DECRYPTING THE ENCRYPTED; UNRAVELLING PAPER LEAKS AND ELUSIVE ACCOUNTABILITY IN INDIA

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INTODUCTION

Competitive examinations are not just the means of achieving academic admissions but they hold weight of the future of lakhs of applicants who walk into examination halls carrying dreams and hopes in their eyes that holds the competence to revolutionize their present. After every few years the dream is snatched from their hands, the mere reason being someone else's greed. The system keeps on failing to put an end to this scandal and the day is stolen even before it begins. The repeated cycle of paper leaks emerging from allegations, arrests and eventually political blames continues to recur for decades. It is incisively due to unceasing advancements of scandals that a decision strengthening India's democracy has been commenced. The resignation of India's union education minister signalled government's accountability averring unmistakable indication of the matter being treated with the gravity it had long demanded.

A paramount step was commenced by the Union Government in 2017 by instituting the establishment of NTA (National Testing Agency) as a Society under Indian Societies Registration Act 1860 to allay CBSE, AICTE and other alike agencies from responsibility of conducting entrance examinations[1]. The aim for such decision was to bring in high reliability, standardized difficulty level for assessing the aptitude, intelligence and problem-solving abilities of students[2]. Despite a proper separate entity dedicated only to entrance examinations, incidents of paper leak still emerge with numbing regularity.

The recent NEET-UG 2026 controversy is just one of the many chapters this country has witnessed too many times before. For the protection of integrity of entrance examinations, Governments have devised legislative changes[3] that introduced technological interventions including computer-based testing, biometric verification, AI-assisted monitoring, encrypted transmission in some examinations and initiated formation of

specialised investigative agencies including Special Investigation Teams (SITs), Special Task Forces (STFs). Regardless of these hopeful credible amends, the official data of number of examination leaks is immensely startling and the wave does not limit to mere entrance exams but also encompasses school level examinations. According to the reports 89 cases have been delineated in media reports covering the span of last 10 years impacting total 6.5 crore candidates[4] and at least 64 major examination leaks impacting 19 states since 2019[5]. Years and years of dreams of thousands is stripped away derailing the future of an entire generation by alarming frequency. A script now familiar to everyone follows itself in cycles: panic among aspirants, petitions in court, a hurried cancellation of results and an assurance of a re-test promising to restore fairness until another deleterious news finds its existence up the surface. In the wake of heightened acknowledgement of these facts, a series of sweeping amends have been proposed each bearing testimony to consensus that education is too consequential a matter to be governed by understated reckonings.

ASSESSING LEGISLATIVE MANDATES

India's legislation finally showed some retaliation to the periodical epidemic of examination leaks by passing the country's first dedicated legislation said to be Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act in February 2024. The said Act casts a wide net encompassing public examinations conducted by central agencies such as the NTA, UPSC, SSC, RRB, and IBPS thereby criminalising an expansive range of demeanour. Crucial to highlight the fact that most offences under the Act are codified as cognisable, non-bailable and non-compoundable. The Act criminalises the leakage of question papers or answer keys, unauthorised access to examination material, tampering with the computer networks and servers on which digital exams increasingly rely, impersonation of genuine candidates, the circulation of solved papers and the staging of entirely fake examinations or the issuance of fraudulent admit cards and appointment letters[6]. Albeit it is rare that the central act professes in isolation. The illicit act is habitually layered with the provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Information Technology Act[7] and at times with the anti-cheating legislation of the constituent state's enactments like Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Bihar, Haryana, Odisha and so on[8].

The weight of sustained public outrage exerted government to treat the operative crisis with a more compelling force. On July 27, 2026, the government introduced the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill in the Lok Sabha to strengthen the 2024 Act via initiation of the Special Task Forces, dedicated Fast-Track Courts, time-bound investigations and trials and considerably harsher penalties[9]. Set against the sheer volume of cases that have persisted to exist despite the statutes proceeding it, the new amendment bill now bears the burden of executing the vow its predecessors have from time and again failed to deliver. Where the existing law penalised offenders for imprisonment ranging from three to five years and a fine up to ten lakh rupees, the amendment proposes raising the minimum term of punishment to five years - and the maximum to ten years while increasing the ceiling on fines up to fifty lakh rupees. The period of debarment for service providers found complicit in unfair means has likewise been extended from four to eight years along with fine heightened from one crore to five crore[10]. Among the attributes most deserving of the adulation is the recital of the intent to bolster the framework of justice by ensuring that delinquents witness the consequences within a time frame that equalises the gravity of their crime. The bill instigates a mandate whereby investigation of an offence be deduced within two months, a stipulation equated by provision for speedy adjudication through Special Fast Track Courts, appointment of Special Public Prosecutors and time-bound disposal of appeals. This serves as a legislative response that government has mirrored as indispensable to reinforce the subsisting framework in light of the scandals that have plagued the education system to its core. This legislative overhaul transpired in proximity with two other remarkable escalations: the Union Education Minister's resignation on 25 July, 2026[11] as an acceptance of accountability and the National Testing Agency's dismissal of 47 officials[12] as part of restructuring of its internal processes to negate the inadequacy unveiled.

Unlike any scandal before it, the NEET-UG 2026 crisis set in motion a chain of consequential events that the education system of this country has never witnessed before. Unlike previous cycles of outrage that repeats itself with no tangible transmutation, the present instant driven by sustained protest of students has yielded a rare narrative encompassing political, administrative and structural amends where resignation of the top hierarchical position, mass termination of the agency officials and assured architectural change has been endorsed. It is precisely this convergence that lends the occasion its

import as no prior leak in twenty-one years record has engendered this historical revamp. Though a dramatic gesture must not be mistaken for a durable fix, for the reason to hold this scepticism firm is drawn from agency's own history. This is not the NTA's first reform promise. Even in 2024, director general of NTA was removed from the position owing to the irregularities of NEET[13] and as a response the Public Examinations Act 2024 was enacted. Yet as the plain events of 2026 elucidate, neither reform proved to be ample to curb the crisis. This is the crucial, sobering fact that the citizens should reckon with that an experiment of analogous nature has already been experienced. An expert committee was convened, reforms were accepted, a director general was removed and the Supreme Court was satisfied enough to close its file but still history repeated itself. Commendable as the portrayal of accountability is through the resignation and mass termination, the substance for now remains unproven. Unless the restructuring offered embraces enforceable, externally audited protocols, the chain of liability will exist as a personnel turnover rather than a genuine reform. A scandal which that was alive by exploiting human links in the chain does not fancy a different set of humans rather it needs the very chain to be re-engineered so as to not be compromised furthermore.

THE HIGH VOLUME OF EGREGIOUS MATTERS

For all the apparent rigour of this legal framework, it's execution depicts strickling congruous and bothersome asymmetry. Deducing from the historical exhibitions of the akin kind, the force of the law is almost felt exclusively by the ones who endure at the lower level of the racket's hierarchy while the upper echelons remain mysteriously insulated. One might assert that exam leaks are an occasional aberration postulating it as an isolated blemish of one or maybe two scandals in an otherwise well responsible and functioning system. Yet an intimate reckoning reveals a catalogue that is far more extensive than such a prevailed assumption where the subsistence of the leaks' list extends well beyond what a common perception would suggest.

The most chilling illustration of this paradigm is the Vyapam Scam in Madhya Pradesh, exposed by a PIL filed in Madhya Pradesh High Court, which took its course from 2008 to 2013[14]. Regarded as one of the gigantic admission and recruitment scams in India, it involved subornment by at least 1,087 conniving candidates for the procurement of higher ranks in entrances supervised by The Madhya Pradesh Professional Board (MPPEB).

Allegedly the scam extended beyond the commoner including the higher echelons of state power - the since convicted then Education Minister, Laxmikant Sharma as well as former Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan and members of his family and other members linked to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)[15]. Vypam scam unearthed India's consequential legislative and institutional failures. The point of time when this apparently perpetual scam existed, investigators were bound to confide on Indian Penal Code, 1860[16].

Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988[17] and Madhya Pradesh recognised Examination Act, 1937[18] whereby there was no dedicated law criminalizing paper leaks, impersonation or organized exam fraud. It stands as a big rationale that scam operated for almost two decades before it was seriously investigated by officials responsible. For a good measure approximately 40 incidents of unnatural death occurred credited to road accidents, suicides and suspicious findings like poisoning of people[19] linked to the scam and the sheer volume of these unnatural deaths invites scrutiny. Yet owing to absence of evidence of homicide, each case was dismissed as deemed to be unrelated to the scam. It was the year 2024 that India passed a dedicated national law known as Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024 to criminalise the paper leaks, cheating gangs, and malpractice in public examinations to undo the legal failure of the legislature.

It is an important contention to note that Vyapam by no means is an isolated data rather it is merely a famed entry in a far longer ledger. The School Service Commission scandal of 2016 in West Bengal reframed itself into a source of the scandal. The very authority that was tasked with detecting irregularities was the one responsible for manufacturing them inflating the marks of unqualified candidates in exchange for bribes[20]. Besides the obvious corruption, the administrative failure points to an absence of an independent audit mechanism. The legislative gap is equally stark where recruitment bodies like WBSSC have limited to no accountability to an external agency. Reportedly the scandal reached a sitting Minister of State for Education whose own family aided from the scam[21]. It exposes the deepest structural flow now common to analogous cases where a political executive powered to oversee an examination body ends up impacting himself. An akin case to NEET- UG 2026 transpired in 2021 in Karnataka Police SI Recruitment[22] where administrative and security failure led to question paper leak exposing the procedural flaws of the department. The stated case marks as a quintessential illustration of many pre-2024 cases precluding the scandals were approached largely as a criminal conspiracy and

forgery in absence of now indelible anti paper leak statute. That very year the state of Haryana too found induced itself into this sombre lineage. The tampering of the OMR sheets loomed up thereby unveiling 3.6 crore cash from the state's own Deputy Secretary[23]- a revelation now not so uncommon that bares the mark of administrative frailty.

Should one be of the presumption that the enactment of the 2024 Act ushered in a decisive restructuring, the record that follows since compels its expeditious confutation. The Uttarakhand Subordinate Services Selection Commission was forced to cancel its September 2025 graduate-level examination after an inquiry confirmed that the screenshots of the question paper have been circulated on social media during the test[24]. This was a breach that occurred not in a printing press or transport vehicle but in real time within the examination window itself. It is of paramount significance to acknowledge that this affliction fails to confine to the rarefied tier of national examinations and even the routine annually conducted examinations have fallen to the prey of such irregularities- a fact ought to be exorbitantly troublesome to the nation. Assam's state school education board annulled the papers of HS first year examinations in march 2025 after confirmed news of leaks[25]. It marks a departure from the national level scandals as the demonstration of the crisis is not just confined to high-stakes national level examinations but has infiltrated the machinery of schooling as well.

Regrettably the catalogue shows more than enough cases and continues its existence case after case, year after year. Nor does the liability end with any single regime, for this ordeal transcends the bounds of politics implicating the institutional architecture of the state itself.

There is no mention of official data of number of question paper leaks as no government has ever maintained or published a consolidated data[26]. Be that as it may an organisation has published a comprehensive dataset. The study documented 220 incidents of exam fraud across 21 states between 2005 and 2026 affecting an estimated ten crore students across the country whereby 72 cases were recorded before 2015, a rate of roughly seven cases per year, while 148 cases have surfaced since then nearly double the annual rate. As authored in the report, before 2015, paper leaks made up roughly 32% of documented cases and after 2015, the data heightened to 70% of all cases. Equally indispensable to voice out is the record of the CBI, the institution entrusted with investigation the most severe of these cases. CBI has been handed with 17 cases of question paper leak since

2015 but has yielded just one case of conviction; the Haryana Judicial Services case of 2017 adjudicated by Hon'ble Delhi High court in August 2024 nearly seven years after the offence[27]. In the interest of intellectual honesty, it must be acknowledged that the dataset remains the work of an independent civil-society body rather than an official government record.

Least to say the absence of an official record does not diminish its integrity rather sharpens it, for in a vacuum where the governments have declined to keep the records of their failures towards the students, it remains the most rigorously recorded document of the scandals in present time. What renders this data not merely bothersome but deeply wounding is the stark realisation that these plethoric numbers manage to survive regardless of the very legislative apparatus ostensibly erected to obturate them. Six anti leak laws passed across four years coexist with a central statute rendering penalties of imprisonment as well as fines but crisis still continue to emerge gloriously claiming fresh victims with seasonal regularity. It must not be inferred that the system lacks the tools to act rather it is a system that incorporates those tools but refuses to wield them with any conviction whatsoever. Authorities that respond to each fresh scandal with such assuredness only to witness the underlying architecture of the crime go untouched cannot credibly claim to be governing a crisis so much as managing it.

CONCLUSION

What emerges from records is not a series of isolated aberrations but a single continuous segment masked with akin failures. Each tragic episode arrives with its own outrage, own fallacious promises and each recedes from the memories at exactly the pace by which the next one launches itself. At the interval, it is the students who spent years for a single morning that a stranger's greed rendered meaningless bear the cost. Reportedly 21 students who sat for NEET UG 2026 have already died by suicide[28] before this article was written. The sentence should be sufficing enough to counter the debate of non-urgency of the crisis.

By extension, the law on paper is not feeble per se. The dedicated anti leak statutes of states- Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Odisha, Jharkhand and so on capped by the central Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act of 2024 sit alongside Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita's provisions on cheating, forgery and conspiracy[29]. The deficiency is scarcely one of the statutory drafting as provisions themselves invite little criticism. The

failure lies in the manner these provisions are administered, invoked and are ultimately allowed to lapse into inertia once the initial spectacle of arrest has been passed. The present law is strict and commendable in its punishment with prison.

In the aforementioned cases the pattern of dereliction repeats itself with almost mechanical fidelity whereby the architecture of accountability bends around those who dwell on its upper floors while the punitive weight descends on those at the bottom. What the decades long data confirms with all credence is that the asymmetry witnessed is not incidental but structural. What is not a rare but an unseen site is non retribution of any examining authority for its own negligence. Scrutinising a case in point, NTA has officiated over two catastrophic NEET failures in three years and has faced nothing in resemblance to the scrutiny, suspension or any structural overhaul that would conventionally be acquiesced in any regulated industry for a comparable nonfeasance. The gaping legislative blind spot of the 2024 Act is non enforcement of any liability on the very body responsible for the entire framework. If a solution is intended, it will not be meticulously inaugurated in the seventh anti leak law resembling the predecessors. As inspected from a number of exam leak case that when a state holds the legal forte and administrative proficiency to discipline and yet repeatedly falls short at it then the shortfall begins to resemble more like a descend in resolution than in law.

The solution lies in critical well-structured reforms. Oscillation of the legal architecture from punishment after the episode to mandated auditable prevention would compel authorities to regard the security of exams as continuous regiment rather than crisis supposed to be managed after the damage. This would connote seizing the possible crisis at initial level itself. Enactment of a sterling unconstrained time bound prosecutorial mechanism answerable to the judiciary rather than the executive who births it would reasonably restore the credence in the inquiry guarded solely by the evidences and existence of no contingency due to the names bestowed upon. At last, an accountability edifice that attains the motive to reach as far as liability expanses will alter the long alive convention of onus catered only by the ones who are replaceable and powerless.

The Prime Minister of India announced the establishment of fast-track courts devoted to paper leak cases. This move undeniably marks the government’s acknowledgement of crisis as being grave and meritorious for redressal. Though rightfully commendable, this

initiative does a little for the indispensable concern which manifests as why a leak is permitted to endure and what safeguards would curb it at birth stage itself. A fast-track court, though a firm plan is still a plan for remedy than prevention. Only time remains as a witness of the resolution's intent to depart the crisis from subsistence. Nonetheless it is a hope worth retaining that the authorities adhere to the destination in earnest and triumphs in clinching the objective to redeem.

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