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NATIONAL TESTING AGENCY (NTA)

SYLLABUS:

GS 2 > Polity > Institutions/Bodies > Education

REFERENCE NEWS:

- With the recent cancellation of the **National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET)-Under Graduate (UG) 2026** examination, the **National Testing Agency (NTA)** has again come under scrutiny over allegations of weak operational capacity, cybersecurity gaps and poor crisis communication.
- The controversy is significant because **NEET-UG is one of the largest entrance examinations in the world**, with over **22-23 lakh candidates** competing annually for around **2.5 lakh seats** across MBBS, BDS, AYUSH and allied medical courses.

MORE ON NEWS:

- The 2026 cancellation marks the **first full-scale cancellation and retest of NEET-UG**. Earlier, **in 2024, a limited retest** was conducted for 1,563 candidates who had received grace marks due to loss of examination time at some centres.
- The **current controversy** involves allegations of paper leaks, impersonation, coaching-linked malpractice, circulation of answer keys, suspiciously high scores, rank inflation and organised cheating centres.
- This NEET-UG was first conducted in **2013** as a common entrance test for undergraduate medical admissions. In **2014 and 2015**, admissions **temporarily returned to separate State and private medical entrance examinations**.
- Later, the Supreme Court revived NEET, making it the centralised entrance mechanism for medical admissions.
- Initially, NEET was conducted by the **CBSE**. From **2019**, the responsibility shifted to the **National Testing Agency**.

ABOUT NATIONAL TESTING AGENCY:

- National Testing Agency (NTA) has been established as a **premier, specialist, autonomous and self-sustained testing organization** to conduct entrance examinations for admission/fellowship in higher educational institutions.
- It was **established in 2017** with a grant amount of Rs.25 crore from union government.
- It is **registered as a Society** under the Societies Registration Act, 1860.
- NTA is responsible for conducting the
 - **Joint Entrance Examination – Main (JEE Main)**
 - **National Eligibility cum Entrance Test-Undergraduate (NEET UG)**

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- **National Eligibility Test (NET)**
- Common Management Admission Test (CMAT)
- Graduate Pharmacy Aptitude Test (GPAT).
- The NTA is **chaired by an eminent educationist** who will be appointed by the Ministry of Education.
- There will be a **Board of Governors comprising members from user institutions**.

WHY WAS THE NTA FORMED?

The National Testing Agency (NTA) was established to address several key objectives that align with broader educational reforms in India:

- **Relieving the Burden from CBSE and AICTE:** Prior to the establishment of NTA, bodies like the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) were overwhelmed with the responsibility of conducting multiple entrance exams. The formation of NTA aimed to centralize and manage these examinations more effectively, allowing **these institutions to focus more on curriculum and policy development**.
- **Enhancing Exam Quality and Fairness:** The NTA aims to improve the quality and fairness of entrance examinations through **standardized tests** that ensure equitable treatment of all candidates, regardless of their background. This includes **conducting exams online to ensure uniformity** and reduce discrepancies in the testing process.
- **Professionalising the examination process:** NTA was created as a **specialist testing body** because institutions like **CBSE primarily deal with school education and curriculum**, not high-stakes competitive testing. Its role is to focus exclusively on examination design, assessment quality, psychometrics and large-scale test administration.
- **Realizing the Vision of the Programme of Action (POA) 1992:** The NTA was conceived to actualize the **POA 1992's recommendation of a common entrance examination** for professional and higher education programs across India. This was aimed at creating a standardized, efficient testing system that could serve various educational institutions at the national level.
- **Promoting computer-based testing:** NTA was expected to shift major examinations towards **Computer-Based Test (CBT) mode**. This helps standardise the testing environment, reduce human error, improve result processing and minimise logistical risks linked to printing, transporting and handling physical question papers or OMR sheets.
- **Providing Accessibility and Inclusivity:** A significant focus for the NTA is to make entrance exams accessible to students from all parts of the country, including rural areas. This **involves setting up exam centers in various locations and providing training** to help familiarize all candidates with the digital format of exams.
- **Implementing Advanced Testing Techniques:** The agency is also tasked with developing a question bank using modern methods, establishing a strong research and development culture in testing, and utilizing both local and global expertise to enhance the testing process in India.
- **Collaboration with International Organizations:** To achieve global standards in testing, the NTA collaborates with international organizations like the **Educational Testing Service (ETS)**, bringing in expertise and practices that elevate the quality of entrance examinations conducted in India.

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- **Frequent and Flexible Testing Opportunities:** The National Testing Agency (NTA) offers exams like **JEE Main, UGC NET, and CUET online**, twice a year. This provides candidates multiple chances to improve their scores, benefiting those who may need more than one attempt to reach their best performance.

CONCERNS AND ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH THE NATIONAL TESTING AGENCY (NTA)

- **Alleged Paper Leaks and Grace Marks:** There have been repeated concerns over the integrity of NEET-UG, beginning with the **NEET-UG 2024 controversy**, where allegations of paper leak, unusually high scores and the award of grace marks to **1,563 candidates** led to a limited retest. The issue has become more serious with the **cancellation of NEET-UG 2026**, after alleged question paper leaks affected over **22 lakh candidates**, leading to demands for a fresh examination, transparent investigation and stronger exam-security reforms.
- **Lack of Transparency and Accountability:** The National Testing Agency (NTA) has faced criticism for its opaque operations, particularly regarding its handling of crises such as **alleged malpractices and errors in result tabulation**, including issues with NEET-UG grace marks. Critics argue that the **NTA's responses, including the denial of demands for a CBI inquiry and a retest**, have been inadequate and lack transparency.
- **Over-dependence on outsourced systems:** The **Radhakrishnan Committee** constituted after the 2024 controversies highlighted NTA's **excessive dependence on third-party vendors and contractual staff**. Sensitive functions such as question processing, translation and exam-centre management are often handled by outsourced personnel rather than permanent officials.
- **Centralization Issues and Challenges:** The NTA has been critiqued for its centralized exam processes, which fail to meet the diverse needs of students from different regions. This centralization has led to operational and administrative challenges, **such as an inadequate distribution of exam centers, particularly disadvantaging students from remote or less accessible areas**. Additionally, many test centers **lack sufficient infrastructure, like CCTVs** for monitoring the examination process.
- **Examination Mode Inconsistencies:** The decision to **revert the NET exam to pen-and-paper mode in 2023 from the online** format has faced criticism and dissatisfaction from stakeholders who had adjusted to the online format's conveniences. This change has also increased the vulnerability to exam leaks. UGC-NET **switched from offline to online in 2018 under NTA** before reverting back to pen-and-paper mode in 2023. In the wake of repeated controversies, including **NEET-UG 2026 cancellation**, the government is now reportedly examining safer **digital or hybrid models** for high-stakes exams.
- **Technical failures and answer-key errors:** Students have repeatedly reported technical glitches, server crashes and errors in answer keys. For instance, in 2026, the **NTA reportedly revised the JEE Main answer key** after correcting multiple errors in the Chemistry section.
- **Delayed implementation of reforms:** Several **recommendations of the Radhakrishnan Committee**, such as reducing reliance on contractual staff and expanding secure digital or hybrid examination systems, **are still pending implementation**. The slow pace of these reforms has raised concerns about the effectiveness and urgency of institutional correction within the NTA.

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- **Legal and Public Outcry:** The controversies surrounding the NTA have attracted legal scrutiny, with **the Supreme Court and Delhi High Court becoming involved after multiple petitions were filed against the NTA's handling of the NEET exam.** Petitioners have raised concerns over alleged malpractices, errors in result tabulation, and the overall transparency of the exam process. These legal interventions **underscore the severity of the issues**, highlighting the **demand for higher accountability** and rectification measures from the NTA to ensure fairness and integrity in its examination processes.

WAY FORWARD:

- **Implement Radhakrishnan Committee reforms:** The recommendations of the K. Radhakrishnan Committee should be implemented in a time-bound manner, especially reforms related to exam security, transparency, restructuring of NTA and reduction of operational vulnerabilities.
- **Secure digital/hybrid delivery:** NTA should move towards **Computer-Based Testing (CBT)** wherever feasible. For large exams like NEET, a hybrid model may be used, where question papers are digitally encrypted and delivered securely to centres, reducing risks linked to printing, storage and transport.
- **Reduce outsourcing:** Sensitive functions such as question processing, translation, centre management and cybersecurity should be handled by permanent and accountable personnel rather than excessive dependence on private vendors and contractual staff.
- **Stronger candidate verification:** Biometric verification, AI-based identity checks, CCTV monitoring and tamper-proof audit trails should be made mandatory to prevent impersonation, organised cheating and centre-level malpractice.
- **Improve exam-centre governance:** Testing centres should follow uniform security standards, including proper surveillance, secure internet, trained staff and local administrative supervision. The Committee also recommended closer coordination with State governments and district administration for exam security.
- **Transparent retest and grace marks policy:** NTA should frame clear rules for re-examinations, grace marks and compensation for loss of exam time, so that such decisions do not appear arbitrary or opaque.
- **Independent oversight:** An independent monitoring mechanism should review NTA's functioning, publish audit reports and ensure timely grievance redressal for students.

CONCLUSION:

- NTA reform must shift from ad hoc crisis response to a secure, transparent and accountable examination system. Implementing the Radhakrishnan Committee recommendations is essential to restore public trust in national entrance examinations.

PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. "The repeated controversies surrounding NEET have raised questions not only about examination security but also about the institutional design of the National Testing Agency (NTA)". Discuss why the NTA was created and examine the major challenges affecting its functioning. (15 marks, 250 words)

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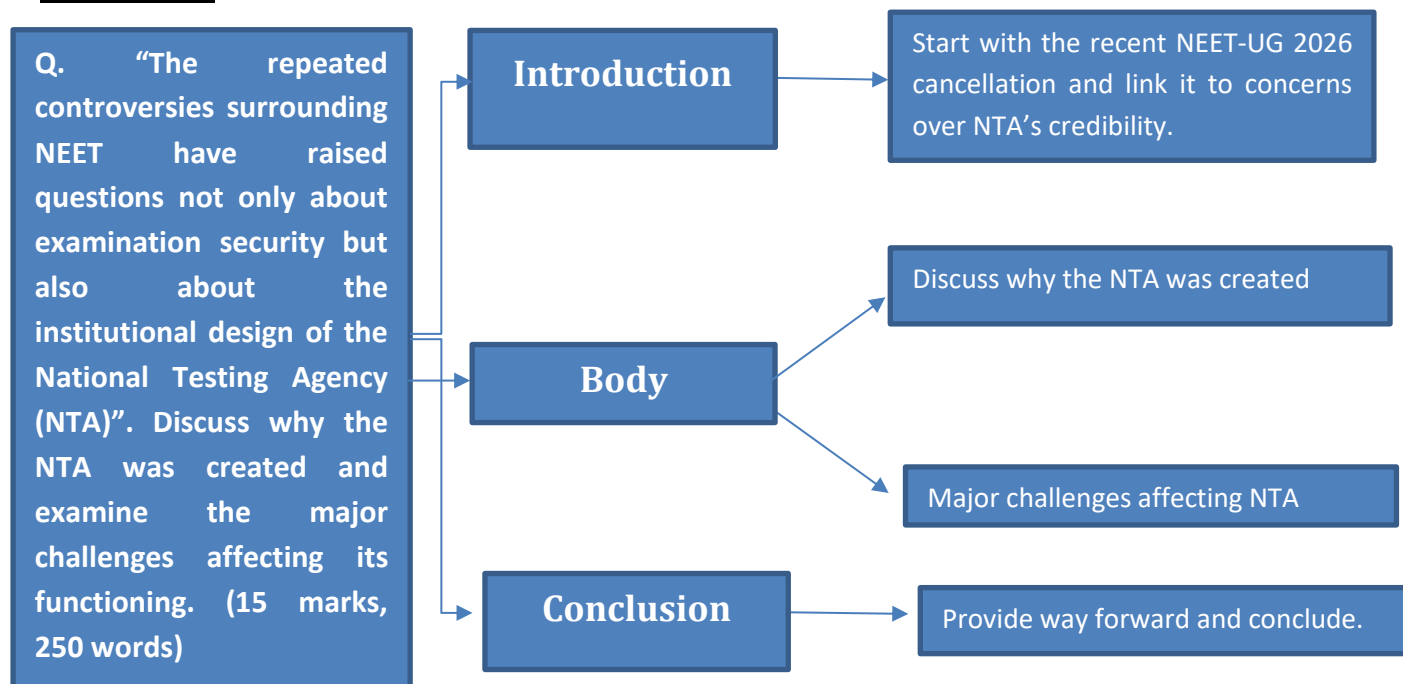
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APPROACH:**MODEL ANSWER:**

The recent **cancellation of NEET-UG 2026** has once again brought the National Testing Agency (NTA) under scrutiny over allegations of paper leaks, weak operational capacity and poor crisis management. **Established in 2017 as a specialist testing body**, the NTA was intended to professionalise and standardise India's entrance examination system.

Why was the NTA created?

- 1. Professionalising examination management:** NTA was created as a dedicated testing agency since bodies like CBSE mainly focused on school education and curriculum, not high-stakes competitive examinations.
- 2. Reducing burden on CBSE and AICTE:** It centralised entrance examinations, allowing institutions like CBSE and AICTE to focus on academic and regulatory functions.
- 3. Improving fairness and standardisation:** NTA aimed to conduct transparent, merit-based and standardised examinations across the country.
- 4. Promoting computer-based testing:** It sought to expand Computer-Based Tests (CBTs) to reduce human error, improve result processing and minimise logistical vulnerabilities associated with physical papers.
- 5. Implementing POA 1992 vision:** The agency gave effect to the Programme of Action (POA), 1992, which recommended a common national entrance examination system for professional education.
- 6. Expanding accessibility:** Through Test Practice Centres and digital familiarisation programmes, NTA intended to make examinations accessible to rural and underprivileged students.

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Major challenges affecting NTA

1. **Paper leaks and exam integrity issues:** Repeated allegations of paper leaks, impersonation and organised cheating in examinations like NEET-UG have weakened public trust. The cancellation of NEET-UG 2026 after alleged leaks affecting over 22 lakh candidates intensified concerns.
2. **Lack of transparency and accountability:** NTA has faced criticism for opaque functioning, weak crisis communication and lack of clarity regarding grace marks, retests and investigation demands.
3. **Excessive outsourcing:** The Radhakrishnan Committee highlighted NTA's dependence on private vendors and contractual staff for sensitive functions like question processing and centre management.
4. **Technical and operational failures:** Students have reported server crashes, answer-key errors and logistical issues, including distant exam-centre allocation and inadequate infrastructure.
5. **Vulnerability of pen-and-paper mode:** Reverting some exams to offline mode increased risks linked to printing, transportation and storage of question papers.
6. **Delayed institutional reforms:** Several recommendations related to cybersecurity, staffing reforms and secure digital examination systems are yet to be fully implemented.

Way Forward

- **Implement Radhakrishnan Committee recommendations:** Reforms relating to exam security, institutional restructuring, cybersecurity and operational accountability should be implemented in a time-bound manner.
- **Expand secure digital/hybrid examination systems:** NTA should move towards encrypted digital or hybrid models to reduce risks associated with physical question papers.
- **Reduce outsourcing:** Sensitive functions should be handled by permanent and accountable personnel instead of excessive dependence on private vendors.
- **Strengthen monitoring and verification:** Biometric verification, AI-based surveillance, CCTV coverage and tamper-proof audit systems should be made mandatory.
- **Improve transparency and grievance redressal:** Clear policies for grace marks, retests and examination disruptions should be publicly disclosed along with independent oversight mechanisms.

NTA was created to modernise and professionalise India's entrance examination ecosystem, but repeated controversies have exposed structural and governance weaknesses. Restoring credibility requires transparent functioning, technological safeguards and effective implementation of institutional reforms.

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