Ethical Issues Related to Repeated Exam Controversies

Mains: *GS-IV – Ethics*

Why in News?

Repeated exam controversies like the NEET paper leak and CBSE evaluation lapses have eroded Gen Z's trust in governance, raising urgent ethical questions about fairness, empathy, and accountability in India's civil services.

What is the core issue?

- **Examination Controversies & Broken Trust** – The examination-related controversies like NEET paper leak, CBSE evaluation errors have shaken the confidence of millions of students and their families.
- For young people, especially Gen Z, examinations represent years of hard work, sacrifice, and hope; when their credibility is questioned, trust itself suffers.
- **Trust as Invisible Capital** – In public administration, trust is the invisible capital that binds citizens to institutions; without it, governance loses legitimacy.
- **Youth & the Social Contract** – India's youth are expected to carry forward the nation's development, yet repeated governance failures have left many questioning whether the system can uphold its side of the social contract.
- **Anxiety Beyond Performance** – Many students and parents now approach crucial examinations with anxiety that goes beyond performance & their concern is whether the system itself can be trusted.
- **Key Questions Raised** – Can institutions be depended upon to protect the aspirations invested in them? Can citizens rely on public authorities to act fairly, competently, and consistently?

Comparative Highlights

Issue	Impact on Gen Z	Ethical Concern
NEET Paper Leak	Loss of confidence, student distress, even suicides	Integrity & fairness
CBSE Evaluation Errors	mismatched answer sheets, reduced pass rates	Transparency & competence
Civil Services Governance	Perception of systemic failure	Empathy & accountability

What are the key ethical challenges that arise?

- **Fairness & Procedural Integrity –** Exam controversies have raised concerns about

merit, equal opportunity, and the credibility of public institutions.

- **Deficit of Empathy in Governance** – The image of an 8-year-old girl running to save her books from bulldozers became a reminder that development and enforcement actions are often judged by how they affect the most vulnerable.
- **Failures in Public Safety & Crisis Response** – From fires to collapsing infrastructure, crises reveal a disconnect between rules on paper and actual implementation.
- Despite safety protocols, authorities often fail to respond with competence or urgency.
- **Weak Accountability Mechanisms** – In many cases, responsibility becomes diffused after a crisis, leaving citizens uncertain whether meaningful corrective action has been taken.
- **Erosion of Trust** – Viewed individually, these incidents may appear unrelated.
- Viewed together, they point to a common problem – the gradual erosion of public trust.

What are the key ethical questions raised?

- **Integrity & Fairness** – Exam controversies raise questions not merely about compliance with rules but about the values underlying governance about merit, equal opportunity, and institutional credibility.
- The ethical question is: Are rules applied honestly and fairly to everyone?
- **Accountability & Responsibility** – The rises test whether public servants act with competence and accountability.
- The question becomes: Do institutions take responsibility, or do they diffuse blame after failures?
- **Responsiveness & Compassion** – The governance is judged not only by efficiency but by empathy for the vulnerable.
- The ethical challenge is: Do policies and enforcement actions protect those most at risk, or do they overlook human dignity?
- **Trust as Public Capital** – In a democracy, trust is among the most valuable forms of public capital; citizens routinely place their faith in institutions they cannot directly control.
- The ethical issue is: Can citizens rely on authorities to act in their interest, even when they cannot directly oversee decisions?
- **Fiduciary Duty of Public Service** – Citizens trust civil servants to act in public interest; such trust creates what ethicists call a *fiduciary relationship*, one in which authority is exercised as a sacred responsibility, not for personal benefit.
- The ethical question is: Do public officials honour this sacred trust with integrity and impartiality?
- **Procedural Justice** – Citizens may scrutinise governments, question policies, and vote out elected representatives, but they cannot oversee every administrative decision.
- Citizens value not just outcomes but transparent and impartial processes.
- The ethical dilemma is: Are procedures fair, consistent, and explainable, or do they erode confidence in institutions?
- **Impact on Youth & Legitimacy** – For Gen Z, exam controversies are about more than papers — they touch on fairness, equal opportunity, and belief in meritocracy.
- The ethical concern is: When trust weakens, does institutional legitimacy begin to crumble?

How can trust be restored?

- **Restore Moral Sensitivity** – The system must recognise that governance failures have consequences that extend far beyond official reports and statistics.
- A paper leak is not merely a procedural lapse; it is a betrayal of the faith and fairness.
- A preventable accident is a breach of trust; Empathy and compassion are essential, not optional, in ethical governance.
- **Strengthen Accountability** – Citizens must see that mistakes are acknowledged honestly, responsibility is fixed, and corrective measures are implemented.
- Trust is rebuilt through visible action and consistent conduct, not mere assurances.
- **Promote Ethical Leadership** – Ethical philosopher James Rest argued that moral action begins with:
    - Moral Sensitivity → Moral Judgment → Ethical Intent → Ethical Action.
- Institutions, like individuals, must place public interest above convenience, integrity above expediency, and fairness above favouritism.
- **Build Citizen-Centric Institutions** – Public institutions must become more transparent, responsive, and accessible.
- Fair processes matter as much as outcomes; Citizens trust institutions when they feel heard, respected, and treated fairly.
- **Reaffirm Public Service Values** – Integrity, impartiality, accountability, compassion, and dedication to public service must become visible in day-to-day governance.
- Trust is built not through declarations but through consistent conduct.

What is the conclusion?

- India's development story will ultimately be judged not only by what it builds, but by the trust it inspires.
- If institutions can recover their moral sensitivity and reaffirm their commitment to ethical governance, trust may yet be restored.
- Only then will governance truly reflect the hopes of India's youth; Only then will the story of India's rise genuinely belong to its people.

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Reference

Indian Express | How can India's civil services and governance rebuild Gen Z's trust?

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