment**, away from rote memorisation, and created **PARAKH**, established as an independent constituent unit of NCERT on **8 February 2023**, as the national body responsible for setting assessment standards, developing holistic progress cards, and guiding school boards toward this design.

THE ANALYSIS

- 1. A leak's value is set by what the exam actually tests.** A leaked answer key against a question that requires applying an unfamiliar concept to a novel scenario is close to useless, since the specific scenario cannot be pre-leaked. A leaked answer key against a question that asks only for a memorised fact or formula is, functionally, the exam itself. This is the editorial's central diagnostic move: the leak problem is downstream of the design problem.
- 2. NEP 2020 already names this as the fix, but implementation has lagged at the high-stakes end.** The policy's competency-based assessment commitment and the creation of **PARAKH** in **2023** show the reform is not hypothetical; it has a body, a **mandate** and a timeline. What has lagged is extending that shift from school-board assessment, where PARAKH's early work is concentrated, to the highest-stakes national entrance exams like NEET and JEE, which remain predominantly recall-and-recognition in format.
- 3. NEET-UG 2026 is the live case that makes the abstract argument concrete.** A single leaked guess paper, matching content from the actual question paper, was enough to force the cancellation of an exam that over **2.27 million** candidates had already sat, trigger a CBI probe, delay results by more than two months, and ultimately cost a sitting Union minister his position. The scale of disruption from one leak is itself evidence of how much a single point of compromise can be worth when the format rewards recall.
- 4. The counter-argument has real force, and scale is the reason why.** Designing, administering and fairly grading application-based questions across **2.27 million** candidates, spanning every state, language and socioeconomic background, is a materially harder problem than grading a recall-based, single-correct-answer format. India's exam infrastructure was built around the latter precisely because it scales; that constraint does not disappear because the design critique is correct.
- 5. Bloom's Taxonomy supplies the vocabulary for what "testing understanding" concretely means.** The distinction between lower-order thinking, remembering and understanding, and higher-order thinking, applying, analysing, evaluating and creating, gives assessment designers a working framework for what a shift away from rote memorisation should look like in practice, rather than leaving "test understanding" as a slogan without a design specification.
- 6. Design reform and security reform are solving different halves of the same problem, not competing for priority.** NEET's move to Computer-Based Testing addresses the physical-leak vector directly and should proceed regardless. But CBT alone does not change what is being tested, only how it is delivered; a leaked digital question bank is still worth everything it always was if the underlying questions remain recall-based.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

NEET-UG 2026: exam held 3 May 2026 (2.27+ million candidates); cancelled 12 May 2026; re-exam 21 June 2026; results 16 July 2026; Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigned 25 July 2026

NEET moving to Computer-Based Test (CBT) format from the next cycle

PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development): independent constituent unit of NCERT, established 8 February 2023, under NEP 2020

Bloom's Taxonomy (revised 2001, Anderson and Krathwohl): Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate, Create

Columnist Sridhar Rajagopalan: co-founder, Educational Initiatives (EI), established 2001; EI's flagship diagnostic is ASSET (Assessment of Scholastic Skills through Educational Testing)

NEP 2020: commits to competency-based assessment over rote memorisation across school and higher education

WATCH THE TRAP: DO NOT WRITE THAT PARAKH CONDUCTS EXAMINATIONS. IT SETS ASSESSMENT STANDARDS, FRAMEWORKS AND GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL BOARDS; IT IS A STANDARD-SETTING BODY, NOT AN EXAMINATION-CONDUCTING ONE, THAT ROLE BELONGS TO BODIES LIKE NTA FOR NATIONAL ENTRANCE TESTS.

THE DEBATE

Argument FOR prioritising assessment redesign. Enforcement measures address one leak at a time; assessment redesign addresses the incentive that makes every future leak worth obtaining. As long as an exam's answer key alone is sufficient to guarantee a top score, someone will pay for that key, and no security regime is airtight against a determined, well-resourced attempt to obtain it, as NEET-UG 2026 demonstrated even under existing safeguards.

Argument AGAINST treating redesign as the near-term priority. Redesigning assessment for application and understanding at the scale of a **2.27-million-candidate** national exam, fairly, quickly and defensibly across every state and language, is a multi-year undertaking with genuine grading and equity challenges. Security and format reforms, including the shift to Computer-Based Testing, are implementable immediately and directly address the specific **vulnerability**, a leaked physical paper, that caused the 2026 crisis.

Balanced verdict. The two tracks operate on different timelines and should both proceed. Security and format reforms are the fast-acting fix for the specific failure mode just exposed; assessment redesign toward competency and application, building on PARAKH's existing NEP 2020 mandate, is the slower-acting fix for the underlying incentive that makes leaks worth attempting again under a different vulnerability next time.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable pattern: **when a system is repeatedly compromised at the same point, ask whether the point of compromise is valuable because of a security gap, a design choice, or both, and do not let a fix for one substitute for the other.**

A high-stakes exam under a recall-based design creates a single, extremely valuable point of failure, the answer key, that draws determined attempts to obtain it regardless of how much security surrounds its custody. Strengthening custody (security reform) reduces the odds of a breach; changing what the key is worth (design reform) reduces the incentive to attempt one. Treating either alone as sufficient misreads the problem.

This same structure recurs in procurement systems, where reducing the discretionary value of a decision matters as much as auditing the officials who make it; in cybersecurity, where reducing what a single compromised credential can access matters alongside strengthening the credential itself; and in electoral administration, where reducing the value of capturing a single counting point matters alongside physically securing that point.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

WHAT A LEAK IS WORTH, BY EXAM DESIGN

RECALL-BASED EXAM

(memorised fact / formula)

|
leaked answer key
|
= THE EXAM ITSELF
(leak fully substitutes
for tested knowledge)
|
HIGH incentive to leak
HIGH value of coaching-
factory rote drilling

APPLICATION-BASED EXAM

(novel scenario, unfamiliar data)

|
leaked answer key
|
= ALMOST WORTHLESS
(specific scenario cannot
be pre-leaked)
|
LOW incentive to leak
LOW value of coaching-
factory rote drilling

TWO SEPARATE FIXES, BOTH NEEDED:

SECURITY / FORMAT REFORM

(Computer-Based Testing,
tighter custody of papers)
|
reduces ODDS of breach
|
fast to implement

DESIGN REFORM

(PARAKH, competency-based
assessment, NEP 2020)
|
reduces VALUE of a breach
|
slow, needs scaling from

school boards to national
entrance exams

TAKEAWAY BOX

Lock the door tighter, and a determined thief still tries the lock. Empty the safe of anything worth stealing, and the door stops mattering as much.

NEET-UG 2026: cancelled **12 May**, re-exam **21 June**, results **16 July**, Minister resigned **25 July**; **PARAKH** established **8 February 2023** under NEP 2020; **Bloom's Taxonomy** (revised 2001): Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate, Create; Sridhar Rajagopalan, co-founder, **Educational Initiatives**.

if an assessment system has for decades rewarded memorisation because it is cheaper and easier to grade fairly at scale, does the state owe students an exam that measures genuine understanding even if it costs more and takes longer to build, or is scalable fairness itself the higher-order ethical obligation?

UPSC has repeatedly tested NEP 2020's assessment reforms and examination-integrity issues under GS2; this editorial connects the policy framework, **PARAKH** and **Bloom's Taxonomy**, to the live NEET-UG 2026 case.

"Recurring paper leaks in Indian competitive examinations are as much a failure of assessment design as of enforcement." Critically examine with reference to NEP 2020's competency-based assessment reforms.

Sources: *Hindustan Times*, NCERT / **PARAKH**, PIB

Source: Move from Testing Memory to Testing Understanding — Ujjyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Hindustan Times columnist Sridhar Rajagopalan, co-founder of the assessment-design organisation Educational Initiatives, argues that India's recurring paper-leak crises, most visibly the NEET-UG 2026 controversy, are not purely a policing or security failure; they are a predictable consequence of an assessment system that has for decades rewarded rote memorisation over genuine understanding, and the durable fix lies in redesigning what exams actually test, not only in tightening how they are administered.



SUPPORTING

- A leaked answer key has value strictly in proportion to how much an exam rewards recall. Where a question asks a candidate to apply an unfamiliar concept to a novel scenario, a leaked answer to a different, previously seen question is close to worthless; where a question asks only for recalled fact or a memorised formula, a leaked answer key is the exam. Assessment design, not enforcement alone, sets the ceiling on how much a leak is worth.
- NEP 2020 explicitly commits to moving school and higher-education assessment away from rote memorisation toward competency-based evaluation of understanding, application and higher-order thinking, and created PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development), established as an independent constituent unit of NCERT on 8 February 2023, as the national body tasked with setting assessment standards and guiding school boards toward this shift.
- The NEET-UG 2026 crisis illustrates the stakes concretely: the exam held on 3 May 2026 for over 2.27 million candidates was cancelled on 12 May 2026 after a CBI probe was ordered into a leaked guess paper matching content in the actual question paper; a re-examination followed on 21 June 2026, results were declared on 16 July 2026, and Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigned on 25 July 2026 amid the fallout, with NTA now moving NEET toward a Computer-Based Test format from the following cycle specifically to reduce leak risk.



COUNTER

Application-based and understanding-based assessment is genuinely harder, slower and costlier to design, administer and grade fairly than recall-based testing, and India's exam volumes make that gap consequential rather than academic: NEET-UG alone tested over 2.27 million candidates in a single sitting. Objective, machine-gradable recall questions can be scored quickly, cheaply and with minimal room for grader bias or dispute, properties that matter enormously when an exam's legitimacy depends on being seen as fair across every state, language and socioeconomic background simultaneously.

 WAY FORWARD

Do not treat design reform and enforcement reform as substitutes; both are needed and they solve different problems. Scale PARAKH's competency-based assessment framework and holistic progress cards from school-board assessment, where NEP 2020 has already begun the shift, toward high-stakes national entrance examinations, starting with pilot sections of application-based questions within existing exams like NEET and JEE rather than a full redesign overnight. Invest specifically in scalable methods for grading application-type responses, including structured multiple-choice formats that test application rather than recall, since the false choice between "objective and cheap" and "meaningful and fair" is often a design problem, not a fixed trade-off. And continue strengthening the security and format reforms already underway, including the move to Computer-Based Testing, as the necessary complement while assessment redesign proceeds.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Recurring examination paper leaks in India are as much a failure of assessment design as of enforcement. Discuss with reference to the shift envisaged under NEP 2020 from testing memory to testing understanding. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

India's recurring examination paper-leak crises, most recently the NEET-UG 2026 controversy that led to a cancelled exam, a CBI probe, a re-conducted test and the resignation of the Union Education Minister, are usually diagnosed as failures of security and enforcement. A less examined but arguably more fundamental cause is assessment design itself: an exam that tests only recalled fact gives a leaked answer key its full value, while an exam that tests application and understanding of unfamiliar material gives it very little.

BODY

NEP 2020 explicitly recognised this problem, committing to move Indian assessment away from rote memorisation toward competency-based evaluation of understanding, analysis and application, in line with the higher-order thinking skills described in Bloom's Taxonomy, the standard cognitive-levels framework running from Remember and Understand through Apply, Analyze, Evaluate and Create. To operationalise this shift, the government established PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development) as an independent constituent unit of NCERT on 8 February 2023, tasked with setting national assessment standards, developing competency-based frameworks and holistic progress cards, and advising school boards on redesigning how they test students.

The NEET-UG 2026 episode shows why this matters beyond the classroom: the exam, held on 3 May 2026 for over 2.27 million candidates, was cancelled on 12 May 2026 after a CBI-ordered probe found a leaked guess paper matching the actual question paper, forcing a re-examination on 21 June 2026 and results only on 16 July 2026, with the Union Education Minister resigning on 25 July 2026 amid the political fallout. A recall-heavy, single-correct-answer format of the kind still used in most large-scale Indian entrance exams is precisely the format in which a leaked paper carries maximum value, since the leak substitutes directly for the knowledge being tested.

CONCLUSION

The balanced position treats design reform and enforcement reform as complements, not alternatives. Enforcement measures, including NEET's planned move to Computer-Based Testing, address the immediate integrity crisis and must continue.

But PARAKH's mandate to shift assessment toward competency and application, if extended from school boards to high-stakes national entrance exams, addresses the underlying incentive: an exam that rewards understanding over recall is one where the next leaked paper is worth far less to whoever obtains it.

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