

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 leak 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.

To know about **India's Education Governance**, click [here](#)

References

1. [The Hindu | Why did NTA's 'Zero Error' policy fail?](#)
2. [The Hindu | NTA an agency in need of a thorough examination](#)
3. [NTA | National Testing Agency](#)

