NTA's NEET Examination Paper Leak Controversy

***Mains**: GS-II – Polity & Governance | Education*

Why in News?

Nearly 22 lakh medical aspirants wrote the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), the NTA stated that the exam had been 'compromised,' and that there would be a re-test.

What about the National Testing Agency (NTA)?

- **NTA** – It was created as India's premier autonomous body *to conduct entrance examinations* with efficiency, transparency, and "error-free delivery."
- **Constitution** – It was constituted in November 2017, operational on September 5, 2018, with a mandate of streamlining and standardising India's national entrance examinations.
- **Modelled on** – United States' Educational Testing Service (ETS).
- **Mission** – To match international testing standards while ensuring fairness in admissions and fellowships.
- **Nodal Ministry** – Under the Department of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education
- **Focus Areas** – Test preparation, Test delivery & Test marking.
- **Growth & Scale** – In 2018–19, the agency conducted 23 examinations for some 69 lakh registered candidates.
- By 2023, it expanded to 66 exams covering more than 1.33 crore registrations, making it the world's second-largest testing body.
- **Functions**
    - **Partner Institutions** – To identify schools/universities with infrastructure for online/offline exams without adversely impacting their academic routine.
    - **Question Bank Creation** – To create a question bank for all subjects using modern techniques.
    - **R&D Culture** – To establish a strong R&D culture as well as a pool of experts in different aspects of testing.

What are the key failures of NTA?

- **NEET 2026 leak** – A handwritten "guess paper" matched nearly all Biology and Chemistry questions of the actual NEET paper, sold for Rs. 5 lakh per copy.
- **Failure of "Zero Error" policy** – The NTA's *"Zero Error, Zero Tolerance" policy* failed because, despite extensive safeguards—GPS vehicles, CCTV, biometric checks - a leaks was happened for 2026.

- **NEET 2024 scandal** – Paper opened at Oasis School in Hazaribagh; circulated for Rs. 30–50 lakh; 67 perfect scores, many inflated by "grace marks"; later, the Supreme Court was compelled to intervene.
- **UGC-NET 2024 darknet leak** – Cancelled within 24 hours after it had been conducted; multiple exams postponed in the same fortnight.
- **JEE Main 2021 hack** – A Russian hacker hacked the iLeon platform used for the test, enabling about 820 candidates to receive Rs. 12 to Rs. 15 lakh each.
- **CUET 2022 collapse** – Technical/logistical failures; wrong subject papers displayed at centres.

What are the key challenges in implementation?

- **Implementation Delays** – In 2024, the NTA floated a tender to increase its capacity of computer labs, but the process could not be finalised.
- Since the Radhakrishnan Committee report came out in 2024, the NTA has not been able to augment its infrastructure to add more centres.
- **Infrastructure Gaps** – NTA has the capacity to conduct CBT tests for only about 1.5 lakh students in a day; we have only 552 CBT centres that exist, mostly used for JEE and CUET.
- **Ministry-level Coordination** – The shifting of NEET to CBT mode is a 'high-level ministry call' involving both the Ministries of Health and Education.
- Multiple proposals to administer NEET-UG exams online were sent to the Ministry of Education, but in vain.
- **Monopoly of Responsibility** – Concentrating responsibility for over a crore aspirants annually in one agency, under one ministerial chain of command, creates the very single point of failure the country has now witnessed twice.
- **Aspirants' Struggles** – For nearly nine years, medical and engineering aspirants have depended on the NTA.
- Most come from middle-class and first-generation backgrounds and have placed their futures in the hands of an agency that has, with regularity, dropped them.
- **State's Responsibility** – Aspirants have suffered re-examinations, postponements, leaked papers and the slow demoralisation of repeated betrayals.
- They are too young to vote, the State has obligations to protect their trust and ensure fairness.

What are the key recommendations of the Radhakrishnan panel?

- **About the Panel** – Following the NEET-UG 2024 controversy, the *Ministry of Education* formed a *high-level committee* headed by former ISRO chairman K. Radhakrishnan.
- However, the committee's recommendations were not followed in letter and spirit by either the NTA or the Ministry.
- **Shift to Computer-Based Testing (CBT) format** – Recommended a transition to CBT format from a Pen-and-paper testing (PPT) model similar to the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) Main.
- It will be conducted in phases and with explicit safeguards for rural candidates and regional-language requirements.

- **Computer-assisted Secure PPT** – The encrypted papers are delivered digitally to exam centres and printed locally just before the test.
- This eliminates the vulnerable printing-and-transit leg; NTA has made no claim of implementing it, choosing instead to rely on GPS vehicles and police escorts.
- **Infrastructure Expansion** – The shift to CBT requires scaling infrastructure beyond the current 552 centres.
- Needs for the upgradation of digital infrastructure at Kendriya and Navodaya Vidyalayas to function as secure testing centres.
- **Federated Model Suggestion** – States regain their role in admissions to medical and engineering institutions.
- Multiple accredited testing bodies share national responsibility.
- A common eligibility threshold replaces one high-stakes exam.
- This approach would distribute risk and align with cooperative federalism envisioned by the Constitution.
- **Restoration of Accountability** – The officials responsible for the 2024 lapses must face consequences that are visible and credible, not the quiet transfers that have become routine.
- **Auditing Testing Agency** – An independent statutory regulator, with parliamentary and judicial oversight, must be created to audit testing agencies.
- The practice of permitting an agency to investigate itself must be clearly ended.

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References

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