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High-Powered Task Force on Public Examination Reform Invites Public Suggestions

29 August 2026 ·

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High-Powered Task Force on Public Examination Reform Invites Public Suggestions

29 August 2026 · 8 min read ·

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*The Department of Personnel and Training announced on August 28, 2026 that the **High-Powered Task Force (HPTF)** chaired by **Nandan Nilekani**, constituted to recommend reforms in the conduct, security, design and governance of public examinations, including those conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA), has invited suggestions from the public.*

THE MANDATE

The Task Force has been asked to examine six heads:

HEAD	SCOPE
Institutional systems and processes	How examination bodies are structured and how decisions are taken
Examination integrity and security	Question-paper security, custody chains, malpractice prevention
Technology deployment	Computer-based testing, biometric verification, digital custody
Examination infrastructure	Centres, capacity, invigilation, geographic distribution
Accessibility and inclusion	Candidates with disabilities, language, distance, cost
Student well-being	The psychological and financial burden the system imposes

Consultation is unusually wide. Suggestions have been invited from students and candidates, parents, teachers and institutions, examination-conducting and test-indenting bodies, subject and technology experts, industry, civil society and other stakeholders, across four themes: **conduct and security**, **assessment methodology**, **governance and accountability**, and **prevention of malpractice**. **Submissions close on 13 September 2026**, through the portal **examreforms-taskforce.dopt.gov.in**, the toll-free line **1800-180-4747**, WhatsApp (send “hptf” to +91 78270 42830), or **ExamReformsTaskforce@dopt.gov.in**.

The inclusion of **student well-being** as a distinct head, alongside the expected security and technology heads, is the most notable feature of the terms of reference. It treats candidate burden as a design problem rather than as an unavoidable by-product of competition.

WHY THIS WAS CONSTITUTED

The immediate context is a sustained crisis of confidence in high-stakes examinations, driven by paper leaks, cancelled and re-conducted examinations, and question-paper security failures in national-level tests. Youth protests centred on examinations, paper leaks, jobs and accountability were serious enough to shape national political debate.

The institutional context is the National Testing Agency. The NTA was **established in 2017** as an **autonomous body under the Ministry of Education**, on the logic that examination conduct is a specialised technical function that should be separated from the bodies that set curricula and award degrees. It conducts several of India's largest and highest-stakes examinations.

That design has a structural weakness that this Task Force exists to address. **An autonomous testing agency concentrates enormous consequence in a body with limited external accountability.** When an examination fails, the candidate has no **statutory** grievance forum, no appellate authority and, in practice, no remedy other than litigation or a re-test the agency itself decides to hold.

The legislative context is the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, which criminalised organised paper-leak activity. For **organised crime** the Act prescribes imprisonment of **not less than five years, extending to ten years**, and a fine of **not less than one crore rupees**; the one crore figure is a statutory **minimum, not a maximum**. For a person or group using unfair means, the penalty is **three to five years and a fine up to ten lakh rupees**. All offences are **cognizable, non-bailable and non-compoundable**.

The precedent context is that this is the second such exercise. A **high-level committee chaired by K. Radhakrishnan**, former Chairman of ISRO, had earlier been constituted to recommend reform of examination processes, transparency and data security at the NTA. A second body being appointed indicates that the first round of reform was judged insufficient.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The most important observation is about the direction of the 2024 Act, and it is easy to miss.

The Act penalises those who leak, cheat or organise malpractice. It creates **no corresponding accountability for the institution that allowed the leak**. The **asymmetry** is exact: a person using unfair means faces three to five years, and an organised leak ring faces five to ten years and a minimum one crore rupee fine, while an agency whose custody chain fails faces a re-test.

This matters because paper leaks are, in the overwhelming majority of documented cases, **failures of custody rather than of candidates**. Papers leak from printing presses, transport, storage and centres, which are all points the agency controls and the candidate does not. **A deterrence regime aimed only at the demand side of a supply failure will underperform**, which is why the Task Force's inclusion of *governance and accountability* as a consultation theme is the substantively important part of its mandate.

On technology, the answer is genuinely double-edged. Computer-based testing eliminates the physical question paper, which is the object that leaks, and this is a real gain. But it substitutes a different *vulnerability* set: server compromise, remote access by proxies, centre-level collusion, and the exclusion of candidates without reliable connectivity or digital familiarity. It also concentrates capacity in urban centres with adequate infrastructure, which cuts directly against the accessibility head. **Technology relocates the point of failure; it does not remove it.**

On accessibility and cost, the burden is rarely quantified. A candidate allotted a centre several hundred kilometres away bears travel, accommodation and lost income, and bears them again when an examination is cancelled and re-conducted. That cost falls hardest on precisely the candidates for whom a competitive examination is the principal route to mobility. Centre allocation is therefore not a logistics question but a *distributive* one.

On student well-being, the underlying problem is not examination design at all. It is the ratio of candidates to positions. Reform can make a queue fairer, faster and less traumatic. It cannot make the queue shorter. Honest analysis should hold both propositions at once: examination governance genuinely needs fixing, and fixing it will not resolve the employment problem that gives these examinations their intensity.

On the composition, one observation. The choice of **Nandan Nilekani**, co-founder of Infosys and founding Chairman of the **Unique Identification Authority of India**, signals an expectation that the answer is substantially architectural and digital, drawing on the identity and digital public infrastructure model. That is a plausible bet, given that the examination problem is fundamentally one of verifying identity and securing custody at very large scale. The corresponding risk is that a governance problem gets treated as a technology problem.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2: Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation; statutory, regulatory and various quasi-judicial bodies; transparency and accountability; issues relating to development and management of the social sector relating to education.

GS Paper 4: Institutional integrity; accountability and ethical governance; the ethics of examination and selection.

Prelims angle: the NTA's establishment year and parent ministry, the penalties under the 2024 Act, the earlier Radhakrishnan committee, and Nilekani's UIDAI association are all directly examinable.

Mains angle: “*India’s examination law penalises the cheater and exempts the custodian.*” Build the answer around the asymmetry between candidate liability and institutional accountability, and argue that a statutory grievance and appellate mechanism is the missing piece.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

THE TASK FORCE:

High-Powered Task Force (HPTF), chaired by Nandan Nilekani, announcement of public consultation on August 28, 2026, by the Department of Personnel and Training.

Mandate: reform of the conduct, security, design and governance of public examinations, including those conducted by the NTA.

Six heads: institutional systems and processes; examination integrity and security; technology deployment; examination infrastructure; accessibility and inclusion; student well-being.

Consultation themes: conduct and security; assessment methodology; governance and accountability; prevention of malpractice.

Nandan Nilekani: co-founder of Infosys; founding Chairman of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI).

THE NATIONAL TESTING AGENCY:

Established 2017 as an autonomous body under the Ministry of Education.

Registered under the Societies Registration Act; not a statutory body.

Created to separate examination conduct from curriculum-setting and degree-awarding bodies.

THE PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS (PREVENTION OF UNFAIR MEANS) ACT, 2024:

Targets organised paper-leak crime and examination malpractice.

Organised crime: imprisonment of not less than five years, extending to ten years, and a fine of not less than one crore rupees. The one crore is a minimum, not a cap. Institutions found guilty face attachment and forfeiture of property and recovery of a proportionate cost of the examination.

Unfair means by a person or group: three to five years and a fine up to ten lakh rupees.

Offences are cognizable, non-bailable and non-compoundable.

Applies to examinations conducted by specified central bodies, including the UPSC, SSC, RRB, IBPS and the NTA.

Candidates are not the target of the harshest provisions; organised gangs and service providers are.

EARLIER REFORM EFFORT:

A high-level committee chaired by K. Radhakrishnan, former Chairman of ISRO, was constituted to recommend reform of examination processes, transparency and data security at the NTA.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY HOOKS:

Article 14: equality before the law, the basis of fair and non-arbitrary selection.

Article 16: equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.

Article 21A: right to education for children aged 6 to 14, inserted by the 86th Amendment, 2002.

National Education Policy, 2020: recommended reform of assessment towards competency-based testing, and proposed the National Assessment Centre, PARAKH.

UPSC is a constitutional body under Article 315; the SSC and the NTA are not. This distinction is frequently tested.

WATCH THE TRAP:

The NTA is an autonomous society, not a statutory or constitutional body. UPSC is constitutional (Article 315).

The 2024 Act does not criminalise the ordinary candidate for the offences carrying the heaviest penalties; it targets organised malpractice.

The one crore rupee fine is a statutory floor for organised crime, not a ceiling. Writing it as a maximum inverts the provision.

This Task Force is chaired by Nandan Nilekani; the earlier NTA reform committee was chaired by K. Radhakrishnan. Two different bodies and two different chairs.

PARAKH is the assessment centre proposed under NEP 2020, distinct from the NTA.

Sources: PIB, Department of Personnel and Training, Ministry of Education

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