

SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION IN INDIA'S EXAMINATION SYSTEM: PAPER LEAKS, INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY, AND TECHNOLOGICAL REFORMS

by

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ABSTRACT

This research paper deals with the reasons behind examination paper leaks in Indian education. Over the past 23 years, India has witnessed 45 paper leaks and related scams, with only 2 convictions, a process that took 14 years of trials. Of the cases: 1658 arrested, 925 accused appeared in chargesheet, 18 cases are still pending, 32 resulted in acquittal, and 43 accused remain in judicial custody. Many leaks were never registered and their accused never arrested, some evidences destroyed, some files were forgotten by the authorities. This paper examines how technology has contributed to the rise in paper leaks, why corruption occurs in higher education, and proposes various taxonomies of academic corruption: 1) Institutional vs Individual, 2) Corrupted functions, 3) Actors and beneficiaries, 4) Comprehensive taxonomy, 5) Pecuniary vs non-pecuniary. The findings include a comparative analysis of examination conducting method across China, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, along with policy recommendations. The paper also discusses hunger strikes in India, the resignation of leaders both in India and internationally, questions of government accountability, the exam/re-exam controversy, appropriate use of technology, trends in the Indian government education budget, relevant case law, and the Jharkhand paper leak controversy.

Keywords: Paper leak, Taxonomies, comparative analysis, higher education, corruption.

Research Questions

1. What factors cause recurring examination paper leaks and academic corruption in India?
2. How can AI and digital systems help prevent examination paper leaks?
3. What best practices from China, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan can India adopt?

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, doctrinal, and comparative methodology. It analyzes documented case law and court records (Vyapam, RRB, JPSC, Railway Group D) through a case-study approach to identify institutional failures behind paper leaks. A comparative cross-national analysis benchmarks India against China, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan's examination security systems. The paper further applies taxonomic classification of corruption types and trend analysis of education budget allocations to inform policy recommendations.

Introduction

Loopholes in the Indian education system have made it corrupt, affecting a vast number of students. Biased behaviour and favouritism among government officials undermine the entire system, damaging India's international image. This paper analyzes the paper leak controversy which has produced only 2 convictions as well as the advancement of technology and the various taxonomies of corruption present from school through higher education, including the failure to appoint sufficient qualified faculty in colleges and officials in Government offices. Civil services examinations are often not conducted regularly, creating a backlog of vacancies that causes officer shortages, unemployment among aspirants, litigation and administrative delays. Paper leaks have become common in India due to: 1) the growth of organized criminal networks, 2) digital vulnerability, 3) outsourcing, 4) weak accountability, 5) large economic incentives.

The legislative response to this pattern arrived with the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, which received presidential assent on 25 February 2024 and came into force on

21 June 2024. The Act prescribes imprisonment of three to five years and fines of up to Rs 10 lakh for individual offences, while organised paper leak syndicates face imprisonment of five to ten years and fines of at least Rs 1 crore, with forfeiture of institutional property where an institution is found to be complicit.¹

A comparison with other countries' governance systems includes China's high-tech Gaokao, South Korea's air-traffic suspension during exams, Turkey's second layer of security, US palm vein recognition, Japan and Singapore's strict security systems. This paper also highlights the government's budget allocation for Indian education and recommends solutions such as end-to-end encrypted transmission of question papers, multilayer digital scrutiny, mandatory biometric verification, and publications of answer keys and OMR sheets.

Major Case Analysis

Case 1: A special CBI court in Ahmedabad sentenced Mahendra Vyas, Rajesh Goswami and five other employees including Sunil Golani, a head clerk of railway, to five years in prison and a Rs 5 lakh fine in the Western railway recruitment scam of 2002.

Case 2: A CBI special court in Hyderabad sentenced Satyendra Mohan Sharma (former RRB Mumbai Chairman), AK Jagannadham (former CEO Hassan-Mangalore Rail Development Corporation) and 8 others to 5 years in prison and a fine of Rs 7.87 lakh. Around 3.86 crore students who had prepared for various exams were unable to appear for them due to government failure to conduct examinations on time, and the resulting paper leak scam left students helpless, suffering from depression and mental health issues, loss of hope for which they had prepared, many mental disorders, no future hope, and shattered trust in the system, forcing many bright students to abandon as the corrupted system accelerated.

¹IMPRI Impact and Policy Research Institute, 'Public Examinations (Preventions of Unfair Means) Act, 2024' (IMPRI, 19 September 2024) <<https://www.impriindia.com/insights/public-examinations-unfair-means-act/>> accessed 2 September 2026.

The human cost of this systemic failure became starkly apparent in the aftermath of the NEET-UG 2026 paper leak controversy: at least 11 aspirants were reported to have died by suicide in the 46 days between the cancellation of the original examination and the scheduled re-test, with subsequent reports placing the toll at 13. A 2023 study in the Indonesian Journal of Teaching in Science found that recurring paper leaks inflict severe psychological harm on aspirants, including depression, anxiety disorders, and a profound erosion of confidence in the meritocratic promise of competitive examinations.²³

The NEET/reNEET controversy of 2026, delays in state PSC mains examinations and the SSC scam are further examples. Many young people protested against these corrupt policies in Delhi, under the banner of the "Cockroach Janta Party" demanding the replacement of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan and the creation of new structured regulation for the systematic functioning of India's examination system. Sonam Wangchuk, a prominent social activist and engineer, began a hunger strike to convey the demands of the youth and pressure the government to address their concerns.

Despite significant public support for engineer Sonam Wangchuk, both in person and online, the government gave no response to the demands, although the Delhi High Court did order that his health be monitored, including daily checkups. On the 21st day, i.e., 18th July 2026, the government moved him to Safdarjung Hospital to save his life. This recalls the case of environmentalist G.D. Agarwal, who undertook a 111-day hunger strike at Haridwar to protect the Ganga from dams and died without receiving any response from the government. If this pattern continues unchanged, India risks stagnation, no new ideas, no innovation, and a failure of its established democratic and republican government. Without change the government risks betraying the very citizens it is meant to serve.

²³Hindustan Times, 'The Human Toll of NEET: 11 Reported Suicides After Paper Leak Forced Re-test' (Hindustan Times, 2026) <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/the-human-toll-of-neet-11-reported-suicides-after-paper-leak-forced-retest-101781771406022.html>> accessed 2 September 2026; The Quint, 'NEET Paper Leak, NTA Failures and Student Suicides' (The Quint, 11 June 2026) <<https://www.thequint.com/news/education/neet-paper-leak-student-suicides-examination-crisis-india>> accessed 2 September 2026.

³Md Kamraju, 'A Study on the Impact of Paper Leaks on Students' (2023) 3(1) Indonesian Journal of Teaching in Science 67.

Case 3: Railway Group D case, in which the 2006 examination was conducted a second time, has been around 142 hearings between 2012 and 2026 and remains in trial; two of the accused are members of the Uttar Pradesh legislature.

Case 4: In the 2015 UPPSC case, individuals photographed the exam paper an hour before the test and opened three sealed exam packages. The examination was cancelled and re-conducted two months later, but the earlier breach could not be adequately investigated to punish those responsible, highlighting the failure of the exam regulatory authority.

Case 5: The 2003 CAT exam case involving Delhi IIMs, in which the examination was conducted twice, led to a dispute between the Human Rights Council of Development and the Delhi IIMs.

The question arises as to why these cases have rarely been resolved successfully: accused individuals are granted bail even in serious offences, evidence is destroyed, key testimony goes uncollected, investigating agencies file closure reports, and cases drag on for 15-20 years. Most cases are filed under IPC sections 420, 467, 468, 120B, which allow for bail within a short period of time. In several instances, the government has referred cases to the ED to pursue money laundering charges, and the UP government has invoked the Gangster Act to seize property. The Karnataka government invoked KCOCA (Karnataka Control of Organised Crime Act) in the 2016 chemistry paper leak case, arresting the accused, who were later acquitted in 2024. The court cited the large number of witnesses as the reason the trial could not be completed on time and the conviction rate has fallen to just 2 out of 45 cases filed.

Technological Advancement Accelerates Paper Leaks

2013 SSC scam: Made possible through technology; outsiders relayed answers to candidates, and papers were circulated via messaging apps like WhatsApp.

2002 RRB leak: A railway official faxed the question paper to outsiders.

Uttar Pradesh police constable exam (2024): Cancelled due to paper leak allegations; the Special Task Force (STF) confirmed the breach.

Maharashtra TET paper leak and UGC NET sociology paper leak in June 2026.

A newer scam involves installing remote-access software such as TeamViewer, allowing outsiders to control a candidate's exam screen. Weaknesses in printing and logistics also remain problematic as corrective measures are rarely taken before exams are conducted.

The scale of the coaching industry itself creates structural incentives for paper leaks. Government data presented in the Rajya Sabha indicates that GST collections from coaching institutes rose from Rs 2,241 crore in 2019 to Rs 5,517 crore in 2024, implying an annual coaching market of over Rs 30,000 crore, roughly two-thirds of the Union Budget's entire allocation for higher education. Investigations in the NEET-UG 2024 and 2026 cases have documented a nexus between coaching centre operators, admission agents, and insiders within examination authorities, with the CBI filing chargesheets against 45 individuals in the principal Patna-Hazaribagh case alone.⁴

The Rajasthan High Court removed several officers from the Public Service Commission and labelled them "corrupt". The Delhi High Court criticized the CBI for its handling of evidence disclosure in the UGC paper leak case, yet under the current justice system, the officials involved were reinstated to recognised posts. In India's education system, when scams occur, bureaucrats rarely accept moral responsibility, offering resignation instead.

⁴OpIndia, 'How Coaching Networks Enabled the NEET Paper Leaks of 2024 and 2026' (OpIndia, 25 July 2026) <<https://www.opindia.com/2026/07/neet-paper-leaks-coaching-mafia-admission-agents-solvers-insiders/>> accessed 2 September 2026; Deccan Herald, 'India Needs Comprehensive Policy Solution to Mushrooming of Coaching Institutes: Congress' (Deccan Herald, 2024) <<https://www.deccanherald.com/amp/story/india/india-needs-comprehensive-policy-solution-to-mushrooming-of-coaching-institutes-congress-3135671>> accessed 2 September 2026.

After the re-NEET results, students continued to suffer: some received passing marks on result day only to see their scores drop unexpectedly hours later, and some had their OMR sheets distributed incorrectly, further evidence of the system's failure.

Why Corruption Persists In Higher Education

Many public and private colleges and universities in India are effectively controlled by ruling parties. Many politicians own schools and colleges that charge high capitation fees and donation fees, automatically excluding capable but less wealthy students from admission. This political influence prevents deserving candidates from being admitted or advancing further, or leaves them undervalued in the job market with lower salaries. Vice-chancellors are also often appointed by the ruling party in ways that promote favouritism. Many colleges lacking NAAC accreditation are effectively fraudulent institutions, presenting fake faculty and curricula during inspections, and even bribing the NAAC grading office for higher rankings.

The extent of this accreditation fraud was confirmed by a formal investigation in February 2025, when the Central Bureau of Investigation arrested the chairman and six members of a NAAC Inspection Committee, including a professor from Jawaharlal Nehru University, for accepting bribes from a private Andhra Pradesh deemed university in exchange for a favourable rating. The CBI conducted raids across 20 locations and recovered cash, gold, and electronic devices at the arrest sites. The NAAC subsequently reformed its accreditation process in February 2025, phasing out physical verification by expert panels in applications received after July 2024.⁵

Many universities, including recognised ones, offer online degrees at minimal cost purely to generate revenue, a practice that defrauds capable candidates who simply cannot afford better

⁵Scroll.in, 'NAAC Bribery, UGC's Diluted Rules: Two Controversies Reflect Crisis in Indian Higher Education' (Scroll.in, 6 March 2025) <<https://scroll.in/article/1079829/naac-bribery-ugcs-diluted-rules-two-controversies-reflect-crisis-in-indian-higher-education>> accessed 2 September 2026; The Print, 'How Bribery Scandal Involving a Guntur University Has Cast Doubts on Integrity of NAAC's Rating Process' (The Print, 5 February 2025) <<https://theprint.in/india/how-bribery-scandal-involving-a-guntur-university-has-cast-doubts-on-integrity-of-naacs-rating-process/2480086/>> accessed 2 September 2026.

options. While India has numerous regulatory bodies and committees overseeing education, problems arise when power becomes concentrated in the hands of few. In India, only about 15% of people are eligible for a diploma, and very few complete a PhD; although enrolment numbers are average, many students discontinue their PhDs for various reasons, including sexual harassment of female scholars by research guides and excessive workloads. Very few faculty members publish research papers, and some universities appoint candidates who do not meet the basic eligibility criteria for professorships. Favouritism also affects school-level ranking and state scholarships.

Medical students' internships often extend to 38-hour shifts, raising serious safety concerns for female interns, as many public and private hospitals lack adequate security infrastructure and private facilities. The Vyapam scandal, involving a state's medical college admission examinations, was alarming in scale, extending from the sale of examination questions and answers to the impersonation of candidates. It resulted in thousands of arrests, several unexplained deaths, and suspected involvement of top politicians and bureaucrats, with the Supreme Court ultimately invalidating the qualifications of hundreds of doctors.

Taxonomies Of Academic Corruption

- 1) Institutional vs Individual: Professorial corruption involves practices related to academic posts, research, publications, and promotions. Examinations-related corruption or cheating includes the sale of fraudulently completed assignments, sale of examination papers, and fixing results.
- 2) Corrupted Functions: Selection processes, institutional and programme accreditation, procurement of educational supplies, professional misconduct, and issues related to educational property costs and taxes.
- 3) Actors and Beneficiaries: Corruption involving students through exchanges with faculty, administrators or staff (gifts or favours), as well as administrative corruption not directly involving students (e.g., procurement, hiring).

4) Comprehensive Taxonomy: Differentiates between categorisation, classification, forms, and theories, as well as between the phenomenon itself, the means, the locus, and the interactions involved.

5) Pecuniary vs Non-Pecuniary: Includes bribery in professor-student relationships, social connections, sexual favours, political factors influencing grade and diploma purchases. Introduces the concept of favour reciprocations.

6) Comprehensive Taxonomy (Expanded): Patronage and capture, licensing and accreditation, student selection and admission, staff recruitment and promotion, financial mismanagement and procurement fraud, sextortion and academic dishonesty.

Budget

1) This data covers three ministries: the Ministry of Education (formerly the Ministry of Human Resource Development), which has two departments, namely the Department of School Education and the Department of Higher Education; the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare; and the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways.

2) In 2009-10, the total size of the Union Budget increased by 10%, meaning government expenditure also rose by 10%. However, the Education Ministry's share of the budget fell from 4.6% in 2013-14 (under the UPA government) to 2.5% in 2025-26, with both departments' shares declining accordingly. The Department of School Education's share is now less than half of what it was 12 years ago, and the Department of Higher Education's share is only 60% of its former level.

3) The combined allocation for health and education was 6.5% of the budget 12 years ago (with 1.8% actual expenditure). This has since declined to 4.5% of the annual budget, while the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways now receives 5.8%.

4) Despite recognising the growing importance of artificial intelligence in education, the central government allocation for the Ministry of Skill Development, launched in 2015-16 at 0.06%, has actually declined to 0.05%.

Student Protest In India

The Jantar Mantar protest in Delhi stands as the largest student-led protest in Indian history, pressuring the government to amend the laws and act in favour of students through hunger strikes and demonstrations across the country, with the CJP (Cockroach Janta Party) acting as a democratic protest movement. Allegations against the Jharkhand Public Service Commission include cases where students who scored 299 out of 300 were not declared passed, while others passed with fewer correct attempts. Students raised the following objections: (1) Category-wise cutoffs were not published; (2) candidates alleged that the published merit list lacked the required signatures of constitutional members of the commission, raising questions whether due process had been followed; (3) circulated images of OMR sheets showed students with very few correct attempts qualifying for the exam, raising questions of authentication; (4) an alleged recruitment racket led the CID Investigation team to arrest several JPSC officials and employees linked to private examination agencies; and (5) beginning 2 August 2026, an activist began a hunger strike as a last resort.

Why Protest Matters And How Re-Exam Affects Students

1. Scale is enormous: Re-conducting an examination is no easy task given the huge number of students involved, and creating a new national-level question paper takes considerable time.

2. Eligibility and age criteria: Many exams have age or qualification limits that must be met, which a re-exam can jeopardize.

3. Financial strain: Repeated exam cycles undermine students' confidence in the government and force them to spend more on coaching and accommodation.

4. Preparing twice is gruelling: Repeated preparation increases anxiety, as success requires not just knowledge but sustained mental and physical readiness.

What Matters More: Resignation or Reform?

Since Independence, India has witnessed numerous scams, cases of corruption, and violations of law, alongside public demands for the resignation of corrupt officials. Yet those who resign are often reassigned to different Ministerial posts, since their continued political support benefits the government. In other countries, officials who resign following public demand are typically held accountable and do not return to power. However, the public must recognise that resignation alone means little without genuine reform; systematic replacement, closing of loopholes, and speedy trials are what protests ultimately demand.

1) Lal Bahadur Shastri: Resigned as Railway Minister after a major train accident in 1956, demonstrating moral responsibility.

2) T.T. Krishnamachari: Resigned as Finance Minister in 1958 following a major finance scandal (the Haridas Mundhra-LIC scandal).

3) Abdallah Hamdok: Resigned as Sudan's PM after acknowledging his failure to protect democracy.

4) Keir Starmer: Resigned as UK PM on 22 June 2026 after losing the confidence of his own parliamentary party.

5) Leszek Miller: Resigned as Poland's PM following unresolved economic failure and corruption allegations.

Ultimately, India's Education Minister finally resigned on 25th July 2026, submitting his resignation to PM Narendra Modi, after which the PM formed a task force, including the Director of Intelligence Bureau, a representative from IIT Madras and four others to implement cyber monitoring, a zero-error process, and secure logistics.

Accountability

Every state is accountable for its actions towards the public. It is the responsibility of a nation to be accountable for its actions. There are various kinds of accountability, and social accountability is one form recognised by some countries, which give certain entities rights to operate some parts of the nation for a period of time. In the end, they provide concessions based on good performance; if performance is poor, the task is assigned to another supplier. Citizens, as consumers, can argue or demand change. In countries like America, the President communicates directly through the media without preparation, which demonstrates accountability, whereas the Indian Government has not held a single press conference in which the Prime Minister directly addresses the public or media.

India was ranked 91st in 2025 and 96th in 2024 on the Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International. During protests, the judiciary does not take strict action nor show judicial activism; even the media does not cover footage of protests, instead considering them externally funded. Though media coverage shapes public perception, this makes it easy for the government to influence the public.

India's score of 38 out of 100 on the CPI 2024 placed it below both the global average of 43 and the Asia-Pacific regional average of 44, representing a one-point decline from its 2023 score of 39 and continuing a pattern of stagnation in the mid-30s to low-40s band that has persisted since 2012. Transparency International's analysis identifies weak judicial independence and inadequate protection for whistle-blowers as key drivers of this stagnation, factors that are directly reflected in the paper leak cases examined throughout this paper.⁶

Findings

- 1) Corruption persists across countries, including the US, UK, and Russia, often through university administrations that favour a single corporate entity or business in exchange for commissions.
- 2) Banks often partner with universities to expand their customer base through student education loans, co-branded ID cards, and campus branch tie-ups; students too sometimes misrepresent their financial condition to secure benefits.
- 3) A "kickback" is a form of negotiated bribery that can take several forms within universities: inflated procurement (university employees favour a single business for IT software or infrastructure, inflating costs and splitting the surplus); reserved admissions (wealthy families secure admission slots through athlete programmes); pre-arranged vendor bids (administrators pre-select vendors during bidding in exchange for kickbacks); and publisher pre-contracts (publishing companies arrange contracts with institutions in exchange for additional student fees).

Comparison

Every year, millions of students worldwide sit for entrance examinations that shape their futures. Some countries have implemented strict measures to protect examination integrity.

⁶Transparency International, 'Corruption Perceptions Index 2024' (Transparency International, 11 February 2025) <<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024>> accessed 2 September 2026; Transparency International, 'India' (Transparency International, 2026) <<https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/india>> accessed 2 September 2026.

1. China's high-tech Gaokao: Candidates undergo facial recognition and identity verification; radio frequency jammers and metal detectors are used; AI-powered cameras monitor exam halls and flag suspicious behaviour; drone and GPS tracking secure the transport of papers. During the four-day exam period, companies like Alibaba temporarily disable image recognition and question-answering features in their AI chatbots.

2. South Korea's air traffic suspension: During the Suneung exam, both civilian and United States Forces Korea military flights are suspended to reduce noise.

3. Turkey's second layer of security: The government deploys signal jammers inside exam venues to block unauthorised communication devices.

4. US palm vein recognition: Palm recognition technology is used to verify identity via near-infrared scanning beneath the skin.

5. Japan and Singapore: Both maintain high-integrity paper-based testing alongside digital transitions and strict custody chains across multiple vendors.

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Why Corruption Increases Paper Leaks

1) Paper leaks generate large sums of money in a short period, drawing in politicians, financially desperate individuals, and those in debt.

2) Paper leaks allow the well-connected to pass exams without any genuine effort.

3) There is a lack of regular counter-measures against loopholes that investigative agencies are already aware of.

Solutions

1. Announce the exam calendar well in advance.
2. Prepare multiple test papers and finalise the one to be used on the day of the exam.
3. Conduct most national-level examinations online.
4. State Governments should establish special task forces to detect fraud quickly and enact stricter laws in states like Jharkhand.
5. Ensure time-bound investigations and public disclosure of findings.
6. Implement end-to-end encrypted transmission of question papers.
7. Conduct independent audits of recruitment agencies.
8. Employ multilayer digital scrutiny with biometric verification.
9. Mandate publication of OMR sheets and answer keys.
10. Encourage judicial activism to help guide reforms in the right direction.

Conclusion

Although the Radhakrishnan and Kothari Commissions, among others, have worked to improve the examination system at the school, higher education and national levels, the issue is not simply whether computer-based examinations are inherently safer from leaks but the matter of effective implementation. India must adopt new methods and strategies to conduct examinations securely, as the country's shortcomings lie not in technology but in management, planning, policymaking, and delayed decision-making, all of which set back the examinations process. The future of any nation's youth lies in the hands of its government, which holds ultimate control. A developing country like India can achieve a great deal, though corruption continues to tarnish its image. In today's age of Artificial Intelligence, student data exists in a precarious space, both protected and at risk, and only a responsible government can bring meaningful reform. Student power remains the greatest force for change, as students across India continue to protest for their rights, pressuring the government to act in the interest of all.

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